

Dwight Stephenson

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 1998

By Joe Horrigan

Dwight Stephenson was never comfortable with the attention his superlative line play earned him during his eight-year career with the Miami Dolphins. The 6-2, 255-pound center from Alabama preferred to go quietly about his business. "I just want to help the team," he would say. "People pay too much attention to me. It's the whole offensive line that deserves the credit."

Stephenson's desire to remain a nameless contributor, however, was futile. Even before joining the Dolphins as a number two pick in the 1980 draft, the friendly, unassuming Stephenson had received accolades generally reserved for "skilled position" players. "Dwight Stephenson was the best center I ever coached," proclaimed Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant. "He was a man among children."

Born in Murfreesboro, North Carolina, on November 20, 1957, Stephenson grew up in Hampton, Virginia where his father worked in a shipyard. A scrawny kid, the Hall of Fame lineman joked that even the neighborhood girls pushed him around.

Dwight's slight physique, however, began to change when at the age of 14 he got a job at a local grocery store. "Every week when the owner would pay me, I'd give the money right back to him," Stephenson said. "I was eating up all the money I made." As things turned out, it was a good investment. "I was playing a lot of basketball and everything I ate seemed to turn into muscle," he reflected.

Stephenson first played organized football as a junior at Hampton High School. He was a natural. As a senior he earned All-State honors as a center and defensive end and Hampton won the state title. Bolstered by their success, Stephenson and two of his teammates made a pact that after graduation they would stay together and all go to the same college.

Dwight signed with Alabama. Certain they would follow his lead, Stephenson called his friends. "I called and found out they both decided to go to North Carolina State," he now says with a chuckle.

A three-time All-Southeastern Conference selection at Alabama, Stephenson helped the Crimson Tide to consecutive national championships (1978 and 1979), three straight Sugar Bowl victories (1977-79), and a 21-game winning streak during his junior and senior seasons. As a senior he was a finalist for the Lombardi Award, given annually to the nation's top offensive lineman.

Although a terrific physical specimen, Dwight's quiet demeanor actually caused concern among some Dolphins observers when he reported to his first training camp. They questioned whether he had the type of disposition necessary for the trench warfare of pro football.

NO MORE MR. NICEGUY

Whatever doubts existed, however, quickly disappeared as the rookie center demonstrated quite a different personality on the field. During one training camp scrimmage, Stephenson was assigned to block for running back Tony Nathan. Defensive back Don McNeal, who was a friend and former teammate of Stephenson's at Alabama, came rushing up to make the tackle. Dolphins coach Don Shula often recounts what happened next.

"I looked away from the play, but then I heard the loudest collision I ever heard," remembers Shula. "I rushed over to the sidelines and Dwight had buried McNeal, who was our number one draft choice. Dwight is a very intense player. He never thought it was only a scrimmage or that he was hitting McNeal," Shula reflects. "We knew then that with time, Dwight would develop into a fine center."

McNeal wasn't the only Dolphins player to have to endure the young center's fiery approach to practice. "Dwight Stephenson was a bear," remembers former Dolphins nose tackle Bob Baumhower. "He was the toughest guy I ever played against, and that made it so much easier for me on game day."

Stephenson, who once listed his hobby as "weightlifting," spent his rookie season playing behind veteran center Mark Dennard. He gained a starter's berth twelve games into the 1981 season after Dennard suffered a torn calf muscle. With Stephenson in the lineup at center, the Dolphins went 4-1 in the final five games and Dwight never looked back. Even with a healthy Dennard, the starter's job belonged to the second-year man from Alabama.

In 1982, Stephenson's first complete season as a starter, the Miami offense emphasized the ground attack. Running back Andra Franklin was the team's leading rusher and guard Ed Newman and Stephenson were the star blockers. The Dolphins with their powerful ground game advanced to Super Bowl XVII where they were defeated 27-17 by the Washington Redskins.

Even though Stephenson had an excellent season, in his typical self-deprecating manner, he insisted that there was still plenty of room for improvement. "He's his own critic, which is something that I find a lot of the best players are," said John Sandusky, Dwight's offensive line coach. "There will be times when we're grading him on films that he will grade himself lower than I do. I think he wants to prove himself over a period of time before he starts accepting the kind of recognition people are going to be giving him."

During film sessions, teammates and coaches often marveled at how Stephenson would absolutely dominate his opponent. "He makes it look so easy," Tony Nathan once remarked. "Sometimes you forget about Dwight during a game. Then on film day you remember. You watch him manhandle a player and you can't believe he's the same size as Dwight."

Stories of Stephenson's line play, even without personal embellishments, are legendary. Miami fans still talk about the time he took out two blitzing New England Patriots defenders, using one forearm for each. Former teammates and opponents alike sing his praises.

"We were playing the Cowboys once, and we were trying to run behind Stephenson and Roy Foster," former Dolphins' tight end Joe Rose said. "On one play, Dwight moved like lightning over to help Foster with one of the Cowboys - I never could understand how he could snap the ball and still get off so quick he could blow people away. Anyway he did, and rubbed out one guy, and then here came Bill Bates blitzing in. I had a perfect view from the sideline, and I knew there was no way Dwight could get Bates too. But Dwight caught him right on the chin and Bates hit head-first going backwards. I just stood there watching in awe."

