



## Kay Stephenson

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Kay Stephenson is the only player in Buffalo Bills history to also serve as its head coach. Stephenson played quarterback for the Bills during the 1968 season and became their head coach in 1983, serving for 2½ seasons. Stephenson was head coach Chuck Knox's quarterback coach before being promoted to the top job, following Knox's resignation caused by a dispute with owner Ralph C. Wilson, Jr.



George Kay Stephenson was born on December 17, 1944 in DeFuniak Springs, Florida. Kay grew up in nearby Pensacola. He attended Pensacola High School where he starred as a quarterback, earning All-State honors.

Stephenson led Pensacola to the Big Five football Conference Title in his senior year with a 9-1 record. He was co-captain of the team and was named to the All-City football team. Stephenson played tailback in the single wing as a junior. The team finished 6-3-1 that year. He was named All-State after his senior season and was a tri-captain for the North-South All-Star high school football game played in Gainesville, Fla., on August 4, 1962.



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Stephenson was also an accomplished baseball player, leading Pensacola to the Big Five Conference baseball championship. He fired two no-hitters in 1962, including one in the conference-clinching game. He also played right field when he was not pitching. Pensacola lost in the Class AA State Championship game 2-0, and Stephenson was tagged with the loss.

Kay matriculated to the University of Florida in Gainesville on a football scholarship in the fall of 1962. He played on the freshman team until he injured his shoulder in early October and was forced to sit out the remainder of the year. At the time, he was the second-string quarterback for the Baby Gators but was throwing the ball well. Head coach Ray Graves was still high on his prize recruit.

Stephenson was Florida's backup quarterback in 1963, playing behind Tom Shannon. He appeared in all ten of the team's games but only threw four passes, completing two for 17 yards with one interception. The Gators finished with a 6-3-1 record, highlighted by an upset win over #3 ranked Alabama 10-6, and a victory over arch-rival Florida State 7-0.

Kay did not play a varsity game for the Gators in 1964 as he was relegated to the "B" team. Steve Spurrier took the reigns as the starting quarterback, and the Gators had other depth at the position.

Stephenson and Herman Wages were Spurrier's backups throughout the 1965 and 1966 seasons. Stephenson saw very limited action in 1965 and did not throw a pass. Spurrier won the Heisman Trophy in 1966, as he led Florida to a 9-2 record, a #10 national ranking, and a 27-12 victory over Georgia Tech in the Orange Bowl. Stephenson played in ten games as a reserve and on special teams. He threw 13 passes, completed eight for 90 yards, and threw one touchdown pass. His only touchdown pass was in the fourth quarter of a 43-7 win over Northwestern, where he connected on a 15-yard tackle eligible play to John Preston. Stephenson had the disadvantage to come along when Florida was loaded at quarterback. He received his bachelor's degree in Physical Education in 1967.

Despite his limited playing time at Florida, Stephenson signed a five-figure professional football contract with the San Diego Chargers on May 4, 1967. The Chargers were impressed with his strong arm and knowledge of the game. Upon signing his pro contract, he remarked, "I have always dreamed of an opportunity like this and I hope I can make good of it."<sup>i</sup>

Stephenson had an impressive training camp with the Chargers, as he earned the backup quarterback job behind John Hadl. San Diego had enough confidence in Stephenson that they traded backup quarterback Steve Tensi to Denver, opening the role for Kay.



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The Chargers opened the season with three consecutive victories. Stephenson got into game four and threw his first professional pass. He relieved Hadl for a series on October 8, throwing two passes without a completion, and ran the ball once for seven years in the Chargers' 31-31 tie with Boston.

He relieved Hadl again on October 29, but this time he played while the Chargers were getting clobbered 51-10. Stephenson appeared in the fourth quarter and his stat line would be one he would rather forget. He attempted six passes with zero completions and one interception.

Stephenson completed his first career pass on November 12 in a victory over Miami. In the fourth quarter he fired a 13-yard touchdown pass to Lance Alworth. The Chargers won 24-0.

