

# **Talking With a Legend: Charlie Sanders**

By: Doug Warren

Back in the spring of 1968, Charlie Sanders wasn't sure he wanted to be a Detroit Lion. Although having just been drafted by the Detroit Lions in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round of the 1968 draft out of the University of Minnesota, the native of Greensboro, North Carolina wondered what kind of an environment would await him and his family in the Motor City. His reservations were due to the fact that less than year earlier, during the summer of 1967, Detroit and many other U.S. cities had erupted in violence due to frustration over the slow progress of the Civil Rights movement that became symbolized with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I had come from the south, with the sit ins, the segregation and the racial turmoil," Sanders recalled, "of course with the riots having gone on, the first thing that popped into my mind was 'here we go again.' It wasn't something that I really wanted to be a part of again, or really have my family be involved in."

Because of his concerns, Sanders nearly went across the Detroit River and deep into hockey country to begin his gridiron career with the CFL's Toronto Argonauts. However, before crossing the border, Charlie's agent talked him into making one last stop at the Lions' offices, that were then located just down the street from Tiger Stadium on Michigan Avenue. "Let's stop in and give the Lions one more shot," Sanders recalled his agent telling him, "if it doesn't work, then we'll head on out to Toronto."

Well, as it turned out, Lions' GM Russ Thomas, who was a notorious penny pincher, agreed to give Charlie an extra \$1,000 a year. With that, Sanders agreed and became a Detroit Lion. That's right; a mere 1,000 George Washingtons kept Charlie Deep from becoming a Canadian football hero. So how much money did the man who would turn out to be one of the greatest players in Detroit Lions' history sign for?

Three years, at \$16,000, \$17,000 and \$18,000 per-season. No signing bonus, no incentives, no endorsements, no ESPN interviews, just your base salary, a thank you and a handshake.

Sanders went to the Pro Bowl after each of his first two seasons, (he would eventually go to four-straight), catching a combined 82 passes, for 1,189 yards and 4 touchdowns along the way. It was then that he decided to go see Thomas and ask for a raise. Not surprisingly, Thomas would have none of it.

"Well, number one, we don't do increases," Thomas said. He then asked Charlie, "What kind of money are you looking for?"

Charlie replied, "Well, like \$35,000."

"Well, wha', we can't double your contract," a staggered Thomas replied.

Finally, after the 1970 campaign, with another Pro Bowl in his pocket and an expired contract in his hand, Charlie went to Thomas once again, this time negotiating a new deal as a proven commodity. Nevertheless, Sanders found Ebenezer Thomas just as stubborn.

"When that contract ended after three years, I was working at the gas company," Charlie explained (most players had second jobs during this time to supplement their NFL incomes). "Russ was offering me \$23,000 – and the gas company was paying me \$25,000" (Laughs). "I figured I can sit here (at the gas company) and make \$25,000 and not take all the bumps and bruises. So I ended up holding out for a couple of weeks just to get it back up to \$32,000" (which was still \$3,000 less than Sanders had hoped for a year earlier).

Followers of the Lions during the late sixties and early seventies often speak about the legendary battles between Sanders and Chicago Bear middle linebacker Dick Butkus. Once during their playing days, Charlie described the ultra-intense Butkus as a "maladjusted kid."

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

---

We reminded of the quote; Charlie laughed and replied, "I was trying to be polite." He then offered me up another, along with another laugh, "I often said during those years that Butkus would hit his own Mother and not be happy unless her head was rolling on the field."

For a time during his playing days, Charlie served as Detroit's emergency long snapper. Once during a tight game against Chicago, the Lions were nursing a slim lead when Lion Center, and official long snapper, Ed Flanagan was injured. Of course that meant later, when the Lions set up for a field goal, Charlie was supposed to go in and face Butkus and the rest of the Bears' FG defensive unit. In those days, the defense was allowed to have a five-yard head start before they smashed into the long snapper. Then, often times, they followed that up by flagging down the meat wagon to cart the poor bastard off the field. In such a tight game, to say that this snap was important would have been an understatement. So as the Lions were getting ready to send their field goal team on the field, Charlie approached Ed and said:

"Ed, do you want to win this game?"

"Yeah," Flanagan replied.

"Well then you better get your ass in the game and snap the ball."

Ed went in, the snap and the kick were good, and the Lions went on to win the game.

