

DON STONESIFER:

The Greatest Receiver of the Chicago Cardinals

By Jim Sargent

Don "Stoney" Stonesifer, later the standout receiver of the Chicago Cardinals, owned most pass receiving records from his collegiate years at Northwestern University. Named as a first team end on the Associated Press All-American team in 1950, Stonesifer was picked to start in the East-West Shrine Game, both Hula Bowl games that year (he scored the winning touchdown in each game), and the College All-Star Game.

When Northwestern selected the all-time great Wildcat team in 1970, Stonesifer joined quarterback Otto Graham, backs Ralph "Moon" Baker, "Pug" Rentner, and Ron Burton, and six other gridiron heroes on the offensive first team. At that time Stoney still held the NU record for passes caught in a single game, 13.

When he retired after the 1956 season to go full-time into business, Stonesifer was the all-time top receiver of the Chicago Cardinals. In six standout NFL seasons the sure-handed end from Chicago's Schurz High School hauled in 231 aerials, gained 2,901 yards, averaged 12.6 yards per reception, and scored 14 touchdowns. During most of those years he was often double-teamed and occasionally triple-teamed.

On October 28, 1953, while Stonesifer was leading the NFL in receptions, Cardinal coach Joe Stydahar explained the reasons for his success:

"Don's an excellent faker and he's got a good change of pace. He doesn't have tremendous speed, but he's got sure hands and close quarters don't bother him.

"He can go up with two or three defenders and catch the ball."

The Cardinal franchise enjoyed few winning seasons in Chicago, and the club moved to St. Louis in 1960. Today the team is the Arizona Cardinals. Consequently, nobody can top the marks set by Stonesifer as a *Chicago* Cardinal.

The former prep star and All-American who, ironically, never made it to a single NFL Pro Bowl, was honored one more time in 1997: he was inducted into the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame.

Born on January 29, 1927, in the Windy City, Don Stonesifer grew up in a sports-oriented family. Don's father, who worked as a linotype operator for the *Chicago Tribune*, was a lifelong Chicago Bears' fan. He began taking his son to Bears' games when the youth was eight. Soon Don's hero was Green Bay Packer receiver Don Hutson, one of the NFL's greatest ends.

Due in part to Don's ordinary size, the Stonesifers wouldn't let their son play school football. But the youth persevered, playing years of sandlot football and finally getting his parents' permission to play varsity football at Schurz. Don became a starter at tackle as a junior, and he was a standout at end as a senior.

His stellar career at Schurz High, where he was an exceptional swimmer for four years and was named all-city offensive end as a senior, led to a scholarship offer at Northwestern.

But the end of World War II delayed the beginning of Stonesifer's collegiate career. After graduation in 1945, he was inducted into the Army Air Force. Sent to Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi, he was soon recruited for the base football team.

Shipped overseas within a few weeks, Stoney was stationed at Fürstenfeldbruck AFB near Munich, Germany, where he served with the Army of Occupation. During the 1946 season he starred on the Air Force football team that won the European Inter-Allied service championship. Also, the versatile

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Stonesifer captained the Fürstentfeldbruck swim team during the European service championships that fall.

After the football season, the coach, Captain Phillip Crigler, recommended Don for a scholarship at Northwestern. Crigler ranked Stonesifer's pass-catching abilities with those of Don Hutson, calling Stoney one of the best prospects he had ever seen.

With the Wildcats

Enrolling in Northwestern in 1947, Stonesifer swam for one season and played four years of football (veterans could play as freshmen). Playing offensive and defensive end for three seasons, he started mostly at offensive left end as a senior. In 1948 Northwestern ranked second in the Big Ten, but the "Rose Bowl Pact" (a team could not represent the conference two years in a row) kept first-place Michigan from competing.

The Wildcats traveled to Pasadena and won the 1949 Rose Bowl, 20-14, over the University of California. Stoney caught the only completed pass in the game, thrown by halfback Frank Aschenbrenner on third and eleven. The play sparked the fourth quarter drive which gave NU the winning touchdown.

