

# Missouri football pioneer Mel West never dwelled on past success

By [Andrew Wagaman](#)

The Missouri halfback gets the handoff in Nebraska's red zone, and then he gets hit. He spins away and gets hit again. He spins off that one, too, and moves on.

Hit and spin, hit and spin. Mel West is a black and gold pinball among red bumpers. The way one teammate remembers it, West gets hit a total of six times before he reaches the end zone. He never loses his balance, and he scores. Missouri wins 31-0, handing Nebraska its worst home loss ever to that point.

West leads the Tigers in rushing that year, 1958, as a sophomore. He does the next two years as well. Missouri runs a sweep three out of every four plays, for the sweep is West's specialty.

"We just pitch the ball to West and try to get a lot of people in front of him," head coach Dan Devine tells The Associated Press in October 1960.

A Columbia native and Jefferson City High School graduate, West might not be the fastest guy on the field. He's fast enough. He knows angles, and he's got an unusually good sense of balance. He always goes on.

When West takes the field in 1958 he becomes the first African-American, along with another sophomore halfback named Norris Stevenson, to play football for Missouri. He graduates in 1961 following an Orange Bowl victory over Navy.

Then something so odd, yet so ordinary, happens.

Mel West gets away from his teammates, too.

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The name reappeared when Norris Stevenson died in early March.

Because he had graduated high school a semester early and enrolled at MU in January 1957, Stevenson became the first African-American to get a football scholarship at the school. After a successful playing career, he went on to help soothe the relationship between Missouri and black recruits in St. Louis, his hometown. Missouri made a \$25,000 scholarship in Stevenson's name and dedicated its Plaza of Champions to him.

Time and distance have all but erased West's story, though.

Don't bother asking his teammates the name of his wife or the nature of his work or why he moved to Minnesota. They know little about his life after football. Usually, they end up asking the questions. Some wonder how he's doing.

Melvin G. West died in Burnsville, Minn., in 2003. He was 64. In Columbia, where West was born, nothing was written. The Minneapolis-St. Paul newspapers ran an obituary that was reprinted in Jefferson City, but few of his teammates ever saw it. Even for some of West's closest college buddies, his passing was more of a rumor.

"I thought he had died," former teammate Danny LaRose says. "Then I thought somebody had said maybe he was still alive and not doing well. I honestly wasn't sure."

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They say West was a black kid with red hair and a fine sense of humor. He coined All-American defensive end Danny LaRose's nickname, Rose Bud, and was always game for one of his practical jokes.

"He (West) usually had a smile, more of a twinkle, really," teammate Russ Sloan says. "And he could give as good as you've got."

West and Stevenson were inevitably linked because of race, but they made for interesting roommates. Stevenson, the son of a Baptist minister and later a minister himself, was serious and reserved. His teammates were almost reverent of him, and they only teased him because he was so darn nice. West was gregarious and liked to go out. On weekend mornings he would grab his shotgun and hunt rabbits with teammate Jim Miles and then, in the evening, head to Andy's Corner (now Murry's Restaurant) or a party at Pi Kappa Alpha, the fraternity some teammates were in.

"Norris was really an upstanding citizen," Miles says. "Mel was more like us."

"I think Norris just sat back and said, 'Oh my God, what are these guys doing?'" LaRose says.

One time during their senior year, when pro football teams had begun contacting them, West and LaRose had a friend prank-call Stevenson. When the phone rang, West made sure to answer it. Then he yelled, "Norris! Norris! It's for you, it's the St. Louis Cardinals! Hurry!"

On one of the trips to Nebraska, Devine found a group of them "singing and carrying on" down the streets of Lincoln after curfew. The next morning before the game, Devine chewed them out and was convinced the Tigers would lose. He grew more irate as the players tried, and failed, to stifle giggles. Finally he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"We just burst out laughing," LaRose says. "And we ended up killing Nebraska."

West's joviality was remarkable given the prevalence of racism. Most overt incidents were on the road, and everyone mentions in particular the trip to Texas A&M, when a hotel wouldn't serve West and Stevenson in the dining room. (The entire team walked out.) But incidents happened in Columbia, too. Success on the football field didn't always make a difference off it.

One Sunday morning he went to a diner for breakfast with Miles and some other teammates. A waitress came to their booth and said she wasn't allowed to serve him, so they all got up to leave. As they walked out the door, a manager said, "That was a good game yesterday, Mel."

West never addressed racial issues to any white teammates except to tell them not to worry about others' remarks. They recognize now that there must have been some unspoken burden for him and Stevenson.

"You have to have a great level of courage and tenacity," Sloan says. "It's really hard to know what was going through their minds at that time, but whatever it was, they handled it as well as they could have."

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That's where the story might end. After West graduated in 1961, many teammates never saw him again.

