

Sensational Sharpe sets records at USC, in the NFL



By STEVE JOHNSON
Sports Editor

It started with the familiar, triumphant strains of "2001" intermixed with the intensely loud cheering of 71,050 fans at Williams-Brice Stadium.

At the climax of Strauss' dramatic masterpiece, a black curtain dropped on a smoke-filled cage revealing a gigantic, fluorescent-red bird waving a Gamecock flag.

As the music slowly fades, a cannon is fired and about one hundred muscular young men in black jerseys charge out onto the middle of the playing field.

The date was Oct. 12, 1985. The event was that year's Homecoming game against the Duke University Blue Devils.

After a close first half in which USC led by a score of only 14-7, an unlikely hero emerged.

Though only a sophomore and thrust into a new position as kick returner, wingback Sterling Sharpe stood in a fearless, confident manner (with his hands comfortably resting on his hips) as he awaited the second half kickoff. It was as if Sharpe knew exactly how easy it would be to do what he did next.

The kick was high and long, backing Sharpe all the way to the goal line. With an army of Duke defenders charging towards him, he let the ball drop into his arms. Without a moment's hesitation, Sharpe charged into a crowd of players.

Leaving a trail of dust and Blue Devils behind, Sharpe streaked up the field so fast it looked like nobody would catch him. The already steady noise of the crowd reached deafening heights as

Sharpe crossed the opposing goal line for a touchdown.

"I got hit a couple of times," Sharpe said after the 28-7 win, "and when I got past the line around the 40-, 45-yard line, I saw that they were catching up to me, so I had to put it on. All I could do was just run."

The versatile receiver and graduate of Glennville (Ga.) High School ran all the way into the record books — at USC and now with the Green Bay Packers of the National Football League.

Although he earned his second letter at USC in 1985, it was the following season that was the breakthrough year for Sharpe. He rose to the occasion again on Homecoming in 1986, this time against East Carolina, catching eight passes for 157 yards and two touchdowns.

Sharpe topped off a sensational season with a nine catch, 167-yard day in a 21-21 tie that included a 72-yard pass from quarterback Todd Ellis for a touchdown. He tallied 74 catches for 1,106 yards and 10 touchdowns in '86 for the best single season ever by a Gamecock receiver. His numbers were also good enough to earn him a second team All-American selection as a wingback.

1987 was a year that saw Sharpe put up more stellar stats as a senior and tri-captain of the USC football team. In a close road loss to 20th-ranked Georgia on Sept. 26, Sharpe caught 11 passes for 144 yards. The following week the Gamecocks lost again on the road, this time to 2nd-ranked Nebraska. Despite the loss, Sharpe was able to scorch the Cornhusker secondary on an 80-yard touchdown reception from Ellis.

It was in the Homecoming game again, though, that Sharpe once again proved his versatility. With star running back Harold Green injured, Coach Joe Morrison opted

for the "I"-formation against Virginia Tech and chose Sharpe as the centerpiece of his "new" offensive attack. Sharpe rose to the occasion while switching from receiver to tailback — rushing for three touchdowns in a decisive 40-10 victory.

The pinnacle of Sharpe's achievements in a Gamecock uniform though, were reached the following week in a game against Virginia. On Sept. 17, Sharpe broke Fred Zeigler's all-time USC career receiving mark of 1,876 yards. Not only did Sharpe catch six passes for 106 yards and one touchdown, he demonstrated his versatility again by returning a punt 59 yards for another touchdown in USC's 58-10 win over the Cavaliers.

Sharpe finished his career with USC in 1987 by being named a first team All-American, having his number (#2) retired, and shattering numerous school records. His career numbers are as follows:

- Most consecutive games with a reception (34)
- Most career touchdown pass receptions (17)
- Most career receptions (169)
- Most career receiving yards (2,497)

After competing in two postseason all-star games (the Senior Bowl and the East-West Shrine Game), Sharpe was picked in the first round of the 1988 NFL Draft by Green Bay. He went on to catch 55 passes for 791 yards and one touchdown and averaged 14.4 yards per catch for the Packers in '88. It was an impressive rookie year, but the NFL had yet to truly see what Sharpe could do after he caught a football.

