DICK STANFEL

By Bob Carroll

Dick Stanfel? Where have you heard that name?

Offensive guard during the 1950's with Detroit and Washington. Well, THAT'S not much help!

We've all heard the cracks:

The two most invisible animals on earth are the South American chameleon on defense and the North American lineman on offense.

We just found Hoffa; he's been hiding out as an NFL guard.

The only time an offensive lineman hears his number called is when he does something wrong.

But like most one-liners, these overstate the case. It's true that an ORDINARY offensive guard can play in the NFL for a dozen years and remain nearly anonymous outside his team's city, but the VERY BEST of the breed will find his name buried in the text of end-of-season articles announcing all-league teams and Pro Bowl selections. If your memory goes back far enough, you may remember Dick Stanfel from those articles because there was a time when type-setters could just leave his name set up from season to season. He was, as the song says, simply the best.

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Richard Anthony Stanfel was born in San Francisco twenty-one years after the earthquake and with much less commotion. When he reached Commerce High School, he made the football team as a 5'8", 155-pound blocking back. He was ranked as the third-best signal-caller within the city limits, but, by that time, the T- formation was becoming the rage. Single-wing blocking backs -- particularly undersized blocking backs -- headed few college coaches' shopping lists. In the fall of 1946, Dick entered San Francisco Junior College where the football coach decided his future lay at guard.

Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Army decided on a different immediate future altogether and Dick became a signal corpsman for a year and a half. When he returned to school, all that good army chow -- or something -- had increased him to a man-sized 6'2" and 192 pounds.

In 1948, onetime all-NFL guard Joe Kuharich arrived as head coach at the University of San Francisco. He installed the sophomore Stanfel as a starting guard on both offense and defense. Though Joe's first Dons' squad limped to a 2-9 mark, it marked the start of a long intertwining of Kuharich's career with Stanfel's. In 1949, USF jumped to a 7-3 mark, and the next year -- with Stanfel as senior captain -- 8-2. Kuharich was building powerhouses, and it is often assumed that Dick played on the famous 1951 team that cruised undefeated through ten games. Alumni of that squad included future Pro Football Hall of Famers Bob St. Clair, Gino Marchetti, and Ollie Matson, as well as Ed Brown, Red Stephens, Joe Scudero, and a couple of others who had fruitful pro careers. But not the graduated Stanfel.

The confusion probably lies in the belated beginning to Dick's entry into the NFL. The Detroit Lions' second round draft choice for '51, he was chosen for the College All-Star game that August, but tore up a knee cartilage so badly he sat out the whole season.

Two operations later, Stanfel -- by then a fast, 6-3, 240-pounder -- became a regular on the Lions' offensive line in his belated rookie year. It was no coincidence that Detroit made its great leap forward in 1952 to win it's first NFL championship in almost twenty years. They repeated the next year, and got to the title game in '54. The Lions had more than their share of glittering stars: quarterback Bobby Layne, halfback Doak Walker, the whole "Chris Crew" defensive backfield, and nonpariel linebacker Joe Schmidt.

But, of course, everything starts with the offensive line. The Lions were known as a "passing team," but even though they had no single, heavy-duty runner, they consistently finished among the top three NFL teams in rushing yardage. When Dick arrived on the scene, Lou Creekmur was the big blocking noise among the grunts. Later, such stalwarts as Harley Sewell and Chalie Ane were added. Certainly Stanfel didn't stand alone along what had to be considered the best blocking line in football. No single lineman can excel if his fellow blockers can't do the job.

Nevertheless, Stanfel was voted unanimous all-NFL in 1953 and '54 and selected to the Pro Bowl after the '53 and '55 seasons. The second Pro Bowl tab is particularly noteworthy because it came after a year that saw him miss half his team's games with an injury. But no doubt his most significant honor in his four Lions' years came at the end of 1953 when his teammates on the World Champion squad voted him the club's Most Valuable Player. Offensive guards are team MVP's almost as often as Mike Ditka begs your pardon.

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Teammate Doak Walker benefitted from Dick's blocking during those years: "When he pulled and cut upfield, we made yardage. He was very nearly the same as Lou Creekmur, but Stanfel had the edge. I would rate him higher than [Dick] Barwegan or [Abe] Gibron. Dependable and hard-working, he could pull or block straight ahead, and he'd play hurt."

