

## *Rich Stephens*

Rich Stephens grew up in Fenton and attended Murphy Elementary School, then North Jefferson Middle School. His first experience with organized athletics came when he started playing soccer as a kid. He excelled at the sport and enjoyed the amount of running involved. Before high school he played football for the Meramec Warriors, but at first did not really enjoy the game as it didn't seem as fast-paced as soccer. At this young age, Stephens was often put on older teams because of his size. Once in high school, he played football for Coach Jim Snell and Coach Paul Haug. Stephens also played basketball and participated in track-throwing the discus. Stephens stood head and shoulders above most of his high school classmates. While he was a good student and well-liked, he does recall one day bringing a water gun to school, and it quickly got taken away by Mr. Corbett, who was no-nonsense and ended up smashing it with his bare hands!

As high school graduation approached, Stephens' success on the football field and his size led to recruitment by notable Division I schools: the University of Indiana and the University of Tulsa, as well as a number of other small colleges. Stephens appreciates the help Coach Haug gave him in the recruitment process, and it turned out that Coach Haug's former college teammate turned collegiate coach, Coach Kirk Doll, recruited him to the University of Tulsa. Coach Doll actually saw Stephens on the basketball court where he was recruiting a Division I prospect from Kirkwood High; upon seeing Stephens size and athletic ability, he was offered a spot at the University of Tulsa. Stephens was a freshman-year red-shirt, then played four seasons at Tulsa.

In 1989, the Cincinnati Bengals drafted Stephens in the National Football League's 9th round. That year, he spent time in the training camps of the Redskins and Jets. Then Stephens was drafted in the 2nd round to the WLAF (World League of American Football) in 1991 by the Sacramento Surge. Stephens recalls that his years with the Surge were the most fun he ever had playing football. The fan base in Sacramento was strong, and the energy at games was exciting. While playing in the WLAF, he got to travel the world and play in London and Barcelona. Additionally, Bill Goldberg was his teammate on the Surge team. In his time with the Surge, he helped the team win World Bowl II blocking for All-World running back and future CFL Hall of Famer Mike Pringle. Eventually, Stephens was inadvertently scouted from the WLAF back to the NFL when Coach Al Davis of the Los Angeles Raiders came to see an opposing player but instead saw Stephens dominate. For the 2nd time in his life, Stephens was the unlikely recruit as Coach Davis found a spot for Stephens on the Raiders roster.

Stephens played for the Los Angeles/Oakland Raiders from 1992-1996 as a leftside offensive lineman. As a professional athlete, this small-town Northwest kid made connections and friends with many colorful personalities...his new friends were folks we only know from television or headlines. During his time as a Raider, he connected with the infamous Sonny Barger, president of the Hells Angels. Stephens felt this unlikely friendship might give him a competitive edge. He recalls a time when he and fellow Raider teammates were invited to the motorcycle clubhouse; when they arrived, a banner stood outside that read, "The Oakland Hells Angels welcome the Oakland Raiders." Stephens also recalls hanging out with members of the band Metallica and later Jesse James, well-known bike-builder and owner of the televised West Coast Choppers.

After his time in the National Football League, Stephens made his way back to Missouri and currently resides in Cedar Hill. His interests and involvements have ranged from attending and graduating from Harley Davidson Mechanic School to owning and managing a bar and restaurant. He still has a place in his heart for football, has coached at the high school level and in the Little League, and has given time to football camps for youth alongside other retired athletes. His focus is for young athletes to understand the fundamentals, which he knows will serve them well at all levels. Stephens is physically active and has an interest in healthy living and wellness. He has also enjoyed attending a Raiders pre-season game and reconnecting with other Raider alumni at the new stadium in Las Vegas.

Rich Stephens succeeded in the athletic arena, making the most of his 6'7" frame and the ability to hang tough on the field. Along the way, he made friends and gained experiences far beyond the walls of Northwest High School. Stephens' colorful times are best told in his stories and big memories.

Congratulations to Rich Stephens, Class of 1984.