He saw his most extensive action on Christmas Eve, when he relieved Hadl in a 42-31 loss to the New York Jets. He threw 15 passes, completing nine for 88 yards with a 12-yard touchdown pass, his second of the season. He finished his rookie year with 11 completions, in 26 attempts for 117 yards with two touchdown passes and two interceptions in seven games. A Miami writer proclaimed, "Stephenson's rise as No. 2 quarterback behind Hadl is the AFL's success story of the season, particularly since the Pensacola native sat out his college career behind Spurrier."<sup>ii</sup> Hadl said, "Kay's got a good strong arm and he learns fast. I'll tell you one thing...Spurrier doesn't throw the ball any better."<sup>iii</sup>

Stephenson was entrenched as the backup quarterback for the Chargers during the team's 1968 training camp. Chargers head coach Sid Gillman had said that Stephenson was his best young quarterback prospect since Norm Van Brocklin. Kay even started one preseason game on August 10, a 31-7 loss to the Oakland Raiders. His statistics were not impressive, as he was 10 of 37 for 147 yards with four interceptions.

The Buffalo Bills lost their top two quarterbacks during training camp as Tom Flores and Jack Kemp sustained serious injuries. The Bills came calling in desperate need of another quarterback. They traded for Stephenson on August 28, sending an undisclosed draft choice to San Diego.

Stephenson came to Buffalo as the backup quarterback to rookie Dan Darragh. Darragh started six of the Bills' first seven games, with Flores starting the other after returning from injury. Stephenson was the holder for Mike Mercer, the team's placekicker, and relieved Darragh in three games and Flores in his start. The Bills had a slow start to the season, winning only one of their first seven games, and were struggling to find an



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offensive spark. Stephenson had not shown much in the games he did play as the backup quarterback, completing only 4 of 17 passes for 17 yards with two interceptions.

Darragh was suffering from a twisted left ankle, a torn right instep, and a torn muscle in his throwing arm, so head coach Harvey Johnson decided to give Stephenson the start on October 27. The 6-foot 1, 210-pound Stephenson was getting his big break. His first professional start came at War Memorial Stadium against the defending East Division champion Houston Oilers.

Stephenson struggled, completing only 4 of 17 passes in the first half. The highlight was a 36-yard touchdown pass to Monte Ledbetter late in the second quarter, cutting the Oilers lead to 10-7. He played the first two series of the second half, but was unable to move the football. Johnson pulled him with the Oilers leading 13-7 and inserted Darragh. The move did not work, as Darragh could not get the offense moving, nor could third-stringer Ed Rutkowski who replaced Darragh. The Oilers took advantage of two Bills' turnovers, and their offensive ineptness to pull away, winning the game 30-7 as boos reigned down from the crowd of 34,339.

As the Bills prepared for their next opponent, head coach Harvey Johnson was asked about the starting quarterback situation and he quipped, "We'll have the mighty Kay Stephenson at the throttle. With our great offense, I don't know what difference it makes."<sup>iv</sup> He was asked how Stephenson looked in practice and with a more serious response, said, "Do I have to tell you truthfully? He's looked like he always has. He can throw the ball but doesn't have the experience."<sup>v</sup>

Stephenson played much better against the Jets at Shea Stadium on November 3. He threw a 55-yard touchdown pass to Haven Moses in the first quarter to give the Bills an early 7-0 lead. He then rallied the club in the fourth quarter after falling behind 19-7. He threw a 10-yard touchdown pass to Dave Costa, and Hagood Clarke returned a punt 82 yards for the go-ahead touchdown as the Bills moved in front 21-19. The Jets responded with two Jim Turner field goals and a 25-21 lead. But Stephenson, with only 52 seconds left, moved the Bills back down the field. He fired a 26-yard pass to Richard Trapp, and 15 yards to Max Anderson putting the Bills on the Jets 20-yard line with one second remaining. He was hurried on the last pass play, and Jets defensive end Verlon Biggs tipped the ball that was caught at the line of scrimmage by Bills tackle Al Bemiller. The Jets swarmed Bemiller to end the game. It was a valiant effort in defeat by Kay. He finished the contest with 12 of 29 passing for 155 yards with two TD passes, and three interceptions.

