

Interview with Sandy Stephens

**Interviewed by Associate Dean Ann M. Pflaum
University of Minnesota**

Interviewed on May 3, 1999

Sandy Stephens - SS
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: This is Ann Pflaum. It is May 3, 1999. I am recording for the University of Minnesota history with Sandy Stephens, who has, probably, the privilege of the most exceptional moment in Minnesota sports in the last fifty years. This is a great honor and privilege to interview you, Sandy. I wanted to get a little background from you. I've read about how you were recruited to the university, but if you wanted to describe it in your own words, I'd be delighted and, then, we'll talk about the famous football game in 1962.

SS: Thank you so much for having me, first of all. You want to go back to my initial reasons for coming here to Minnesota?

AP: Absolutely, yes.

S: Initially, I always wanted to go to the Big Ten. I came from western Pennsylvania, a little town called Uniontown, forty miles southeast of Pittsburgh. That whole area is known for their quarterbacks and just football players in general. Because of that, we always thought we had the best competition. I was undefeated when I came out of there, so I wanted to go where the best were playing because of the fact that when I did beat them, I didn't want there to be any excuses that they were inferior quality. The Big Ten, to me, was the best conference and the toughest conference. I figured if you went there, that I'd get an opportunity to play, maybe, elsewhere—but, then, that's another story. We had a lot of fellows from my hometown even, a couple guys who had played with Ohio State. We were fairly close to Ohio State. So, because of that, I had visited Ohio State about four times. My roommate-to-be was Judge Dixon from Clairton, Pennsylvania, and he also was very interested in Michigan. Ironically, we happened to visit up here at Minnesota the same week. He was kind of enthralled with the tradition they had at Michigan and I, likewise, at Ohio State. What they were doing is they were going every other year to the Rose Bowl. Michigan would go one year and Ohio State would go the next year. During that time, you weren't allowed to go two years in a row. So, they ended up kind of trading off, it seemed like to me. Judge and I decided, instead of being part of somebody else's tradition, we would come here in Minnesota and kind of start our own. We

planned to go to the Rose Bowl and I found a buddy that wanted to go do the same thing and, then, we got two more guys, Tom Hall, H-a-l-l, and John Mulvena, M-u-l-v-e-n-a, from Wilmington, Delaware. They were from out East also. Mulvena was the captain in my senior year.

AP: They were from the East as well.

SS: Wilmington, Delaware, yes.

AP: My question to you is when you came, did you play your first year or were you just a student your first year?

SS: We weren't allowed to play as freshmen, at the time that I came here, which was in 1958. We couldn't play. At that time, we had where the freshmen could play with the remaining, returning lettermen and, also, we played a game against the alumni, the graduation seniors. Also alumni who had played previously and some guys that were the ex-pros would come back and play. That was quite a game. We beat them though in my first game that we played. That kind of let us know that we were going to be pretty good at that time. Then, we kept adding talent every year. You had to do it as a team effort and you really have to have the horses, especially in the Big Ten because, like I said, it was highly competitive. In fact, during the time that I played, six out of the top ten teams my senior year were from the Big Ten and there were two more in the next ten. So, it was eight out of the top twenty teams in America were in the Big Ten. We made it rough.

AP: Where did you live your freshman year? Do you remember the dorm you lived in?

SS: Territorial Hall. We were the first residents of Territorial Hall. We saw them put the sod down around that place.

AP: Life as a student, as a freshman... Were you frightened, excited? What was your mood? How did it seem to you? Did it seem big?

SS: Oh, I came here because it was big. I almost didn't come because it wasn't big enough. I wanted big. I would have went to Northwestern if they'd had a bigger football field. They only had 30,000 or 35,000 in their stadium. That just wasn't big enough for the kind of play and performance I planned to put on. Ohio State had 76,000. Michigan had 104,000. Even Minnesota was almost too small when I thought about it, but I liked everything else about the Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul. The college was kind of in the middle of it and you still had your campus life as well as the cities were near. I'm more of a city boy myself; I like the bright lights of the cities and you can't get enough of them for me. I wasn't intimidated at all. I thought they'd never ask. I felt that the great opportunity was here and Coach [Murray] Warmath, I like his system. His style was the same as I had in high school. He promised to give me an opportunity to play and that's all I've ever wanted wherever I went.

AP: And you roomed with Judge Dixon, is that correct?

