

## Catching up with Wildcat and CFL Legend Gerald Alphin



*His actual road game jersey modeled by wife, Jeannette.*

Though there wasn't much of a reason to celebrate Kansas State football in the 1980s, many might remember Gerald Alphin. The soft-handed receiver played for the Wildcats from 1982-85 and went to star in the Canadian Football League.

Alphin led the Wildcats in receiving yards in 1984 (256) and 1985 (524). Here is my interview with the former tight-end-sized receiver known as "Big, Big Alph."

JC: Gerald, let's start right off with the most memorable Gerald Alphin moment in K-State history — the purple pride version of the immaculate reception. It was a dark and stormy day...

GA: The Catch! That was really something, I can't believe you remember that. We were on the road at Missouri and we were having an awful season. We made two big plays to score and then we won our only game of the year.

JC: The starter, Randy Williams, was out injured and John Welch started that game as I recall, and he was the passer, correct?

GA: Yes. It was about a 45-50-yard pass into coverage, but we needed something. I ran the play called "skinny post" (on the high marks on the field).

I look up and the ball is heading my way, slightly under-thrown and floating. I reached back with my right hand, but the pass was tipped by defenders once or twice — I can't remember — and then I was able to feel it with the tip of my fingers to give it life.

After a couple of tries, I finally grabbed it and hauled it down. Part of that highlight is catching it while a good friend and childhood competitor, Eric McMillan, was defending on the very play.

After that, another great Welch pass to Kent Dean and we scored to win the game.

JC: John Welch could really wing the ball — he was a blue collar QB — brought his lunch pail to work.

GA: And he was built like a linebacker with his pads off. He was one of the hardest throwers I ever played with. His passes had a lot of zip. You had to run your passing routes with urgency and look for the ball or it would hit you right in the ear hole.

Yeah, 'Welchy' could really spin it.

JC: So why did you choose K-State over Missouri, being from St. Louis?

GA: I picked KSU because I wanted to play right away. Missouri offered me a redshirt opportunity, but at K-State I thought I could walk in and contribute right away. Plus K-State told me I could possibly play baseball as well, which Missouri didn't.

JC: I don't remember seeing you play baseball. Did I miss something?

GA: Well, I learned pretty quick that there was not any spare time to play baseball. Lifting, workout schedules, off-season conditioning and all the requirements for football were way more than anticipated.

But in reality, the football coaches wouldn't let me play baseball. I remember being told, "your scholarship is in football."

I actually used to go sit in the stands and watch the Cats' baseball team practice and would salivate, wishing I could be out on the diamond with them. I know I could have contributed.

JC: Were you an every-sport athlete growing up?

GA: My father was the coordinator for parks and rec, so I was either playing, refereeing, or umpiring. I did everything in sports, but played baseball, football and basketball.

Luckily, my mom and pops kept my brother and I in line. Pops was commander of homicide/rape and child abuse with the St. Louis Police Department... so we were always accountable to him.

JC: Let's talk about that. Do you think the student-athlete is treated differently?

GA: Here was my experience. There are coaches and school leaders out there that do a dis-service to young people by emphasizing victories over academics. It should be a privilege to play, an honor to represent your school or community, not a right. Pops and others led a charge to change the rules at my high school.

JC: Sounds like your father was a great mentor for youth and you:

GA: One time, my parents decided to pull my brother off the team because of his grades. The result was the coach and the principal calling the house trying to convince my parents to let my brother play. That only infuriated my parents. That was a motivator to make changes, and they did.

JC: Was it different for you when you followed all of that, were you a political mark?

GA: No, because we got a new coach and I learned from that example that I better stay eligible. The new coach told me if he had me 1-2 more years he would have made me quarterback. The coach allowed the quarterback and I plenty of freedom. He created the "A" series which allowed unspoken communication between the QB and me. The defense couldn't be right. Based on their alignment, I had the option to change my route. In football it's known as running "option routes" and we had a ton of success doing it.

JC: So it wasn't just K-State and Missouri that recruited you?

GA: Iowa State, Wichita State, Missouri, K-State and Arkansas State. I went to all of them. I thought I should visit them all since they made the effort. It seemed like a good idea at first, but after so many visits I was worn out.

JC: You mentioned Missouri, but why did you finally choose the Wildcats?

GA: They were a major program in a respected conference, but stumbling. I was confident I could play four years and create a perfect scenario to get me into the National Football League.

The main reason was the passion of the fans. There was no comparison. Those fans were just crazy. Passing fans over the crowd, even the mascot, Willie. I loved the spirit and it made me decide that I wanted to play for them.

JC: Most star athletes drive fancy cars, but you had a famous moped, that is a picture that would be amusing for many to see:

GA: Oh man, the moped. Don't make fun of me now, Jeff. You want funny? Imagine Reggie Singletary, our nose guard, riding it. Now that was funny.

The moped was a gift to myself, actually. My grandmother left all the grandkids some money for school. I didn't have to use mine on books because of my scholarship, so instead of burning through the cash, I bought the moped. It came in pretty handy on campus. But, the weirdest things started to happen. I even started to get superstitious. After every good road game I had, I would get back home and something was a mess. It was so bad that after games I would sit on the bus or plane ride back wondering what was coming.

JC: Say what?

GA: Yeah, great game at Iowa State, my apartment gets broken into. Great game at Kentucky, my moped was stolen. After another game, my moped was in an accident. And another time, after the game, I fell and chipped a tooth.

JC: Maybe the moped was haunted:

GA: The craziness finally ended when a friend wrecked it so bad it had to be replaced, and then I got a new one.