Stephenson was back at the controls on November 10 against the Miami Dolphins. He said prior to the game, "I've got my chance now and I hope to make good. I believe I can



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do it, but I've just never had much of a chance. I've been backing somebody up since 1961 (at Florida) and now that I've got the job, I don't plan to give it up without a struggle."<sup>vi</sup>

"We've got some fine receivers on this team and they make my job a lot easier. Richard (Trapp) has been doing a fine job and so has Haven Moses. I was glad he grabbed that 55-yard TD pass because he dropped one just like it a week ago against Houston. If he'd have dropped that I don't know what I'd have done."<sup>vii</sup>

Stephenson played outstanding football in the first half, staking the Bills to a 17-0 lead on a Bob Cappadona 33-yard touchdown run, and a 21-yard TD pass to Cappadona. On the second play of the second half, Stephenson scrambled for 12 yards, and at the end of the play ran into Dolphins cornerback Dick Westmoreland, and linebacker Ed Weisacosky. Stephenson hit the turf on his left shoulder and broke his left collarbone. His season was over. The Dolphins rallied to win 21-17. Stephenson's final game statistics were 7 of 13 for 129 yards, one touchdown and one interception along with 12 yards rushing.

Stephenson lamented in the postgame locker room, "I haven't had a starting job since my senior year in high school, and now this."<sup>viii</sup> He went on to say, "I know that I can do the job. It was mine and I did it. What I was most concerned about was reading their defenses, but I checked off a lot and the plays went."<sup>ix</sup>

Harvey Johnson said, "That was the best our offense has looked all year. Kay was throwing better than I had seen him and his play-calling was just fine. He was just beginning to get confidence in himself and we were getting confidence in him."<sup>x</sup>

He was back with the Bills in their training camp in 1969 but did not last long with new head coach John Rauch. Jack Kemp and Tom Flores were healthy again, Dan Darragh was back, and the Bills had drafted quarterback James Harris from Grambling. Stephenson played in the Bills' initial preseason encounter on August 2 against Houston. He played the third quarter, prior to injuring his leg, and he completed one of two passes for three yards with one interception. Two days later, he was released. When Rauch was asked by the media why, he said "Over the long run, we felt Harris had more potential than Stephenson."<sup>xi</sup> And with that, Stephenson's Buffalo playing career was over.

The Atlanta Falcons gave him a quick look but that lasted only a couple weeks before he was released. In the offseason he followed in the footsteps of Joe Namath and became part-owner of a night club in Warrington, Florida, a suburb of Pensacola, called "Kay Stephenson's Quarterback Club." It was a social club for sports enthusiasts.



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Stephenson signed a contract in 1970 with the Oakland Raiders and participated in their training camp but was competing for a job with Daryl Lamonica, George Blanda, and Ken Stabler. He did not make the club. He got a quick tryout with the Cincinnati Bengals prior to the start of the 1970 season, but that also did not work out. His NFL playing career was over.

Stephenson's nightclub foray, though quite successful, did not last long either. He sold his interest in the Quarterback Club in May 1971, purchased another club, called the RAEL (restaurant and entertainment lounge). But it was torched by an arsonist on June 28, 1971.

Stephenson decided to get into coaching football as an assistant coach at Rice University in 1971 and stayed for two years. He became the athletic director and head football coach at Baker, Florida High School in 1973. He still had a passion to play football, so he signed on with the new World Football League's Jacksonville Sharks in 1974. He was their starting quarterback in their opening day victory over the New York Stars 14-7 on July 11. Throughout the season he shared the quarterback duties with Reggie Oliver. The Sharks were 4-10 when they folded in early October.

Stephenson finished his stint in the WFL, completing 69 of 150 passes for 815 yards with four touchdown passes and 11 interceptions. His playing career was now over.

He joined Los Angeles Rams head coach Chuck Knox's staff in 1977 as quarterback coach. He worked with Pat Haden and Joe Namath in Los Angeles, as the Rams won the Western Division title but were eliminated by the Minnesota Vikings in the playoffs.