SS: I roomed with Judge Dixon, yes. We were in a room in Territorial Hall; I believe Room 1133.

AP: Do you remember some of the courses you took?

SS: We both were in philosophy and political science and business. I started out in business, but I changed to philosophy and psychology my last two years. I, eventually, ended up getting a psychology degree out of Metro State University.

AP: I can't imagine that you would have had a second of time for any other kind of student activity, but I'm just wondering, did you work? Did you have any other hobbies or things that you liked to do as a student?

SS: I played freshman basketball, too. I was on the freshman basketball team. I was supposed to play baseball. That was one of the conditions why I came here. Minnesota, at that time, also was a big baseball power in the Big Ten. Six out of eight years, they had won the Big Ten championship and two of those years, they were national championships. I tried out with the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Philadelphia Phillies. The Phillies wanted to sign me even before I came here. I had worked out a deal that I could play baseball as well as football and if I made the team, then, I didn't have to go to spring practice even. That was another reason why I came here to Minnesota. But, I never did get around to baseball. Because we did so well in football, I just kind of stayed with it and never got back to baseball. But, I really loved baseball. In fact, baseball was my favorite sport, to tell the truth.

AP: Of course, the last two seasons in the 1950s weren't wonderful. You were at the bottom of the Big Ten and the coach had to go through all of that abuse.

SS: Exactly. We were in last place in my sophomore year, 1959. My first year of playing, we were 2 and 7. But, six of those seven games were by six points or less. Only one team really, we felt, beat us and that was Iowa. They beat us 33-0 or something to that effect and there was no two ways about it, they were a better team than we were and there was no qualms about it. It was ironic though because they still were the number one team in that following year. That's the same team that we met for the national championship. They were number one and we were number two. Those same teams and the difference of those six games that I told you we lost by six points or less, were the teams that we knew we outplayed them, but they outscored us and that's what counts. They were young mistakes that we made, myself being included. I'd throw interceptions and do things that Coach Warmath had taught us better, but as a sophomore, you think you can do it anyway and you don't play smart. In my junior year, that was the difference. Those six games went the other way because we were smarter; we didn't make mistakes. We made the other team make the mistakes. That was the biggest turnaround, really. He preached it to us many, many times until we understood that the team that makes the fewest mistakes wins, generally 95 percent of the time. It's a true axiom today. If you watch any game, the team that has the most turnovers, you can bet that team generally lost. That was what we took up as our religion that year, you might say, and we went about making other teams make the mistakes and we just capitalized on their mistakes. He would even kick on the third down. People were really criticizing. I didn't understand that part at first myself either. But, then, I understood our defense was so great that we would kick the ball down there to them knowing they

couldn't advance on us and when we kicked it, we got it back and our return punts, we would always get in good field position. So, we ended up in good field position and we'd go, say, forty yards for our touch down where the opposing teams had to go about eighty yards. It makes a difference in the long haul. Little things like that add up when you're playing great teams and it's only the little things that makes the difference in good and great.

AP: Do you remember how you felt as a player going around the campus? You must have been kind of a god. Was that an amazing experience?

SS: No, it wasn't all that. But we had a good time. I had a great college experience. Like I say, I wouldn't have traded it. I felt I made the right choice when I came to Minnesota. I've never regretted coming here. The friends and the teammates that I played with were outstanding. The college, the campus, the administration was great at that time.

Senator Hubert Humphrey used to come over to practice all the time. In fact, he told me—I wanted to go there to one of his marches—if I could beat Iowa, then, he would take care of the people down there at Washington. He was a great fan. In fact, I haven't seen anyone since the former Governor [Arne] Carlson who was a greater fan than Senator Humphrey.

AP: That's interesting. I didn't know that. He would go to your practices?

SS: Oh, yes, he would come right down there, throw his coat right on the grass. I'd look at him; the guys would look at me. He'd roll his sleeves up just like he was... "All right, Sandy, what are we going to do this weekend? How are the guys looking?" He would come over all the time. But, the thing I loved about Senator Humphrey is he was with us when we lost all them years. That year of my sophomore year, he was with us then. I didn't mind him coming into the locker room because he deserved it and was with us when we were losing. You can tell the well wishers and the people that pat you on the back after you won but they were the very ones that were writing all those despicable things. I haven't forgot it. I know the ones that did and didn't.

AP: Were there other people that were big fans? That's a wonderful little story. Were there fans like Senator Humphrey, others that were avid fans?

