

JAN STENERUD

by Don Smith

For years, it was generally assumed that someone who did nothing more than kick the ball on the football field could not be a legitimate candidate for the sport's highest honor, membership in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"Kickers don't 'pay the price'," the argument went. "Their job doesn't call for them to hit or be hit. Even their practice routines are less demanding than those of the scrimmage-line regulars."

Then Jan Stenerud, a talented ski jumper from Norway, popped onto the scene with the 1967 Kansas City Chiefs. He stayed around for 19 years before retiring after the 1985 season with the Minnesota Vikings. He scored 1,699 points, second in history only to the fabled George Blanda, and earned the universal reputation of being the absolute best at his job.

In 1991, in his first year of eligibility, Stenerud completed his unlikely journey from the ski slopes of Norway to the Pro football Hall of Fame, the coveted honor even his strongest supporters recognized might be out of his reach. His election made him the first player whose sole responsibility was place-kicking to enter the Hall.

The Hall's 31-member Board of Selectors conceded that placekickers don't face the every-down pounding that most football players do but also recognized that place-kickers are called on in pressure situations to win games. The consensus opinion was that the blond, curly-haired Norwegian was clearly a cut above most of the others who have tried his profession.

Stenerud's career achievements are legendary. In addition to his 1,699 points, he holds the career record with 373 successful field goals, 38 more than Blanda. Until 1990, he was tied with Nick Lowery, his successor in Kansas City, with seven seasons scoring over 100 points. He ranks second with 17 field goals over 50 yards -- his longest was a 55-yarder against Denver in 1970. His 580 career points-after-touchdown place him third in that category.

Stenerud played in two AFL All-Star games and four AFC-NFC Pro Bowls. With four field goals, including a then-record 48-yarder, and two extra points, he won Most Valuable Offensive Player honors in the 1972 Pro Bowl. From 1967 to 1970, he was successful on 72 percent of his field goal attempts while the AFL norm at the time hovered around 50 percent.

The strong, sturdy Stenerud's initial success becomes even more impressive when it is remembered that he didn't have the advantage of artificial turf, domed stadiums or even warm-up nets on the sidelines. The offensive concept of maneuvering into field goal position in close games was just emerging.

"In those days, we didn't work much on special teams," Chiefs quarterback Len Dawson, Stenerud's holder for several years, recalls. "There's no telling how good Jan could have been had he started his career a decade later."

From Fiord to Football

The story of how Stenerud made his way to the American gridiron is as fascinating as any account of his sterling achievements in pro football. Born in Fetsund, Norway, on November 26, 1942, Stenerud played a little soccer and hockey as a youth but was good enough as a ski jumper to earn an athletic scholarship at Montana State University.

On his way to his new college home in 1963, Jan stopped to visit his sister, Berit, who at the time was dating a Buffalo, New York, sportswriter. The writer, Larry Felser, a current member of the Hall's Selection Board, suggested that Jan and Berit might like to see the Buffalo-Kansas City football game that afternoon.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 6 (1995)

Later, Felser asked Stenerud what he thought about the new game he had seen. "It's the craziest thing," Jan replied. "I can't understand why all those guys keep jumping on top of each other."

So Stenerud put American football behind him and went on to Montana State, where he became a collegiate All-America ski jumper. Football re-emerged by accident during his sophomore year.

When MSU's regular kicker began practice after recovering from an injury, Stenerud agreed to keep him company and hold for his placekicks. It wasn't long before Jan decided to try kicking the oval-shaped ball himself.

"I tried to hit some kicks with the toe like everyone else," Stenerud recalls. "Then I hit some with the side of my foot. That was easier for me, like I was taking a corner kick or a penalty kick in soccer."

The MSU basketball coach, Roger Craft, noticed Stenerud booming kicks straight and long toward the goal posts and told the football coach, Jim Sweeney, what he had seen. The result was that Stenerud became a football player.

Stenerud kicked 18 of 33 field goals in two years at MSU. Included was a 59-yarder, longest ever for all of football at the time. His overall record undoubtedly suffered because Sweeney, lacking a good punter, often called for field goal tries in normal punting situations. He reasoned that a missed field goal by Stenerud would be better than a punt. The ultimate example of this strategy came on a 113-yard attempt which Stenerud kicked all the way to the opponent's 30-yard line.

To the Chiefs

Even though the Chiefs had already drafted Jan as a future choice in 1966, Coach Hank Stram decided to take a look at his new recruit in a game against Tulsa. "On the opening kickoff, Stenerud put the ball through the goal posts and seven rows deep into the bleachers. I had seen all I needed to see," Stram remembers.

The NFL's Atlanta Falcons also drafted Stenerud but Jan chose Kansas City primarily because of Stram, who had been a kicker himself as a collegian at Purdue. "He really impressed me," Stenerud once said. "He didn't just talk about signing. He talked about kicking and I liked that."

While Stram tends to downplay his contributions, Stenerud insists that the Chiefs coach played a big role in his success. "He brought me in a month early before my first season," Stenerud says. "Every day he had me out there kicking 50 balls -- and he was doing all the holding. It was Coach Stram who pointed out that I was more likely to miss a field goal from the right hash mark. I didn't realize that but his charts showed me it was true. He had me practice from that side until it was no longer a problem."

Soon after he received an \$80,000 signing bonus from the Chiefs, Stenerud went home to Norway to see his family. He brought along some films of Montana State games to try to show his parents what he was going to do for a living.