Charlie was one of the most dominant Tight Ends in the entire NFL during his ten-year career (1968-77). As the Lions' top receiving threat, he was constantly doubled, sometimes triple-teamed. With the free-for-all pass defense pre-1978 (the five-yard chuck rule was non-existent) he was often the target of extra-curricular abuse from opposing defenders. Despite the extra attention from guys like Dick Butkus, Charlie only missed nine regular-season games during his career. In addition, Sanders was a seven-time Pro Bowl selection and a two-time All-Pro before a major knee injury forced him to hang up his cleats.

Many might not remember that from 1989-96, Charlie served as Detroit's tight ends and wide receivers coach, and for many of those years, tutored three guys by the names of Johnnie Morton, Brett Perriman and Herman Moore. Under Charlie's guidance, all three players would go on to etch a place in the Lions' record book.

When it came to personality, Moore and Perriman were polar opposites. "I called them the Odd Couple," Sanders recalled. Perriman was brash and flashy, the little guy (5'9" 180) who played big. "Brett was the loud one – vocal – joking with everybody." Moore on the other hand was more soft spoken and cerebral. "He'd always ask you – why? Why are you doing it this way? So you had to explain everything to him until he felt comfortable with you."

Just as their personalities differed, the way Sanders motivated them also differed. "The way you motivated Brett was to tell him that 'Herman thought he was better than he (Brett) was,' and the way you motivated Herman was to tell him that a guy like 'Jerry Rice thinks he's better than you.'" Both players enjoyed their greatest seasons under Charlie's watch. In 1995, they became the first teammates in NFL history to each record at least 100 catches in the same season. Moore caught a then-NFL record 123 balls, while Perriman snared 108 pigskins.

Johnnie Morton of course came along later (1994) than Perriman (1990), and Moore (1991). However, just like his two pass-grabbing teammates, Morton presented Sanders with challenges of his own. During Morton's rookie season, with Moore and Perriman at their peaks, Johnnie would only catch three balls the entire year. "You couldn't play 'em all," Charlie recalled. At one point during that 1994 season, Charlie even got an unexpected call on the subject of Morton's playing time, from none other than Johnnie's father. "I just told him that if he wanted him to play, then he could come down here and apply for my job," (Laughs).

Despite the different challenges that each player presented, it was clear that Charlie was proud of each of them and what they accomplished as Lion players. "They were a different breed, Sanders said, "It's not often that a coach can say that he coached three guys who all went on to break your receiving records. They were a good group."

For the record, Charlie's 336 career receptions remain number-five on the Lions' career list, behind only the 1990's foursome of Moore (670), Morton (469), Perriman (428), and Barry Sanders (352). In addition, his 14.3 yard-per-catch average trails only Leonard Thompson (16.9) and Gail Cogdill (16.1) among the teams' top-ten pass catchers.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005)

---

Today, Charlie Sanders remains in the Detroit Lions' fold as the team's Assistant Director of Pro Personnel; where once again, just as he was as a player and coach, Charlie Deep is knee deep in a rebuilding project that Lions' fans everywhere hope one day will result in the Motor City's first Super Bowl Championship.

---

CHARLIE SANDERS  
Sanders, Charles Alvin  
Minnesota  
B: 8 / 25 / 1946, Richlands, NC  
Drafted: 1968 Round 3 Det  
1968 Det 14   1969 Det 14   1970 Det 14   1971 Det 13   1972 Det 9  
1973 Det 14   1974 Det 14   1975 Det 13   1976 Det 13   1977 Det 10

---

### Super Jinx?

Check out this string of losses by teams in the first four Super Bowls played in the Louisiana Superdome.

In Super Bowl XII, the Dallas Cowboys defeated the Denver Broncos by a score of 27-10. Three years later, this score would be repeated when the Oakland Raiders beat the Philadelphia Eagles in Super Bowl XV. Not to be outdone, all the New England Patriots could muster was 10 points in a humiliating 46-10 loss to the Chicago Bears in Super Bowl XX. The 10 point losers string came full circle when the Broncos returned to Super Bowl XXIV and were crushed by the San Francisco 49ers by a score of 55-10. New England would finally break the streak when they scored 21 points in a losing effort to the Green Bay Packers in Super Bowl XXXI.

--- Timothy Holland

---