SS: Oh, yes. We had the best fans. Listen! we had 65,000 people, plus, every game and the record, probably the biggest crowd of any sports, still to this day—unless they enlarge the Metrodome. We had the record of 66,000, plus, and the fire marshals made them stop. That's the only reason we didn't have 66,000 every weekend. You can check that today. I think, until they enlarge the Metrodome, they haven't had a bigger event here yet, I don't believe. You might want to check that.

AP: I believe you.

What would you say is one moment that you'll carry with you? There probably are a lot, but is there one particular moment in your sports' career that you remember?

SS: I'll always remember this day, winning that game, getting a chance to go back to the Rose Bowl after losing. That was the most terrible pain I've had in a long time. That was worse than that whole sophomore year. That would be because I was undefeated. I never lost a game I started before I came here to Minnesota, so I didn't know anything about losing at any sport too much. When we did, it took quite a toll on me. We came back with a vengeance and, like I say, I was supposed to play baseball and I forfeited that and told Coach Warmath that I wanted to be there in spring practice so we could really polish our act and get it down pat. I really meant to take care of business that coming year—and we did.

AP: You certainly did. That is just remarkable.

What have you done since college? You finished up at Metro.

SS: Yes, that's just been recently. What I did after I came out of college is I went to Canada and I played three years in the Canadian Football League, because I was not allowed to play in the NFL, at that time, as a quarterback. The New York Titans drafted me in the first round but they didn't have the money. It was a new AFL and the league was going bankrupt and they were going bankrupt. I guess the league stayed on. They were the team I got drafted by, unfortunately, drafted me number one and was going to pay me the most money of any offer I had but they wouldn't put it in escrow for me; so, I had to go play in Canada like so many black quarterbacks after me had to do. I went up there.

Then, I came back here. I had a car accident. They paid me rather than to let me play and I was back here watching the Vikings, buddies that I played with, and that was the worst feeling I've ever had. If you want to know the worst feeling, that was coming back here and watching guys play when you can't play and you know you can play as good or better than they can, but you can't play. That was kind of where I was, watching the Chicago Bears and the Minnesota Vikings. After the game, I met and old, dear friend of mine, Roosevelt Taylor, who was with the Chicago Bears. After talking to him, I kind of told him the story of what happened. He had shown me around the town of New Orleans when I went to some banquets after college there. I went to talk to him and after talking to him, I had made up my mind, I was going back and I was going to play pro ball anyway. Despite their objections, I was going to find somebody that was going to let me play. I was really going to celebrate that night and that's what we did. We kind of over-celebrated and we were dragging down Cedar Avenue here and ran into a tree...

AP: Oh, dear.

SS: ...at about 115 miles an hour. Yes, like I say, we were celebrating. My wife was modeling down at the Capp Towers and they had a Jimmy McGriff dance and she was going to model first while we were coming from the game. We was taking the whole party down to see my wife model in a fashion show and go to the Jimmy McGriff dance. That's when it happened. Anyway, I came out of there and that took a couple of years. During that time, I bought a nightclub and a restaurant and became a young entrepreneur. They told me I wasn't ever going to walk right because my foot was mangled and my left arm was broke in two places and my ribs was broke and [unclear] lacerations.

But I told them, "No, not only will I walk, I'll run again." And I did. I told them that even at half as good as I was, I could still beat them. I went down to Kansas City and played two years with them, just to prove my point. After that I gave it up. I went on and managed a nightclub down there. Then, I came back here to Minnesota and began in mortgage banking. Then, most of the entire 1970s, I spent in Manhattan, New York, though. It's like I told you, I do like the lights and even Minnesota got kind of slow for me around here in the 1970s, so I had to go back to the East Coast and kind of have a little more excitement, so I went right to Manhattan and stayed there until 1980. Then, I've been back here now since 1980. This will be my home; I'll pass away here, probably. I've always found Minnesota to be one of the nicer places in the whole United States and the people and the country have been. If you travel around a lot and you get to meet a lot of people from all around, I don't think there's no contest. Minnesota is above many, many places. There's still room for improvement, but still, they're heads and tails above almost everywhere I've been anyway and I've been in most of the places in the United States.

AP: Did you join one of the black fraternities?