To answer their questions: West played pro ball for little more than a year and then tore up his knee. He went back to MU, got his master's degree in education and married a Jefferson City girl, Sharon Hopkins, whom he'd gone to high school with, but never dated in high school because she was white. They moved to Minnesota, where he had relatives, and wore snowmobile suits around the house that first brutal winter. He taught for a year in the Minneapolis Public Schools, immediately got promoted to assistant principal and wound up a superintendent. He was selected for a national education policy fellowship program. He got a summer place farther north, where he hunted and fished and learned how to ski well. When he had to, he played golf. He and his wife had two daughters.

In other words, Mel West moved on.

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It's easy, even comforting, to simplify things. But understand: West never severed ties with MU. Jerry Devine, brother of Dan Devine, actually lived with his family for half a year in Minnesota. In 1993, he was inducted into its Hall of Fame, and in 2001 he and Stevenson were grand marshals of the homecoming parade. The Stevensons picked up the Wests from the St. Louis airport and shared a hotel suite in Columbia.

"It was a lovely weekend," Delores Stevenson says. "They made Norris and Mel feel so special. They (Stevenson and West) really enjoyed the time together."

Once, LaRose stopped by while passing through Minnesota on a sales trip in the late 90s. He called up West and picked him up at his house. LaRose didn't go inside, and he didn't meet West's family.

West was still gregarious and quick to laugh, but he was also in pain. By then West had suffered from diabetes, heart problems and a bacterial infection that resulted in the amputation of his one leg above the knee.

Lunch didn't last long. They shared some memories and caught up with each other. That meant realizing life had finally caught up with West.

LaRose wishes the Missouri athletics department would have done more to bring back the 1960 team that went undefeated (after a Kansas victory was later forfeited) and won the

Orange Bowl. The department had no reunions specifically for them before the turn of the century.

"We probably had the best team they ever had there until a few years ago," LaRose says. "You'd think they would honor that team."

Others say the department under coach Gary Pinkel has done a better job inviting alumni back. Pinkel took over in 2000, though, and by then some players from the late 50s and early 60s like West had trouble traveling.

"LaRose is right in a way," says John Kadlec, who was an assistant coach on the 1960 team and continues to work for the athletics department today. "Most people forget about that those were great football teams, and with reunions now, it's a hard time getting here for a lot of 70-year-old guys."

No one deserves all the blame, if blame is even part this. As with any other college cohort, friendships slipped away as a matter of course. Historical significance made no difference, and West in particular didn't dwell on the past.

"Everybody scattered, and that's the way it goes, I guess," says Norris Kelley, a former Missouri teammate who lives in Sedalia. "We didn't stay in touch like we should have."

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The West family remains in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. Sharon West lives three blocks away from her younger daughter, Melisha West, and walks her two boxers every day. She'll tell you about all the nice parks in the area, and how you should visit.

She still holds onto the house up north. Of all her memories of her husband, that's where the most vivid ones seem to be. She remembers walks in the woods and fishing and bow hunting in the earlier years, and later, feeding the birds from the deck and his learning how to walk on a prosthetic leg in the state park lot.

"It wasn't some big sumptuous place or something, but it was nice," Sharon West says. "I wish I could get up there more often, but it's just not the same without him."

Some memories are in the scrapbook her mother-in-law, Martha Washington West, kept and her older daughter, Melody West, now holds onto. They are filled with clips from newspapers like the Jefferson City News Tribune, the Columbia Daily Tribune and the Boston Globe. From time to time, Melody West pulls the books out and shows them to her two sons.

Memories have other outlets. The younger grandson, 6-year-old Mason, never met his grandfather. But Sharon West keeps seeing her husband in him.

"Mason is so athletic and has the personality plus type of thing," Sharon West says. "Mel would have loved that."

When Mel West died two years after his last visit to Columbia, Sharon West told their older daughter to call the Stevensons. Melody West did, but amid all the funeral arrangements, she contacted few others from her father's distant past.

"It didn't occur to me to call the school (MU) or the press," she says. "I was taking care of too many other things."

Melody West says that she must have Googled her father's name a million times. She's never found much. There is [his Missouri Hall of Fame profile](#), and there are his brief professional football stats. Even after Stevenson died in March, when she tried searching for Mel West once more, she couldn't find him.

Certain stories from her father's Missouri football years, of the Orange Bowl and Dan Devine and the Texas A&M trip, have been engrained into Melody West's mind. He told these couple of stories often.

It's funny, though. Just as Mel West's teammates don't know much about his life after football, his daughter isn't sure who his closest teammates besides Stevenson were or how he really felt about breaking the color barrier.

"When you're a kid you don't think to ask adults stuff like that," she said. "When you get older you realize, gosh, that would have been a wealth of knowledge."

*Supervising editor is [Greg Bowers](#).*