Selected captain for his senior year, Stonesifer teamed with quarterback Dick Flowers to break most Big Ten pass receiving records. Don hauled in 28 passes in six conference games, bettering the old mark of 21 set by Indiana's Clifton Anderson in 1949. Stoney's 394 yards gained topped the 1949 record of 333 set by Iowa's Jack Dittmer.

The NU ace also set a single game receiving record of 13, eclipsing the 1945 mark of six established by NU All-American Max Morris, who later played pro football and major league baseball. Stonesifer won several All-American honors, thanks in part to his regular season marks of 42 passes for 560 yards in nine games.

By then a six-foot 200-pound all-around athlete, the personable Stonesifer had dreamed of being the first member of his family to go to college--and he dreamed of earning a scholarship to get there. As a result, he worked hard in practice and excelled in game situations.

For example, Stonesifer and Flowers practiced together after the team's regular sessions ended all during the 1949 and 1950 seasons. Talented enough to play right or left end on offense or defense, Don never got the recognition he deserved until as a senior he became the regular left end.

"Stoney has become a master at the art of faking the defense out of position," commented NU end coach Waldo Fisher. "That, rather than speed, accounts for his ability to get into the clear to catch passes. And he's a tireless worker, always trying to improve."

Popular, friendly, and a very good student who majored in commerce, Don was also a good pianist. After the squad's pre-game dinner on Friday evenings, he used to sit down at the piano and play boogie-woogie for his teammates, who, led by Ray Evans and Johnny Miller, would enjoy a songfest.

Stoney's outstanding senior season led to his participation in several postseason games, including the College All-Star game against the NFL Champion Cleveland Browns on August 17, 1951. The Browns won easily, 33-0.

But Stonesifer already had been drafted in the third round by the Chicago Cardinals. On May 17 he signed with the Cards for \$7,000 plus a \$500 bonus, which was a good salary in the early 1950s.

On to the Cardinals

Stonesifer played six strong seasons in the National Football League, but, unfortunately, the Cardinals were often the conference doormat. Chicago won the NFL title in 1947, posting a 9-3 record and beating the Philadelphia Eagles for the championship, 28-21.

Led again by quarterback Paul Christman and tough runners such as halfbacks Charlie Trippi and Elmer Angsman and fullback Pat Harder, the Cards proved even better in 1948. After fashioning an 11-1 mark, however, Chicago lost to the Eagles 7-0 for the championship in a game that was played during near-blizzard conditions in Philadelphia.

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In 1950 the Cardinals lost several key players and went into decline. By the time Stonesifer joined the club in 1951, only a handful of stars, including Trippi, remained from the great teams of 1947-48.

During Stoney's rookie season, the Cards finished last in the American Conference, compiling a 3-9 record under new coach "Curley" Lambeau, longtime pilot of the Green Bay Packers. Unable to ignite his team, Lambeau resigned midway through the 1951 season. Assistants Phil Handler and Cecil Isbell then coached the team.

Charlie Trippi and Jim Hardy were the main quarterbacks in 1951, with Trippi completing the most passes (88 of 191) and gaining the most yardage rushing, 501 (78 carries, 6.4 average). Fran Polsfoot was Chicago's top receiver, hauling in 57 passes for 796 yards and four touchdowns. But Stonesifer was second with 27 catches, 343 yards gained, and two TDs scored.

The Cardinals often struggled during the 1950s. Chicago had some first-rate players, but they didn't have enough of them, especially offensive and defensive linemen.

"We had different coaches and different quarterbacks," Stonesifer explained. "I idolized Curley Lambeau, but he was near the end of his career when he coached us. Joe Kuharich, Joe Stydahar, and Ray Richards followed him. I played six years under four head coaches.