SS: Yes, I did. I wanted to tell you about that. One of my best times of my college career and one of the great moments—I was thinking about that when you asked me what was my great moment, but we were talking about football then—and memories I have is the fraternal experience that we had here. We won championships in softball, basketball, and track. We would be fighting against the Phi Delt who were the big power on campus here and the SAE [Sigma Alpha Epsilon] Lions. We were the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. We reorganized a chapter that was kind of defunct at the time. We reactivated the chapter. It's the same fraternity that Dr. Martin Luther King and many other men of that nature belonged to. I'm about being first anyway in whatever it is, so they were the first black fraternity. The things they stood for and their ideas kind of appealed to us. That was a part of the college campus life that I thought was an integral part of it and it was. We had a dynamic time and there are many memories and stories that we'll never forget pertaining to that weekend, the lo-o-ng weekend. [laughter]

AP: I want to be sure I spell it correctly. A-l-p-h-a P-h-i A-l-p-h-a?

SS: Right.

AP: Were there two black fraternities on campus at the time?

SS: Yes. There was another fraternity: Kappa Alpha Psi.

AP: Sometimes, fraternities collect types of people, like athletes.

SS: There was another one that started even after that, more so with the athletes; although, at that time, we had all the athletes: Carl Eller, Bobby Bell, Bill Muncie, John Williams. We had all the notable athletes, at that time, in our fraternity. But, nation-wide, that fraternity is more or less the type that would be more the learned group of the fraternities. Now, you had the Omega Phi Psi, called the Omegas. That's another prominent black fraternity and they're well known for their

athletes. The Kappas are also. People like Jim Marshall, Jim Tate, those guys were Kappas. The Kappas at that time, made a mistake here. They took us for granted and they felt like since they were the only one on campus that they just had us and they didn't do anything. They felt like we should just kiss their behind, you might say, to do it. We didn't have to do that. We could do anything we wanted.

AP: So, then, you activated the Alpha Phi Alpha?

SS: We activated the other chapter just to show them that they didn't have anything on us and weren't going to stop us from doing what we intended to do. That's how that came about. But it was a wonderful experience and I'm very proud... Old Teddy Robinson from Grambling is an Alpha man. As a matter of fact, I have to down June 25 to Dallas or Los Angeles for an Alpha function. I got a great award out there in 1997 when I went into the Rose Bowl Hall of Fame. Also, the Orange County Chapter gave me a wonderful award when I was out there. I still do keep current in my dues, both locally and nationally. I don't really function that much in the older fraternity but I do keep current as far as the dues and things.

AP: Did you find that the students were receptive? I know that one of the reasons you came to Minnesota was you'd have a chance to play quarterback, which you got. Did you feel socially that you were accepted as a student here?

SS: Oh, yes. We didn't have any problems. We didn't have any personal problems. Nobody personally messed with us. It was only the thing of messing with the coach. When you mess with my coach, you messing with me. [laughter] That's when I took offense and, really, it was at him and he was such a man that he'll never say anything or complain about it till today. You won't be able to get him. I told people in a minute about it because I didn't appreciate it. That was part of our motivation also, though they didn't know it would help. [laughter] Really. Even those kind of things, like I said, as well as Minnesota is and as far as they've gone, still there was still room for improvement and things like that went on right there in Edina, our great old Edina. They dumped garbage on his lawn. His wife couldn't go to the store to shop even. He had to take his kids out of school and he's never complained once to today about it. He was just the greatest man I ever knew. He came right in and it was business as usual everyday. Every one asked me because I was at the quarterback meeting at 7:00 every morning, which was my toughest class. All the guys would always want to know, "Sandy, how's the coach today?" He never flinched one iota during all the time and is the greatest testimony I've seen of a man under that kind of pressure. He was the greatest role model for our whole team and I think our whole team was helped invaluablely by this: watching his character during a horrible time.

AP: You talked about a quarterback meeting at 7:00 in the morning. You said it was your toughest class.

SS: Yes, ma'am.

AP: Now, was that just you and the coach or who would attend these?

SS: All the quarterbacks. There was about four or five of us that were in there with him every morning. Before you'd go to all your other classes, you'd have the quarterback meeting and, like I say, at 7:00 in the morning. I'm still not very good at that time of morning. [laughter] I had to be functioning and you had to be sharp. You couldn't come in there being sleepy and you had to know every *and, but, or, for* conjunction. Just like what he said on the blackboard, you had to know that verbatim.

AP: When you say "verbatim," that was the plays?