Knox left the Rams and signed to become head coach of the Buffalo Bills on January 11, 1978. Stephenson joined Knox in Buffalo shortly thereafter as QB coach. Kay was an important part of the Bills resurrection in the early 1980's, capped off with their first NFL East Division championship in 1980. The Bills also recorded their first playoff win as an NFL club, beating the New York Jets 31-27 on December 27, 1981.

The Bills' 1981 offense with 5,640 yards was the most productive offense in team history up to that time. Stephenson was a key part of that success. His work with quarterback Joe Ferguson took Joe from a very mediocre quarterback to one of the better ones in the AFC. Under Stephenson's tutelage, Ferguson had his four best seasons as a pro.

Knox left the Bills as head coach following the strike-shortened 1982 season when he and Bills owner Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. could not come to terms on a new contract. Stephenson was named to replace Knox on February 1, 1983. Wilson said the primary reason for promoting Stephenson was his familiarity with the system. Wilson chose continuity as



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the Bills had made two playoff appearances in the three previous seasons. The other candidate that was under serious consideration for the job was former Kansas City Chiefs head coach Marv Levy.

Stephenson was excited at his initial Rich Stadium news conference. He said, "We're going to be sound; we're going to be a solid team."<sup>xii</sup> He went on to say, "I have talked at length with Ralph and I, personally, am impressed by his commitment to continue to bring an outstanding football team to Buffalo."<sup>xiii</sup> Wilson said of his hiring of Kay, "I think very positively that Kay is going to do an outstanding job for the team, the Western New York community..... Kay has been, in my mind a very loyal, productive coach for the Bills. He knows the players. He gets along with the team. He has their respect."<sup>xiv</sup>

When Stephenson took over, he was facing some head winds. The Bills had 15 players whose contracts had expired and were not happy with the ownership of the team. There was much speculation that Knox left because he could not get a commitment from Wilson to make the necessary investment in the player's salaries. Also, the United States Football League was starting in 1983 and were attempting to poach good NFL players. The Bills were clearly a target.

The Bills got off to a good start in Kay's first season, winning three of their first four and stood at 7-4 after beating the Jets 24-17 on November 13. A playoff berth appeared to be in the offing behind an opportunistic defense, a solid passing game with Ferguson calling signals, and an outstanding runner in Joe Cribbs. Buffalo had some excellent road victories including a 38-35 overtime win in Miami (their first win in the Orange Bowl since 1966), a 30-7 drubbing of the Baltimore Colts, a come from behind 24-17 win over the New York Jets at Shea Stadium, and a 10-6 defensive struggle over the Cincinnati Bengals.

The Bills could not close the deal however, as they lost four of their last five including routs in Los Angeles, to the Rams 41-17, and in Atlanta, 31-14 to end the season. They missed a playoff spot by a single game as they finished with an 8-8 record.

Stephenson's second season can only be described as a complete debacle. The Bills lost Joe Cribbs to the USFL, Ferguson's play deteriorated significantly, and the defense was more like a sieve. The team lost their first 11 consecutive games, and several were not even close. They lost four games by more than four touchdowns each; the scores were 37-7, 37-7, 38-7 and 38-10.

The Bills, 0-11 at the time, did have one bright spot, a major upset of the 7-4 Dallas Cowboys on November 18. Bills running back Greg Bell ran 85 yards for a touchdown on the first play from scrimmage and the Bills played inspired football throughout,



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holding the vaunted Cowboys attack to a measly three points. Jack Kemp was inducted on the Bills Wall of Fame at halftime, and the stunning upset was a fitting tribute to the Bills' only starting quarterback to ever lead the franchise to league championships.

The Bills won only one other game, beating Indianapolis 21-15, finishing the season with a 2-14 record. The Bills 1985 season started no better, losing their first four games and Stephenson was fired. Buffalo only won two of his last 20 games as head coach. His overall record with the Bills was 10-26.

