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THE LIFE STORY OF UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA FOOTBALL LEGEND

★ **STEVE WADIAK** ★

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Preface

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At halftime of the 1951 Blue-Gray college football All-Star game, players on the Gray squad sat on benches in the cramped locker room of Montgomery, Alabama's Cramton Bowl and waited patiently for their coach's instruction.

The Blue-Gray game, first played in 1939, paired teams of college seniors—All-Stars, hoping to show off their skills and raise their stock with professional scouts. The teams were divided along geographic lines intended to mirror the allegiances of opposing sides in the American Civil War.

On the day of the 1951 game, Max Moseley from the "Montgomery Advertiser" pitched the game to his readers: "The greatest battle since Appomattox . . . the Blue-Gray football classic that takes place in Montgomery's Cramton Bowl. The kickoff is slated for 1:45 p.m. Upwards of 22,500 fans are expected to witness the clash between 48 outstanding senior gridgers from north and south of the Mason-Dixon line."

The Gray team's head coach, Louisiana State's Gaynell Tinsley, had a problem—too many stars and not enough playing time for all of them to showcase their skills. Of the 48 players in the game, 28 would be selected the following January in the 1952 NFL draft.

Coach Tinsley was particularly overloaded with talent at running back. The team was blessed with eight gifted runners, including everybody's All-American, Fred Benners, from Southern Methodist University.

Among the eight Gray running backs was Steve Wadiak from the University of South Carolina. Wadiak had earned a starting position in the Gray backfield, and he played well in the first half, rushing for 18 yards on three attempts and catching a pass for another 13 yards. Despite his efforts, the Gray team trailed 7-0.

In four seasons at the University of South Carolina, Wadiak rushed for 2,878 yards and eclipsed the Southern Conference rushing record of University of North Carolina star running back Charlie "Choo Choo" Justice. As a junior, Steve was named the 1950 Most Valuable Player in the Southern Conference despite playing for a team with a losing record.

Wadiak's natural gift was to run around, over, and past would-be tacklers. A rare combination of shifty moves, open field speed, and raw toughness distinguished him as one of the most respected running backs in all of college football. A local sports writer christened him with the nickname, "Th' Cadillac," forever associating Wadiak with the most-well-engineered and classiest automobile of the day.

Wadiak became the "big man" on the USC campus and a matinee type idol throughout the state of South Carolina. Dashing good looks and a chiseled physique made him a heartthrob among campus co-eds. Schoolboys mimicked his football moves on playgrounds, opportunistic business owners clamored for his friendship by never allowing him to pay at their establishments, and well-wishing boosters padded post-game handshakes with cash.

Uncomfortable in the limelight, the Chicago native was a quiet and unassuming hero. When praised, Wadiak deflected attention toward his teammates. His humble upbringing often left him to feel as though he didn't deserve the attention. That same unassuming nature also made him approachable. Students, teachers, and locals felt like they knew their hero.

The culture of college all-star games was about individualism versus a team mentality. Players worked hard during a week of pre-game practices in hopes that coaches would notice and award them highly coveted playing time. It was this blatant "me-first" environment that made what happened at halftime in the Gray team's locker room all the more unbelievable.

During halftime, Steve overheard his coaches discussing their predicament of trying to juggle playing time for eight different running backs, while also dealing with a short supply of defensive backs.

One assistant coach for the Gray team was Rex Enright, head coach of the University of South Carolina Gamecocks and a mentor and father figure to Wadiak during his four years at USC. In the locker room, Wadiak caught the attention of his coach and offered a suggestion.

"Put me on defense," Wadiak said.

Enright smiled at Wadiak's request. Steve's unsolicited willingness to play defense was exactly the kind of unselfish behavior that had so endeared him to Enright during his time as a Gamecock.

The request to play defense was all the more remarkable because the Blue-Gray game afforded Steve his first real opportunity to run behind a wall of talented blockers. Throughout college, he had struggled to perform behind the blocking of an undersized offensive line. His South Carolina teams also struggled to develop a balanced offensive attack that could relieve some of the attention Wadiak consistently drew from opposing defenses. Steve had performed well in practices—and now, in the first half, his stock was on the rise.

Enright informed Coach Tinsley of Wadiak's insistence on playing defensive back in the second half. Tinsley was perplexed. Who in his right mind would willingly give up offensive playing time in an all-star contest? Also, Tinsley knew Wadiak as one of the nation's top running backs. That didn't necessarily translate to an ability to play defense.

Enright assured Tinsley of Wadiak's sincerity, explaining that Wadiak had played on a high school team that consisted of only 11 players and that he was confident in his ability to play defensive back. Tinsley agreed to Wadiak's offer, and in the second half, he inserted Steve into the Gray team's secondary.

"We had seven of the finest running backs in the country assembled there—but none as great a runner as Wadiak—and not a single one was a defensive back," Enright said after the game. "But Steve offered to play defense. It was indicative of the kind of man he is. He readily agreed to play defense and played one of the finest ball games from a defensive standpoint ever played on any field."

The Gray team overcame a 7-0 halftime deficit and went on to win the game 20-14. Less than a month later, the Pittsburgh Steelers made Wadiak the 30th overall selection in the 1952 NFL draft.

Steve was closing in on the fulfillment of his lifelong dream—to play football in the National Football League. His was a dream forged on the sandlots of Chicago's South Side, a dream that survived a tour of duty in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and a dream fine-tuned and propelled toward fruition during his record-breaking four-year career at the University of South Carolina.

In 1952, Steve Wadiak was so close to fulfilling that dream. So very close.