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All-star Connection Stretches 58 Years

Oczus follows his grandfather's footsteps to elite U.P. football game

MENOMINEE - They'll rewind the clock when the U.P. All-Star Football Game kicks off at the Superior Dome in Marquette Saturday.

After 57 years the classic game has been revived by Xcel Sports Training.

For former Stephenson High School head football coach Axel Anderson, the past and present will intertwine when he watches his grandson, David Oczus of Menominee, compete for the West All-Stars.

Anderson played offensive and defensive end for Escanaba in the 1950 U.P. All-Star Game at Negaunee. His grandson will be at defensive back Saturday.

The players in this year's game are being housed in the dormitories at Northern Michigan University. During the 1950 all-star week, accommodations were a little less plush.

"We slept on cots in the Negaunee High School gym," Anderson recalled. "We had our meals at the fire station in Negaunee. We had to find our way to Negaunee, but there were no other expenses."

Players in Saturday's game had to raise \$500 to help support the event.

Since U.P. coaches were not allowed to participate, high school coaches from Baltimore with Upper Peninsula ties, coached the South team.

"We had to learn a whole new system offensively and defensively," Anderson recalled. "It was three downs and punt."

With U.P. Back of the Year Mel Holme of Stambaugh on the South team, the 1950 clash was expected to be an offensive shootout. Holme went on to play for the University of Minnesota.

But the two teams were locked in a scoreless deadlock when the South's Jim Devine of Norway blocked a punt and fell on it in the endzone to give the South a 6-0 lead, which held up the rest of the way. Since the rosters were smaller, most of the all-stars played both ways in the 1950 game.

Sitting next to the 6-foot-1 Anderson in the South team picture is Menominee tackle Frank Svoboda, who was the biggest player on the team at 6-6, 247 pounds.

"I looked pretty small sitting by him," Anderson says with a laugh.

Stephenson was represented by Maurice Larsen, a 6-4, 190-pound end.

"He was a big farm boy," Anderson recalled.

During workouts for the 1950 game, Anderson met Stambaugh all-star Jerry Pangrazzi. The two players both enrolled at NMU that fall and were co-captains on the Wildcat football team in their senior seasons. Anderson and Pangrazzi were both inducted into the NMU Sports Hall of Fame. Anderson earned 11 letters while at NMU.

Pangrazzi went on to be the football coach and athletic director at Marquette High School.

The connections from the 1950 game continued when Devine was hired as the head coach at Stephenson High School in 1957. A year later, Anderson replaced his former all-star teammate as coach of the Eagles.

Anderson coached at Stephenson for five years.

"Then a young graduate of Stephenson came back to his hometown," Anderson recalled. "He was working for Wilson Sporting Goods. His name was Ken Hofer.

During 1963 visit to his alma mater, Hofer visited with Anderson, who confided to him that he was not going to coach the Eagles in 1964. Anderson encouraged the future Michigan High School Football Coaches Association Hall-of-Famer to apply for the Stephenson job.

The future coach of three state titles at Menominee took over the head coaching job at Stephenson in 1964.

Fifty eight years has merged into a week of excitement as Anderson gets ready to cheer on his grandson in Saturday's game.

"I'm very honored to be doing this. It's a thrill. I've been following him all through his career," Anderson said.

Oczus will play for the West team in Saturday's game.

"He's always been an inspiration to me," Oczus said of his grandfather. "He's always there to cheer for me."

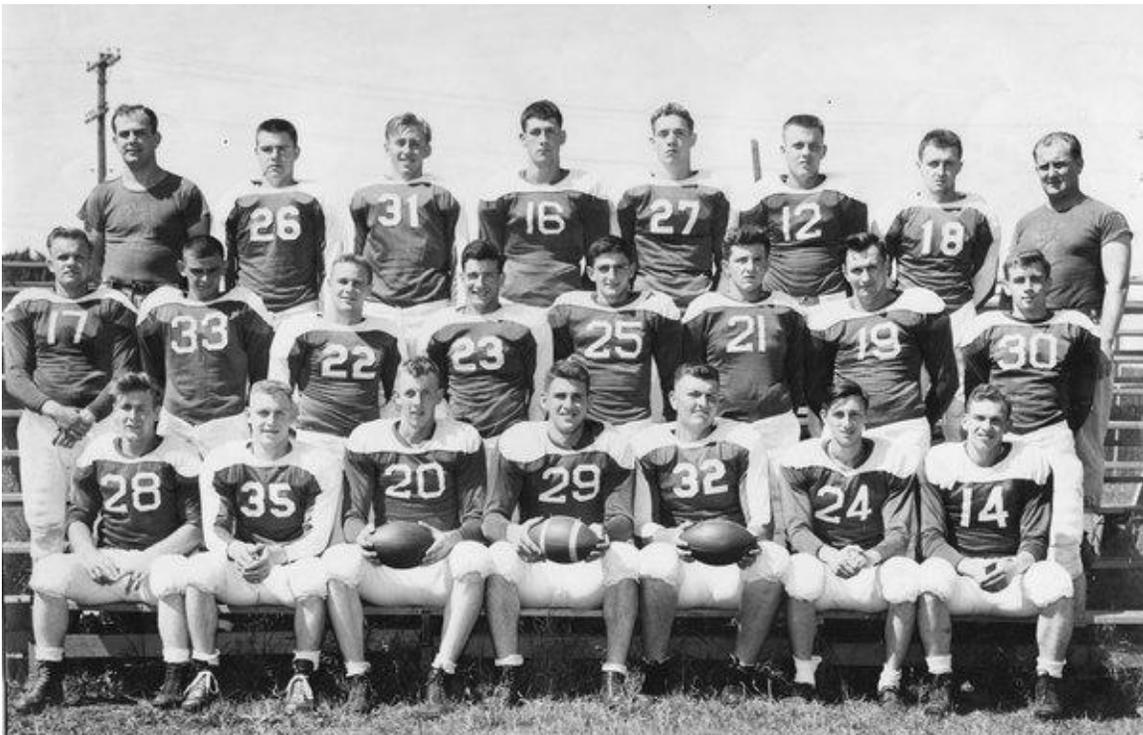
While his grandfather was a receiver in the all-star game, Oczus's mission Saturday will be to contain the North receivers.

The Menominee defensive back intercepted 11 passes in his two years with the Maroons, knocked down four passes and had 68 career tackles.

The Maroon star noted that the first two days of all-star week have been all about "eating and practicing." The team practiced twice a day for two hours each session.

Oczus noted that it would be nice to pick off a pass Saturday in the dome, but he is just excited about being part of the all-star experience.

"I just want to get out there and play," he explained. "I'll be playing my last competitive game, so I just want to have fun."



Former Stephenson football coach Axel Anderson, first row No. 24, played for the South All-Stars in the 1950 Upper Peninsula All-Star Football Game. Anderson's grandson, David Oczus of Menominee, will play defensive back for the West All-Stars Saturday in the first U.P. all-star football game since 1951. Frank Svoboda of Menominee (32) is seated to the right of Anderson and the late Maurice Larsen of Stephenson is the third player from the left in the front row. (Special to the EagleHerald)