Stephenson left two lasting impacts on the club. The first, he led the change of the Bills helmet color from being primarily white to red. The Bills kept the red style helmet for 27 years. His second and most importantly, was putting the long-term success of the franchise ahead of his own personal success. He did not trade away future draft picks for vets that could help a little right away but would sacrifice the future. A story in the January 20, 1991 *Buffalo News*, when the Bills were preparing for the 1990 AFC Championship game, Gene Warner wrote, "The poor won-lost records -- Stephenson was 10-26 in his 2 1/2 years -- and his firing were the "price to pay" for rebuilding the Bills, a decision that Stephenson knows was the right one."<sup>xv</sup> Stephenson had said upon his firing, "Obviously, we would like to have won more games, but we knew that would be impossible with the approach we were taking. You have to make the commitment and then hold your head high."<sup>xvi</sup>



Stephenson was a successful real estate developer in Florida before the itch to get back into coaching was too strong to ignore. He returned to coaching when the World League of American Football (WLAF) came into being in 1991. It was set up as a developmental league for the NFL with teams both in the United States and in Europe. He was hired to



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be the head coach of the Sacramento Surge. His first season was a disappointing 3-7. But in 1992, he put it altogether with David Archer at quarterback. The Surge won the North American West division with an 8-2 record. In the playoffs it defeated the Barcelona Dragons 17-15 to qualify for the World Bowl. The Championship game was played at Olympic Stadium in Montreal and a crowd of 43,789 attended the exciting game. Sacramento came from a 17-6 deficit in the second quarter and scored the final 15 points of the game, capped off by an Archer to Eddie Brown 2-yard touchdown pass to win the World Bowl 21-17.

At the conclusion of the 1992 season, the NFL decided they were changing the league to be NFL Europe, with only European-based teams and all the U. S. teams would be shutdown. Stephenson's final coaching record in the WLAFL including playoffs was 13-9 with a .591 winning percentage.

The ever-venturous Stephenson decided to get involved in another experiment. The Canadian Football League (CFL) expanded into the United States for the 1993 season and placed a team in Sacramento. The Gold Miners became the league's ninth franchise, and first expansion team since 1954. It was perfect for Stephenson, and he became head coach of the Sacramento Gold Miners.

The Gold Miners finished in last place in the Western Division, with a 6-12 record in their first CFL season. For the 1994 season, Sacramento was joined by three other U.S. teams, the Las Vegas Posse, the Baltimore Colts, and the Shreveport Pirates. The Gold Miners improved, finishing with a 9-8-1 record, but were still out of the playoff picture.

The CFL added two more U.S. teams for the 1995 season, and the Sacramento franchise was relocated to San Antonio and were called the Texans. Stephenson followed them to Texas to be their head coach. He had his best season coaching in the Canadian league as the Texans were 12-6 during the regular season, finishing second in the South Division and qualifying for the playoffs. Stephenson's squad won their first-round playoff game with a resounding 52-9 conquest of the Birmingham Barracudas. In the division finals the Texans were beaten by Baltimore 21-11, and the Colts went on to become the only American team to ever win the Grey Cup.

Stephenson was out of football in 1996 but returned in 1997 to be the offensive coordinator for the Arkansas Razorbacks. He left there, after just one season, for one more shot in the CFL. He became the head coach of the Edmonton Eskimos in 1998.

In his one season in Edmonton he steered the Eskimos to a 9-9 record, and a second-place finish in the CFL West Division. They won their first-round playoff contest with a 40-33 win over the B.C Lions but were taken apart in the Divisional final round by Calgary 33-



10. That was the last professional football game coached by Kay Stephenson. Following that season and at the age of 54, he decided to call it a career. His final CFL coaching numbers including playoffs was 38-37-1.

After his football coaching career, he became President and CEO of CTS America, a system development and support company in Pensacola, Florida that specialized in software for public safety security, law enforcement, and emergency agencies. Stephenson also has had various sports talk radio gigs, and newspaper sports columns in Pensacola.

His wife is Mary Jac and they have one adult daughter Sheryl. They reside in Gulf Breeze, Florida.

#### End Notes:

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