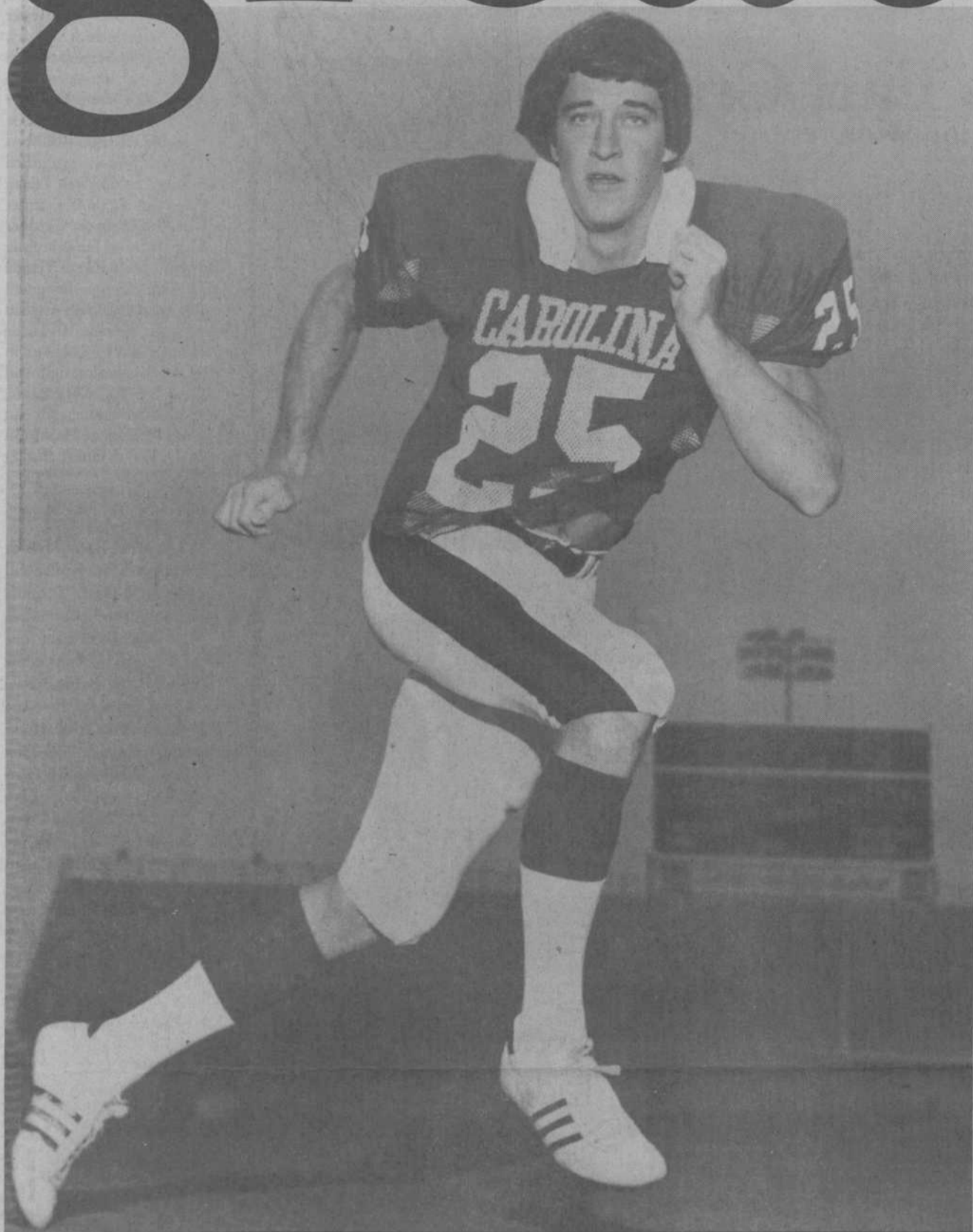


GAMECOCK

greats



*Rick Sanford
provided
USC defense
'never give up'
attitude
throughout
late-'70s run*

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Photo courtesy of Mike Safran
Defensive back Rick Sanford finished his USC career with nine interceptions.

In the history of Carolina football, many great members of the team's defensive secondary have shined during their careers in garnet and black.

There have been numerous All-American selections, along with many who have gone on to have successful careers in professional football. Names such as Bobby Bryant, Sheldon Brown and Arturo Freeman are sprinkled throughout USC records.

But all those great names from the defensive secondary had to have someone set the standard, and in 1975, Rock Hill native Rick Sanford arrived at USC and became one of the most successful secondary players to ever set foot in Williams-Brice Stadium.

"I could've gone to Clemson obviously, and then Georgia recruited me heavily for football and basketball," Sanford said. "The big thing was coach (Jim) Carlen coming in to USC. I was really excited about him. He just did some things during recruiting that I felt other coaches didn't mention. Like an education. That was very important for me."

After finishing his high-school career with Shrine Bowl honors, Sanford made the trip to Columbia. Universities across the country were disbanding teams of all freshmen, allowing newcomers to step in and make an impact the minute they set foot on campus.