Sharpe's level of play reached such heights in 1989 that he was no longer a secret. It didn't matter though because opposing secondaries found it nearly impossible to contain the strong, speedy Packer receiver. In '89 Sharpe not only led the NFL in receiving, with 90

receptions for 1,423 yards and 13 touchdowns, he also set new Packer season records for receptions and yards. Sharpe represented the NFC as a wide receiver in the 1990 Pro Bowl.

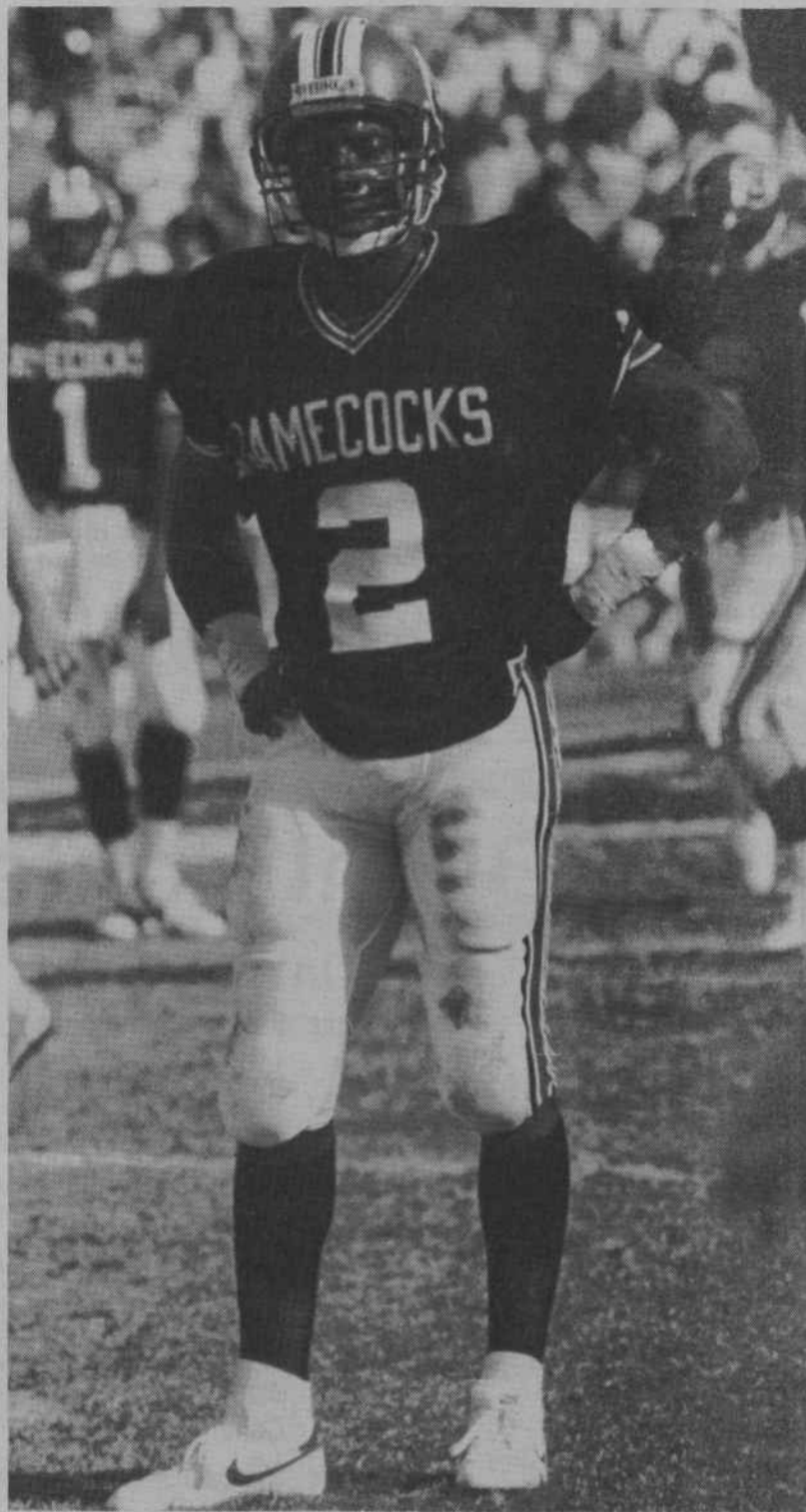
The gummy Sharpe played in all of this past year's games despite the fact that the pain from a cracked rib prevented him from practicing the last five weeks of the season. Even when he's playing at less than 100 percent, Sharpe has earned enough respect from his fellow players to have them name him to his second straight Pro Bowl. Sharpe caught 67 passes for 1,105 yards and six touchdowns for an average of 16.5 yards per catch.