"We had a bunch of good guys, like Angsman in my first year, Pat Summerall, Ollie Matson, Johnny Olszewski, Charlie Trippi, Don Paul, Leo Sugar. We just didn't have enough good players. But we had the best set of guys you could have on a team.

"Even though we lost a lot, we didn't have much dissension. In the first quarter it always seemed like we would play well, and we'd go downhill after that."

In 1952 under coach Joe Kuharich, who was so tough the players nicknamed him "the barracuda," Chicago finished fifth with a 4-8 ledger. The season started well with Frank Tripucka of Notre Dame at quarterback. But Tripucka suffered a shoulder separation in the fifth game. The Cards won three of the first four, and Tripucka never played another game for Chicago.

Trippi was the leading passer and rusher (350 yards, 4.9 average, 4 TDs), and rookie back Ollie Matson made an impact by gaining 344 yards (3.6 yard average) and scoring three times. Stonesifer became the leading receiver, making 54 catches for 617 yards (he didn't score in 1952).

In 1953 the Cardinals hired Joe Stydahar as head coach, so the team learned new offensive and defensive systems for the third straight year. Unfortunately, the result was worse: last place and a 1-10-1 record. Now playing in the Eastern Conference, the Cards' only saving grace was a 24-17 victory in the season finale against the rival Bears.

Two new quarterbacks, Jim Root and Steve Romanik, made little difference. Charley Trippi led all rushers with 433 yards (97 carries, 4.5 average), although he failed to score; Johnny Olszewski, a rookie from California, picked up 386 yards (3.6 average) and scored four touchdowns; and Stonesifer paced the receivers, grabbing 56 passes for 684 yards and two TDs.

Going Deep

"I ran mostly short patterns," Stonesifer reflected. "They passed to me a lot on third down when we needed a first down, when we were third and eight, third and twelve, that sort of situation. I wasn't the deep threat, like, say, Ollie Matson.

"One time against Tom Landry of the Giants, I hooked and went long, and I caught a touchdown pass over him. Landry came up to me after the play and shook me, and said, 'You never go deep!'

"Landry was so fundamentally sound, and he knew I didn't go deep. I usually went down and out, or hooked, for that 10 or 12 yards. I remember he was quite upset about that!"

But Stydahar's Cardinals were no better in 1954, occupying the conference cellar, this time with a 2-10 record. Rookie quarterback Lamar McHan threw most of the passes, completing 105 out of 255 for 1,475 yards and 6 TDs. Matson (506 yards, 5.0 average) and Olszewski (352 yards, 3.3 average) led the running attack, while Stonesifer led the receivers with 44 catches for 607 yards and two scores.

Stoney recalled his strategy against Giant defensive ace Emlen Tunnell:

"I would split out on maybe third down, and I'd look up and there would be Emlen, smiling at me. He liked to talk. He would always ask, 'Stoney, what kind of pattern are you going to run?'"

"I would tell him the truth. One time when Stydahar was the coach, he heard me answer Emlen and then run that pattern. He yanked me out of the game and wanted to know why the hell I was telling Tunnell the pattern I was running.

"I said to the coach, 'I tell him because after the first five steps I take, he will know the pattern anyway.'"

"But my best days came against the Giants, because Emlen never believed me!"

In 1955 Chicago improved to 4-7-1 and ranked fourth under Ray Richards, a Stydahar assistant. Lamar McHan directed the attack, passing for 1,085 yards and 11 touchdowns. Ollie Matson, now one of the NFL's most dangerous runners, ran for 475 yards (4.4 average) and one score, returned 15 kickoffs for 368 yards (25 yard average), and led the league with 13 punt returns for 245 yards and two TDs.

Stonesifer led the receiving corps with 28 catches, good for 330 yards and a career-high five touchdowns. All-around threat Matson was Chicago's second leading receiver, grabbing 17 passes for 237 yards and two TDs.