Former New York Jets defensive lineman Joe Klecko faced Stephenson twice each season. Klecko knew just how tough that assignment could be. "Dwight made fools of people who made mistakes," he remembered. "You knew he would destroy you anyway. If you messed up, it just happened faster."

HONORS ROLL IN

By the end of the 1983 season, Stephenson was already being hailed as the premier center in the NFL. Among his many post-season honors he was named All-Pro, chosen as an AFC starter in the Pro Bowl, and named the NFL Players Association's Offensive Lineman of the Year. As a unit the Dolphins offensive line allowed just 23 quarterback sacks, the fewest in the league.

The Miami offensive line led the league with the fewest quarterback sacks every season that Stephenson was a starter. At one point, the All-Pro center went two seasons without surrendering a sack to an opponent.

Dan Marino, perhaps the biggest benefactor of Stephenson's remarkable line play, refused to reduce the five seasons they played together to a personal "favorite" play. "He made so many unbelievable plays, you can't pick just one out," Marino offered. "Because of what I had to concentrate on during a game, it was hard for me to notice Dwight while he was in there. "But," he added, "I sure noticed it when he was not in there."

Before Marino arrived in 1983 and began rewriting passing statistics in 1984, Dolphin opponents' game plan was to attempt to neutralize Stephenson. That was high praise for an offensive lineman. A true

student of the game, Stephenson mastered the moves and techniques of the center position. His combination of quick feet and great strength enabled him to either blow a guy off the line or drop back and pass protect or assist a fellow lineman with his blocking assignment.

"Every team in the NFL helps its center block the nose man with another lineman," Joe Klecko pointed out. "But Miami never had to help Dwight."

A tireless worker, Stephenson stayed in peak condition year-round. Out of 50 days in the Dolphins' 1986 off-season training program, Stephenson missed just two, and both times to accept an out-of-town award. His off-season workout routine even impressed Shula. "If I could tell a young player to learn from one of my veterans, to follow around and copy one player, that player would always be Dwight," Shula once told a reporter.

Stephenson's contributions were not confined to the playing field. In 1985 he was honored as the Miller Lite/NFL Man of the Year. The award, presented annually, goes to an NFL player who combines outstanding community service and playing excellence. He was the first Dolphin to win the award since its inception in 1970.

It was also in 1985 that an injured Stephenson played a major role in preserving the 1972 Dolphins' place in NFL history as the only team to post a perfect 17-0 season. In a late-season Monday night match-up, the 12-0 Chicago Bears faced the 8-4 Dolphins. Late in the first quarter, Stephenson was forced to the sidelines with what was diagnosed as a sprained shoulder. A lot of guys wouldn't have played with that injury," Sandusky recalled. But Dwight refused to leave the lineup. With just one good arm he managed to contain the Bears' highly touted defensive lineman William "The Refrigerator" Perry. The Dolphins went on to hand the Bears their only loss of their otherwise "perfected season." "It can't get any tougher than this," a frustrated Perry said after the game.

THE OPPONENT HE COULDN'T BEAT

Extremely durable, Dwight played in 107 straight games from 1980 until the 1987 players' strike ended his streak. Following the strike he returned to the lineup and after seven games was in the midst of yet another awe-inspiring season. Then with just seven minutes remaining in a game against the New York Jets on December 7, Stephenson suffered a career-ending knee injury. It happened when Jets defensive lineman Marty Lyons blocked Stephenson during a fumble return. While the hit was legal, some argued that it was unnecessary since Stephenson was well behind the ball carrier when Lyons delivered the block.

"I have no bitterness towards Marty Lyons," said Stephenson, who received several calls from his former college teammate after the injury. "I know he didn't mean it."

Although he worked diligently during the off-season to rehabilitate the injured knee, by September, doctors confirmed his worst fears. His playing days were over.

Dwight Stephenson played just eight seasons but during that time he established himself as the best of his day. Many have offered that he may well have been the "best ever."

During his career Dwight was named All-AFC and All-NFL five consecutive times (1983-1987), selected to play in five consecutive Pro Bowls (1984-1988), and was named the NFL Players Association Lineman of the Year five consecutive years (1983-1987).

Having his outstanding career shortened by injury left Stephenson with only two regrets. One was that he wasn't a part of a winning Super Bowl team. The other was more personal. "I wish my sons could have seen me play," he said.

Although they may not have seen him play, Dwight's sons will no doubt be on hand in Canton, Ohio on August 1, 1998, when their father once again takes "center stage" and is formally enshrined into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Dwight Eugene Stephenson

Center. 6'2", 255. Alabama.

Hampton High School, Hampton, Virginia.

Born November 20, 1957, Murfreesboro, NC.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Gm</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Team</u>	<u>Gm</u>
1980	Mia	16	1984	Mia	16
1981	Mia	16	1985	Mia	16
1982	Mia	9	1986	Mia	16
1983	Mia	16	1987	Mia	9
				8 years	114