In just three quick years, Sharpe has already climbed to ninth place on the Packers' all-time receiving list with 212 receptions for 3,319 yards. Sharpe smashed James Lofton's old record for passes caught during the first three seasons with the Packers. (Lofton had 72 in his first three seasons with Green Bay while Sharpe already had 145 after just two seasons.) Sharpe has also reached the 200 reception mark faster than any receiver in Packer history.

Sharpe is popular not only with the fans but also with his fellow players and his head coach.

"Sterling has a great personality," said Packer coach Lindy Infante. "He's a leader both on and off the field. He leads by his actions. I think he gets more and more respected by his peers in the NFL as the years go by. I hope he continues to grow and improve. He played incredibly well this past season considering he played with a cracked rib but we're expecting even bigger numbers out of him next season."

Sharpe will undoubtedly exceed even Infante's high expectations. It's just too bad the Packers don't have a Homecoming game!



File photo
Sterling Sharpe, the best receiver to ever play at USC, in a rare shot of him not racing across the football field.

Struggling Gamecocks vie for essential win against Virginia Tech

By PATRICK VILLEGAS
Assistant Sports Editor

The stats speak for themselves. The Gamecocks Metro road record: 1-4. The Gamecocks last five games: 1-4. The Gamecocks February record: 3-4.

It seems USC is on the verge of losing its once 'sure thing' NCAA tournament bid in the final month of regular season action. Since dropping out of the Associated Press poll on Jan. 28, the Gamecocks have managed to turn the heads of no one, except loyal Gamecock fans in disgust.

In this month of decline, the Gamecocks have lost by an average margin of 15 points per game, and can

only declare wins over cellar-dwellers Clemson and Louisville and perennial wimp Winthrop.

USC — 19-9 overall, 5-7 in the Metro — will attempt to cope with what head coach George Felton calls a "lack of motivation" plaguing the team when they travel to Blacksburg, Va., to face the Hokies of Virginia Tech Thursday. The game could give the team a tight grip on the slippery NCAA tourney rope with a victory.

Virginia Tech has not been traveling down an easy road lately. Losers in their last two games, the Hokies are 10-15 overall and 4-8 in the Metro.

Virginia Tech head coach Frankie Allen has been nursing his young team into maturity all season long, and hasn't had any time to think about the decline of

the Gamecocks in recent weeks.

On a team that carries only one starting senior on the squad and a majority of underclassmen, Allen is more concerned with the stability of the team.

"They don't know what it takes to win on a consistent basis, even at home," Allen said.

Although USC has plenty of Metro road woes, Allen is in no way relying on the Gamecocks' apparent weakness. Despite USC's fall, Allen stressed that any team always has the ability to shift gears from one game to the next.

Allen said the Hokies have to watch for USC's inside and outside game, especially with the play of Jo Jo English and Jeff Roulston.

Thursday's game between the Hokies and Gamecocks will be the second meeting of the year between the teams. The first game occurred an hour after the opening shots of the Persian Gulf War on Jan. 16. Despite the world events, the game went on as English and Barry Manning scored 20 points each to pace the Gamecocks to a 83-67 defeat of Virginia Tech.

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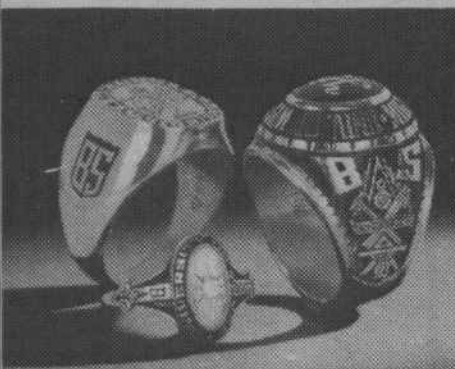
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