"When Roosevelt Grier first came up with the Giants in 1955," Don recalled, "we played them in an exhibition game. From watching Rosey on film, I noticed that he went for the halfback fake into the line. So when we played the Giants, every time we needed short yardage, we would fake to the halfback inside, I would let Rosey go for the fake, and block him easily—using his momentum to knock him down the line.

"A month later we played the Giants at Comiskey Park. On third down we needed three yards and the Q.B. called the left halfback fake. I waited for about a second, and the next thing I knew, I was being knocked into the ball carrier, resulting in a 5-yard loss.

"All of a sudden big Rosey grabbed me by the arms, lifted me up, looked me in the eye, and said, 'Not today, Stonesifer!'"

A Winning Season

In 1956 Chicago posted the only winning mark, 7-5, that Stonesifer enjoyed during his six-year NFL career. Ray Richards' club rose to second place. But the season was marred by a heart-breaking 10-3 loss to the Bears in the next-to-last game. Matson had touchdown runs of 83 yards and 65 yards nullified by penalties.

In his final season Stonesifer led all Cardinal receivers for the fifth year in a row, hauling in 22 aerials for 320 yards and two touchdowns. Matson, gaining 924 yards (4.8 average, 5 TDs), and Olszewski with 598 yards (3.8 average, 2 TDs), led the rushing attack. Also, Johnny ranked second in receptions with 17 for 182 yards, and Ollie ranked third, catching 15 for 199 yards and two TDs.

Despite his first-class seasons as the top Cardinal receiving threat, Stonesifer never made the Pro Bowl. He was named honorable mention All-Pro in 1953, when the first team ends were Elroy Hirsch of the Los Angeles Rams and Pete Pihos of the Eagles.

Leo Sugar, the two time Pro Bowl defensive end from Purdue who joined the Cards in 1954, roomed with Stonesifer for three seasons.

"Stoney was a great ballplayer, a great team guy," Sugar told me. "He always knew his defender and he had a great instinct of how to get open. Don was a terrific guy to be around, on or off the field. He always had a good attitude, and he was never down."

For highlights, Stoney remembered *twice* catching 27 passes in three consecutive games. At Northwestern in 1950 he caught 27 passes in three straight games: his numbers were 7, 13, and 7, with

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13 receptions against Minnesota. For the Cards he once caught 10, 7, and 10 passes, with his 10-catch games coming against the New York Giants.

Stonesifer, a first-class person and a great storyteller who has given talks for the NFL Alumni Association, likes to say, "If you have played professional football during the last 20 years, you're a celebrity. If you played pro ball over 20 years but not longer than 40 years ago and are still remembered, you're a *legend*."

"On the other hand, if you played professional football over 40 years ago and are still remembered, you're an *immortal*, which includes guys like Jim Thorpe, Red Grange, George Halas, and Jimmy Conzelman."

Judging by his first-rate skills and the records he set at Northwestern and with the Cardinals, Stoney played his position, caught the passes, and helped his team as well as any end in the league. He became the Chicago Cardinals' greatest receiver, and he deserved the honor of induction into the Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame.

Don Stonesifer grew up yearning to be good enough to play football and earn a college scholarship. Combining his excellent talent with a positive attitude and a great work ethic, he succeeded. In an era of intensely competitive 33-man NFL teams, Stoney lived the American football dream well beyond his youthful aspirations.

| Year | Team | Gm | NO | Yard | Avg | TD |
|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|------------|-----------|
| 1951 | ChiC | 12 | 27 | 343 | 12.7 | 2 |
| 1952 | ChiC | 12 | 54 | 617 | 11.4 | 0 |
| 1953 | ChiC | 12 | 56 | 684 | 12.2 | 2 |
| 1954 | ChiC | 12 | 44 | 607 | 13.8 | 3 |
| 1955 | ChiC | 12 | 28 | 330 | 11.8 | 5 |
| 1956 | ChiC | 12 | 22 | 320 | 14.5 | 2 |
| 6 years | | 72 | 231 | 2901 | 12.6 | 14 |