"My mother was a little leery of my playing football," Stenerud relates, "and my father hoped I would jump for Norway in the Winter Olympics. And when they looked at the film, nobody could understand what was happening."

But once he was back in Kansas City, everyone knew what was happening, that the Chiefs had found themselves a real gem. While Pete Gogolak had become pro football's first sidwinding placekicker in 1964, Stenerud, with his great accuracy and long- distance capabilities, made more of a lasting impression.

He kicked a 54-yard field goal in the 1967 season opener against Houston and wound up the season with 21 field goals, high for the AFL and a new Chiefs record. His 108 points, second best in the AFL, started a string of five straight seasons in which he scored more than 100 points. In 1969, he kicked 16 straight field goals, eclipsing the existing pro mark of 13 straight held by Cleveland's Hall of Fame tackle, Lou Groza.

Never was Stenerud's value more apparent than in Super Bowl IV, when the Chiefs upset the heavily-favored Minnesota Vikings, 23-7. Stenerud started the scoring with a Super Bowl-record 48-ard field goal and followed with a 32-yarder and a 25-yarder to give the Chiefs all the points they needed to win.

While Dawson was named the game's Most Valuable Player, Stenerud's contributions did not go unnoticed. "Any time you can score from as far out as we did on that first field goal," Stram said, "it has a strong psychological effect on your squad."

Stenerud's reputation for long-distance kicks often intimidated opponents. A visiting coach once asked Kansas City groundskeeper George Toma about the dozens of white 'X' marks painted on the stadium wall 10 full yards behind the end zone. "Those are the spots where Stenerud's kickoffs have hit the fence," Toma explained to the astonished coach.

Moving On

In August, 1980, the Chiefs decided they needed a younger kicker and Stenerud was released. Jan thought his career might be finished but, as it turned out, some of his finest years were still ahead of him.

In November, 1980, the 6-2, 190-pounder signed a free agent contract to play the last four games with the Green Bay Packers. The next summer, he had to beat out two veteran kickers, Benny Ricardo and Rick Danmeier, to win a job. A pre-season 54-yard field goal, which coach Bart Starr ordered only because his punter was slumping badly, kept Stenerud's career alive.

His 91.6 completion percentage on 22 of 24 attempts in 1981 was the finest of his career. The next season, he helped the Packers to the playoffs and kicked a Green Bay playoff-record 46-yard field goal against St. Louis. In 1983, he won or tied five games in the last two minutes and broke Blanda's career field goal mark with four field goals in a 12-9 Monday night win over Tampa Bay.

"When the game was on the line, there was no one I would rather have kicking than Jan," former Packers quarterback Lynn Dickey relates. "The older he got, the harder he worked, so he never had the deterioration of his physical skills."

In July, 1984, Stenerud was traded to the Minnesota Vikings for a seventh-round draft choice. Since the Vikings played in a domed stadium, Jan viewed the move as a positive thing, something that could lengthen his career.

The 1984 season in Minnesota proved to be one of Stenerud's finest. He connected on 20 of 23 field goals for an 87 percent success rate, second best ever for Jan. At the age of 42, he became the oldest player ever to participate in the Pro Bowl.

Stenerud's production tailed off slightly in 1985, although he still scored 86 points on 15 of 26 field goals and 41 extra points. After the season, the bad back that had plagued him for some time forced him to retire.

The consistent and durable Norwegian could look back with pride on a 19-season tenure during which he played 263 games -- third most in history -- without a miss.

Stenerud, now a sports architecture marketing executive in Kansas City, excelled at a pressure-filled job where victory or defeat often depended on his ability to come through in the clutch. "Pro football is a game of tremendous highs and lows but I try to keep it all on an even keel as much as I can," he once said. "If you've been around a number of years, everything basically is going to happen to you. You just hope you're going to be successful a lot more often than you're not."

For the hard-working Stenerud, who approached his job with calm, business-like dedication and precision, personal success which spelled victory for his teams became a career hallmark.

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STENERUD, JAN

Jan Stenerud

K 6-02 190 Montana State

HS: Lillestrom, Norway

Born: 11/26/42, Fetsund, Norway

Selected by Kansas City on 3rd round as future in 1966 AFL draft

AFL All-Star Games following 1968-79 seasons;

Pro Bowls following 1970-71, 1975, 1984

Pro Football Hall of Fame 1991

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 17, No. 6 (1995)

YEAR	TEAM	LG	GM	KICKING				
				XP	XA	FG	FA	PTS
1967	KC	.. A	14	45	45	*21	36	108
1968	KC	.. A	14	39	40	30	40	129
1969	KC	.. A	14	38	38	27	35	119
1970	KC	.. N	14	26	26	*30	42	*116
1971	KC	.. N	14	32	32	26	44	110
1972	KC	.. N	14	32	32	21	36	95
1973	KC	.. N	14	21	23	24	38	93
1974	KC	.. N	14	24	26	17	24	75
1975	KC	.. N	14	30	31	*22	32	96
1976	KC	.. N	14	27	33	*21	38	90
1977	KC	.. N	14	27	28	8	18	51
1978	KC	.. N	16	25	26	20	30	85
1979	KC	.. N	16	28	29	12	23	64
1980	GB	.. N	4	3	3	3	5	12
1981	GB	.. N	16	35	36	22	24	101
1982	GB	.. N	9	25	27	13	18	64
1983	GB	.. N	16	52	52	21	26	115
1984	Min	. N	16	30	31	20	23	90
1985	Min	. N	16	41	43	15	26	86
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19 years			263	580	601	373	558	1699

* - Led conference