Art Donovan, the Colt's great defensive lineman, played against Stanfel for years. He felt Dick's strong suit was run-blocking. "Great pulling guard -- superb in that area," he says.

Another Hall of Fame defender, Andy Robustelli, said, "Steady. So steady you didn't realize how good he was. [Dick was] as good an offensive lineman as anyone who played in the NFL during his time." But after thinking that over, Robustelli decided that Stanfel was "not as good as Parker." Of course, as anyone who follows football knows, there may never have been an offensive lineman to rate with Baltimore's Jim Parker. But those ranking in the next tier down wouldn't fill a one-car garage -- even allowing for the size of NFL linemen.

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While Stanfel was helping the Lions win championships, his old college mentor Kuharich had become coach of the Washington Redskins. The 'Skins had nestled at the bottom of the NFL standings for nearly a decade when Joe arrived. He managed to return them to respectability for a while. In 1956, he worked a trade that brought Stanfel to Washington.

Unfortunately, Kuharich's Redskins roster lacked the depth to make many advantageous trades possible, and owner George Preston Marshall's policy of refusing to draft black players virtually doomed his team to a backslide. But while Washington's record slipped, Stanfel soared. For three straight seasons -- 1956-58 -- he was chosen for the Pro Bowl and named all-NFL by both AP and UPI. In seven seasons, he'd missed being named all-league in only his rookie year and the injury-plagued 1955. At age 31, he was at the top of his game.

And then he retired.

To younger fans, it may seem inconceivable that an all-pro would walk away from the NFL at the height of his career, but it was fairly common in the 1950's. Cleveland quarterback Otto Graham went out on top after ten seasons. New York defensive tackle Arnie Weinmeister jumped to the Canadian Football League after only six U.S. pro years. Doak Walker, Stanfel's teammate at Detroit, also played only six years. Numerous other stars retired early.

The reason, of course, was money. NFL players -- even stars of the first magnitude -- were not lavishly salaried in the '50s. Most players found off-season employment a necessity in supporting a family. When a full-time career opportunity beckoned, most players were quick to hang up their spikes.

In Stanfel's case, the opportunity was tendered by Joe Kuharich. Fired by Marshall at Washington after the 1958 season, he landed on his feet as the new head coach at Notre Dame for 1959. As his line coach, he took with him his best lineman, Dick Stanfel.

Dick was 31 at the time. Only three starting offensive lineman in the NFL were older than 31 in 1958 -- Lou Groza, Chuck Bednarik, and Abe Gibron. It was time to look for a permanent career.

Although Kuharich's head coaching career was a mixed bag in the following years, Stanfel quickly established himself as an outstanding line coach. After four years at South Bend, he spent 1963 at the University of California. Kuharich brought him back to the NFL in 1964 when the Eagles hired Joe as head coach. At Philadelphia, Stanfel was given much of the credit for the development of the great tackle Bob Brown.

In 1971, Stanfel returned to San Francisco as an assistant with the 49ers. In 1976, Hank Stram hired him at New Orleans. The Saints gave Dick his only shot as a head coach -- four games at the end of the 1980 season and a "career record" of 1-3. Since 1981, Stanfel has been with the Chicago Bears where he built one of pro football's most celebrated offensive lines during the decade.

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Just how high to rank Stanfel among all those who have played offensive guard in the NFL, is complicated by his comparatively short career. Bill James, the popular baseball writer, made a point in evaluating the careers of diamond stars that applies equally to gridders. James noted that players have two kinds of value -- "career value," in which longevity is a major factor, and "peak value," in which a player's career may be relatively short, but during that time he ranks at or near the top of his profession. To draw a football comparison, Franco Harris played 13 seasons and ranks very high in "career value" even though he may never have had a year in which he was the NFL's top running back. Gale Sayers had only five productive years, but during that "peak" time, he was the most valuable runner in the league.

Offensive guards, of course, take longer to be noticed than running backs, so career length becames an easier factor to throw into any evaluation. Nevertheless, Stanfel's five all-NFL seasons in seven years makes him a standout. The Hall of Fame Selection Committee had no trouble recognizing him in naming him one of three guards (along with Parker and Barwegan) to its All- Pro Squad of the 1950's.

On an absolute scale among NFL guards since the game became a two-platoon affair, Jim Parker is usually accorded first place, followed by John Hannah and Gene Upshaw. After those three, there are several candidates, but possibly as high as fourth -- and certainly in the top half-dozen -- Dick Stanfel.