

Steve Nelson: "A Kid Who Loved to Hit"



A Change of Mind

North Dakota State, a small college juggernaut coached by Ron Erhardt, was not Nelson's first choice. Steve initially enrolled at Augsburg, where his uncle Edor was coach. It didn't take long to realize that he had undersold himself. After freshman year, he and Stan called Kjelbertsen to see if the Bison were still interested.

They were indeed. Steve headed off to Fargo, where he first played defensive end after sitting out a season. Kjelbertsen shifted Steve to linebacker in his second campaign to take full advantage of his instincts and aptitude for the game.

"If he's at end, he's only on one side of the formation. But at linebacker, he's got more of the field to cover and he can play against both the run and the pass. He 'scraped' very well, meaning he moved into the holes very quickly," recalls Ev.

Nelson was twice a second-team All-America pick, Bison MVP in 1972 and 1973, and captain as a senior. By then, Erhardt had departed for New England to help Chuck Fairbanks rebuild the fortunes of the Patriots. "Fargo" quickly brought Nelson to his boss's attention.

The Small College Kid Goes High in the Draft

"I was like his agent for those first couple of seasons," laughs Ron, who amassed 61-7-1 record at NDSU before coming to the pros. "I told the Patriots, 'Hey, this guy can play. And he's a real leader.'"

Fairbanks dispatched Bucko Kilroy and his scouts to evaluate Nelson. He concurred with Erhardt and picked Steve in the second round of the 1974 draft.

"All the reports had high praise for Steve. He was very smart, a natural. He played faster and better than his overall speed would have indicated. Every move he made was in a positive direction - he always went right for the ball, and he had a way of evading blockers. He was also a great tackler. He started for us as a rookie," recalled Fairbanks.

Luck played a role for Steve in the early going. Fairbanks and his staff installed a 3-4 defensive scheme, which was more suited to Nelson's style than the traditional 4-3 alignment. The players' strike kept the veterans out of practice for a while and gave Steve and the newcomers a lot of time to learn the system.

First Words Presage a Life in Football

The toddler pointed to the television receiver in the living room. Across the screen flitted grayish images, described by a background voice as Thurston, Starr, Nitschke, Hornung, Adderley, Kramer and others.

"Football!" he exclaimed, turning to his father for approval.

"It was the first word he ever spoke," said Stanford Nelson of his middle child Steve. "As a parent, I guess I was expecting something like 'Mama' or 'Daddy.'"

Young Steve's earliest verbal achievement shouldn't have been a surprise. In the Nelson household of Anoka, Minnesota, football was king. The Packers ruled the National Football League - there were no Vikings quite yet - and Stan Nelson was in the early stages of his 33 years of coaching high school football.

"Steve always had a ball in his hand,," recalls Stan, who directed the football fortunes of Anoka High, the state's largest secondary school, for 26 seasons. "In baseball, he was a catcher. In basketball, he was a point guard. In football, he played linebacker and fullback. He was captain in all three and all-state in football.

"But Cheryl, our oldest, was the best athlete," Stan quickly adds. "She was on two state track championship teams and was captain of the girls basketball team at Augsburg College. Steve's brother David played guard in football, and he was captain and most valuable player for two years at Minnesota-Duluth."

While his siblings may have possessed more natural athletic ability, Steve yielded to no one in his determination to be a football player.

"Ever since I can remember, I had the dream. My dad was a coach, and being around him and football players all the time, I wanted to be one of them," says Nelson.

Ev Kjelbertsen, who recruited for North Dakota State in the Twin Cities, regarded Steve as a top prospect from the minute he saw the lad play.

"He had quickness. He had hitting ability. He was a good student. And he wanted to play football. What more could you ask?" said Ev recently.



Steve's Career Patriots Statistics						
Year	GP	TT	UT	Sacks	Int	Yds
1974	11	79	58	0	0	0
1975	14	157	118	2	2	8
1976	10	91	57	1	2	32
1977	13	134	90	4.5	0	0
1978	14	115	75	1	5	104
1979	15	135	85	2	1	18
1980	15	186	116	0	3	37
1981	12	126	62	0	0	0
1982	9	130	45	0	0	0
1983	8	98	30	1	1	6
1984	16	207	71	3.5	1	0
1985	15	149	74	2	0	0
1986	10	70	36	1	2	21
1987	11	99	35	0	0	0
Totals	174	1,776	952	18	17	226

“Another thing about Steve was his work ethic and his preparation,” continued Fairbanks. “He was always studying opponents and finding ways to give himself an edge. You never had to tell him what you wanted more than once. We used to give him a couple of different defensive signals to call on the field, depending on what the other team did. For us, it was like having another coach in the game.