SS: Like those axioms and things that I told you about that we learned, the things that you learn about the game. Quarterbacks have to do all that while other guys do something when you tell them what to do.

AP: In effect, you're calling the shots?

SS: Exactly, and I called my own plays, too, so I really had to know it and know it well so that he would have confidence, but they were always his plays. I never designed a play in the world. I just took the ones that I favored, but I knew what he wanted when he wanted it. That's why we always got along good and why he could trust me to call my own plays. I just really did what he wanted done. Once you see the reasoning of why he's telling you to do what you're doing and you understand it, then it's easy to do. That's what I thought about executing the plays. I wanted it just as bad as he did. On Thursdays, I'd be worse than the coach out there on the field. On Tuesday, you would do your offense. Wednesday would be your defense. Thursday would be your special teams. Then, your offensive has to be polished and ready to go because you really don't have a chance to do anything else on Friday; you're just going through the motions.

AP: Could you run through that again? That's a very interesting little litany.

SS: That was our little schedule, at that time. You played on Saturday and Sunday was the day you stayed in the whirlpool and tried to get your aches and pains... Then, you'd come out and on Monday would be your offense day. Then, the next day, you'd do your defense. Then, the next day would be your special teams. That day, also, was the day that I wanted to make sure the team is right myself. I'm the one that they had to please that day, more so than the coach. I'm the one that's going in and going to be killed and the coach was on the sidelines. That's why I could take them in hand and really make the horses run. I just came from the Hall of Fame in Pittsburgh this weekend here and I was teasing the first guy that ever was on the line and blocked for me. I used to play with the older guys and I had a pair of track shoes on and that's when I first had that smell for the goal line. I couldn't see around all the big guys because I was playing with all the older guys, but I was running the ball and we were about three yards from the line and I couldn't find anywhere to go so I went right up over this guy's back with these track shoes.

AP: Oh!

SS: He still has the scars to this day. [laughter] I didn't [unclear] and he still has the scars today from when I did that. I never wore them again, but I used to wear these three-quarter aluminum cleats. That use to make my linemen in high school and college get out of the way when I ran the quarterback sneak. I never had much trouble. They knew if they didn't give me a hole, I'd go right up their back, so they kind of got their man and got their block always very good on that play. [laughter] That's why I was so successful over the years.

AP: Wednesday was special teams. What was Thursday in practice?

SS: Thursday, you just walked through what you were doing. Thursday and Friday you just kind of walked through. You did your special teams, your punting, your kickoffs and all that kind of thing. Then, Friday, you didn't do anything. Say, if it was an away game, you just put on some sweats to go out just to check the field out and see how it feels out there, see how the wind blows, just get a feel for the stadium. Then, you come on back in. You really don't do anything. You want to keep your legs rested. You're getting ready to play then. Then, Saturday, you're at it.

AP: What would you do on a Friday if it was a home game? Would you go check the wind?

SS: Oh, yes, we'd still go out and do that same kind of practice even on our own then because you'd loosen your legs, see if you have any kinks, but you wouldn't do anything much. It's like about a ten, fifteen minute...just kind of a walk through the motions there, loosen up, limber up, and go right back in. Then, we would go to the Hotel St. Paul where we stayed here in town. We would go to a movie from there. Everyone with a residence there would go to a movie, get back about 11:00. Then, everyone else would do everything else and, then, quarterbacks again had to go to there quarterback meeting.

AP: Is this 11:00 in the morning or in the evening?

SS: Either one. Then, the next morning, you get up and have breakfast and you take the bus ride right on down University Avenue right to the stadium. It seems odd now, I still think I'm in the wrong city when I go by that corner and I look for the stadium and I see the swimming pool. I swear I'm in the wrong city because there should be a stadium there.

AP: I understand that there was cheering when the bus would arrive. The fans would be very enthusiastic?

SS: Oh! the band would be playing. They would be tailgating. It would be nothing but maroon and gold up the whole University Avenue there. You'd have to go down, because of the one way, around Fourth first and come back up University. Oh! you'd hear that band playing and we'd be ready. We couldn't get off the bus fast enough. Like I say, we had the greatest fans in the world and we would just be... Oh, man! you wanted to get off the bus and just get into your suit just as quick as you could and get the game going.

AP: This interview has been extremely helpful. I really appreciate it.

SS: It was my pleasure.

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[End of the Interview]

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