"That's the reason I came here. I felt like if I worked hard, I could play as a freshman," Sanford said. "Fortunately, I did get to play quite a bit my freshman year. I think there was only four of us that ended up playing that first year out of that class of about 30 guys that came in."

Sanford's career as a Gamecock started out on a high note, including a 56-20 drubbing of archrival Clemson to close out the season. With a 7-4 record, the Gamecocks

earned a trip to Florida to play in the Tangerine Bowl.

The 1975 team featured some of the best talent to ever play at Carolina, including quarterback Jeff Grantz.

"It was thrilling. We had a really, really good football team," Sanford said. "I think a lot of people didn't know a lot about us. We had an excellent quarterback in Jeff Grantz, who was probably the best one to be here ever in my opinion. I think he pretty much carried us in a lot of ways."

The next year, Sanford made what he called the most memorable play of his career as USC faced Ole Miss in Columbia.

As time wound down in the ball game, the Gamecocks clung to a 10-7 lead with the Rebels driving. That's when Sanford made a goal-line stop to preserve the win.

"The Mississippi game my sophomore year I made a tackle at the goal line and was fortunate to knock the ball out," Sanford said. "It ended up being the last play of the game. The running back ended up fumbling the ball into the end zone, and Bill Currier fell on it."

Plays like those earned Sanford his reputation as one of the best defensive backs in the country. His big play ability and quick reaction time set the stage for a chance at a big senior season at Carolina. Sanford didn't disappoint, compiling four interceptions en route to earning First Team All-American honors from The Sporting News.

"I never really thought of myself as really that high-profile. I just felt like if I continue to work hard, I'll continue to improve and get better," Sanford said. "I guess I was just real fortunate to have the opportunity I had presented to me. I was fortunate enough to make plays when they were presented to me."

That season earned Sanford spots on numerous post-season honorary

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Rick Sanford

teams, including the East-West Bowl and the Senior Bowl.

Success brought NFL scouts, as Sanford would set the precedent for USC defensive players. In the 1979 draft, the New England Patriots selected Sanford as the 25th pick in the draft, making him the first Gamecock to be selected in the first round of the NFL draft. And until Dunta Robinson in 2004, he was the only member of USC's secondary to ever go in the first round.

"That's the biggest honor I think's bestowed on me, being the first pick ever out of the school's history," Sanford said. "I'm real proud of that. I'm proud of the fact that I was able

to accomplish that. There's been a lot of guys come behind me, but they'll only be one and I'll always cherish that."

Sanford went on to play seven seasons in the NFL, including six with the Pats. He played his final season with Seattle. In only seven years, Sanford had 16 interceptions, including seven picks in 1983.

"Unlike a lot of today's players, I think I looked at it as an honor and a privilege," Sanford said. "To me it was an honor to have the opportunity to stand out there in front of 80 to 90,000 people and showcase what you can do."

The biggest interception of

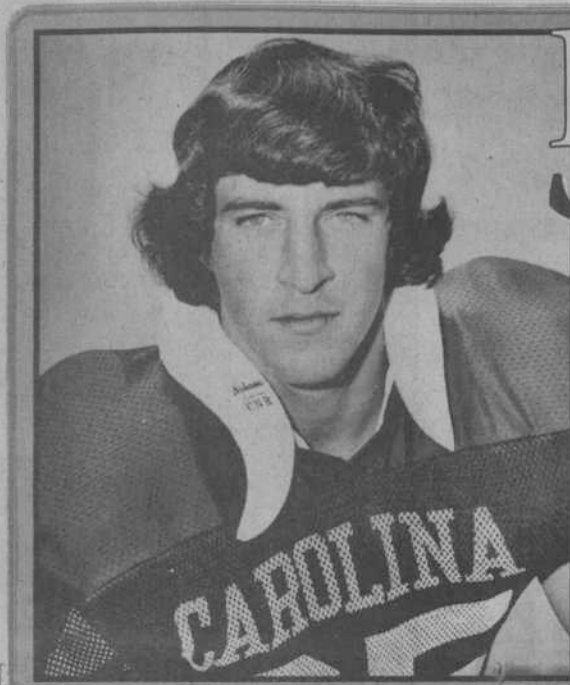
Sanford's career came against the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field when he picked off a pass in the end zone and returned it 99 yards for a touchdown. It was the longest return in Soldier Field history.

"In 1982 I think is my finest play on the ball, I intercepted a ball and returned it 99 yards in Soldier Field," Sanford said. "I think that's still a record in Soldier Field, which is one of the highlights of professional football. To still hold a record there is quite an honor for me."

After finishing his career in the game, Sanford returned to the Columbia area and began a chiropractic practice in Irmo, where he calls home today.

"I've been a chiropractor now for 16 years now," Sanford said. "I just decided I wanted to do that. I'd had some problems with my back in professional football. When I got out I decided if I could get some help like a chiropractor there, I wanted to help others."

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Rick Sanford

- ✦ First Gamecock selected in the first round of the NFL Draft in 1979. He was selected with the 25th pick by the New England Patriots.
- ✦ Finished his career at Carolina as an All-American with nine interceptions
- ✦ Earned spots on the East-West Shrine team and the Senior Bowl team in 1979