“He knew his role, what job he had to do, and what he could depend on others to do. And beyond his performance, he was totally unselfish and dedicated to the team.”

Nelson played his entire 14-year career with the Pats. During the first franchise resurgence under Fairbanks, he and youthful cohorts Steve Zabel, Sam Hunt, Steve King, George Webster, and Pete Barnes swarmed enemy ball carriers and receivers. In the middle 80’s under Raymond Berry, Steve was elder statesman of a new generation of hitters that included Andre Tippett, Johnny Rembert, Larry McGrew, and Don Blackmon.

“We had a linebacking crew that was comparable to what New England has had in recent years,” said Zabel, who also coached four years with Nelson at Curry. “Nellie was like a Ted Johnson and Tedy Bruschi rolled into one. He was quick and agile, and strong enough to take on the guards and others who’d come after him. He always played the strong side, and most teams in those days were right handed and would run to the right.”

Nelson’s 174 Patriot contests played place him seventh in franchise history. He was a Pro Bowl selection in 1981, 1985, and 1986. Steve led the team in tackles eight times, finishing with a fittingly Patriotic total of 1,776. The Pats named him to their Team of the Century in 2000 and retired his number 57 jersey.

Steve Grogan recalls Nelson as a player who always had fun on the field, even during practice sessions. “He was one of the toughest

players I knew, and he had a great knack of putting himself into position to make plays,” declared Grogan.

Bill Lenkaitis, who later teamed up with Steve in a restaurant named “Doc and Nellie’s,” agrees. “Nellie ran a 5.1 and O.J. was a 4.2, but Nellie always got to the corner first.”

Nelson retired after the 1987 season. His first attempt at coaching football was as an assistant on Rod Rust’s staff in 1990. The team finished 1-15. “We all got fired, and we all deserved it,” he says.

A Long Coffee Break

But coaching remained attractive. A few years later Steve was on a WEEI radio broadcast. Engineer Dave Hyatt, a Curry College graduate, mentioned that his school needed a pigskin makeover and asked Nelson if he’d be interested. That inquiry set the old Bison’s mental gears churning.

Not long afterwards, through the efforts of alumni Dave Marr and Brian Valley, Steve had a date for a quick cup of coffee with Curry president Kenneth Quigley. The pair hit it off immediately, and the coffee break lasted more than three hours. Quigley was scheduled to host the faculty Christmas party at his home that day. He showed up very late, grinning like a cat full of cream but unable to tell anyone that he’d found his new football coach. All he could reveal was that his afternoon was “time well spent.” On January 9, 1998, Nelson officially became the Colonels’ head football coach.

Curry had gone 0-10 the previous season and had posted an anemic 11-62-1 mark since 1990. The losing streak lasted one more game, the opener at Norwich. Curry reeled off a 6-4 mark for the year, earning Steve the first of three Coach of the Year designations.

Within a year, the position of athletic director at Curry opened up. Steve took that role as well. He now oversees Curry’s 13 varsity sports. Under Nelson, Curry football has not had a losing season. In each of the past three years, the Colonels have made it to the NCAA Division III playoffs. Nelson’s overall record is a sparkling 64-22.

“It was difficult for us to envision the type of success Curry has had with Steve,” said Quigley. “It’s not just been the great seasons we’ve had in football. I’m talking instead about the quality of his interactions with all of our student athletes.”

Nelson feels most at home on the football field, tutoring enthusiastic young hitters in his beloved game. He cites his former coaches, defensive coordinators Rust and Fritz Shurmer, as major influences in his own evolution as a coach.

When he’s not out on Walter Katz Field or seeing to the sporting endeavors of Curry students, Steve can be heard dispensing football wisdom on WEEI radio, WCVB-TV, and New England Cable News. He and his wife Angela are now empty-nesters, and Steve recently became a grandfather for the first time. He has four daughters – Cameron, 29; Casey, 27; Caitlin, 25, and Kelli, 23.

Steve's Curry College Coaching Record					
Year	Games	Won	Lost	Tied	
1998	10	6	4	0	NEFC Coach of Year
1999	10	7	3	0	
2000	10	6	4	0	
2001	11	9	2	0	ECAC Tourney
2002	10	7	3	0	ECAC Tourney
2003	12	11	1	0	NEFC Champions; NCAA Tourney; NEFC Coach of Year
2004	11	9	2	0	NEFC Champions; NCAA Tourney; NEFC Coach of Year
2005	11	9	2	0	NEFC Champions; NCAA Tourney
Totals	86	64	22	0	