JC: What was your first impression of Manhattan, Kansas?

GA: Flat. But I was so focused on football, really trying not to make mistakes that I didn't even notice anything else. Early on in the equipment room, I met my friend and teammate Mark Toliver.

JC: Skipping ahead; You did well enough to get invited to the NFL Combine. How was that?

GA: It was kind of out of the blue. I wasn't invited to anything else and I think I was the only K-Stater there that year in New Orleans.

JC: It was in the Superdome or Tulane?

GA: It was in the Superdome. I hated the lighting in there. It was hard to adjust to. One thing I was surprised by was that all the athletes there were supportive of each other. We all wanted each other to succeed, even though it was also a competition.

JC: What did you do best there?

GA: It was the deep routes. I've always loved the deep "go route." Just close the cushion of your defender, avoid contact and finish for six.

I was running a "go route," turned my head and the ball was already out in front of me when I found it in the lights. I stretched way out and caught it. It was a great grab and everyone roared in cheers.

I got back to the line and one of the coaches says, "Alphin, come up to the front of the line. Can you do that again? We didn't catch that on film, we missed it."

At first, I thought they were joking, but they were serious. So, I ran the same exact route, and unbelievably, the ball was in the same, exact, place. So, I over-strided, caught up to it, stretched out and caught it again. That's my NFL combine moment.

JC: That's truly amazing. So then on draft day, what happened?

GA: I was sitting with my buddy, Nelson Nickerson and my girlfriend — who is now my wife — the whole day. I was a little irritated because the phone never rang, other than my friends calling asking had I been drafted.

No NFL team calls for three days, and immediately after the draft last pick, my phone began to ring off the hook. I got free agent offers from around 12 teams.

JC: So you were ecstatic?

GA: At first, I felt so dejected that I had worked so hard and didn't get drafted. I was really upset and so every time I answered the phone, I just told them to "call my agent."

JC: Sports news was harder to find in those days, but didn't you go to Oakland?

GA: The Los Angeles Raiders. They were way higher in their offer than the other teams and as a free agent in 1986, that meant about \$4,000 more.

I went out there with an attitude to prove everyone wrong, but for me to make the team, a lot of good fortune had to happen.

For starters, they had so many receivers trying out, that I was given the No. 10, as there were no 80s left.

JC: Did you get to meet Al Davis?

GA: I did, and Howie Long, Marcus Allen, Jim Plunkett, Lester Hayes and Cliff Branch.

All great guys who had won the Super Bowl and still thought they could win another. Al Davis walked around like a god. He always

wore white, never missed a practice and would often interrupt drills and plays and yell “Now that’s how I want it done!” He was a real micromanager with every detail. If he was coming near where you were doing drills, people would warn each other, “straighten up for Al!”

JC: So I take it your next move was the CFL?

GA: In those days there was also the USFL, so I was feeling pretty good that if I didn’t make the Raiders I would get a job somewhere. But as my luck would have it, the very day I was cut, while driving home from the facility, it was announced on the radio that the USFL had folded. So I just thought, “what now?”

About 2-3 weeks later, the CFL called from Montreal — the Alouettes. In Canada, they only allow 16 import players (Americans) and they are usually only able to play certain positions, but they decided because of my size they wanted to make me a slot-back. This is usually for Canadian guys only, so they made a special provision and said “We think you can play right away, how soon can you get here?”

JC: You fared pretty well there as I recall. Even recall seeing a couple of games on TV:

GA: I did and I enjoyed it. The Canadian fans were really great and a lot like K-State fans.

JC: Who were some of your favorite passers?

GA: There were so many great quarterbacks over the years. Damon Allen, Tracy Ham and Matt Dunigan. I was on the receiving end of many of their passes as they made their way to the CFL Hall of Fame.

JC: When did you end up back in the States?

GA: I had to cut my teeth up there for four years and finally in 1990, instead of renewing my contract with Ottawa, I tried the NFL again. Seattle, Dallas and New Orleans were in a bidding war, which is how I ended up in New Orleans.

In hindsight, I should’ve picked the Cowboys. It was right before they were primed to win the Super Bowl.

JC: What were those teams like, were they the same or different? I am assuming ‘America’s Team’ may have been different than the ‘lowly Ain’ts.’

GA: It was so different. In New Orleans, the team chemistry was bad. The veterans and the rookies were divided and even though I was kind of a veteran, I was a newbie and unproven. I had always been a starter and now I was a specialty third-down receiver, which made it very hard for me to develop as quickly.

The Cowboys’ attitude in their locker room was all team, family, camaraderie — an incredible environment with guys like Nate Newton, Alvin Harper, Michael Irvin and Troy Aikman as true leaders.

They were all young and vibrant and buying into Jimmy Johnson’s system. They were even volunteering in the off-season for charities. The difference was night and day.

JC: Where did the nickname “Big, Big Alph” come from?

GA: Funny story. After the Saints, I was in the Cowboys off-season program when I signed. We all worked hard as a receivers group. By now, I had lost the bulk that slowed me to run a 4.6 40 at the NFL Combine years ago. I knew I could run easily a 4.5 time. Speed was everything. It was test day and our turn to run 40s. The wide receivers and defensive backs were running our 40- yard dashes as a group.

Alvin Harper yells out “Big, Big Alph” what you gonna run?

With everyone listening, I say “low 4.5s.” They said no way and hung around to watch.

My first time was 4.39 and the second was 4.45. Everyone was blown away. I’ll go on record and confess, it was aided by being on a rubber track and timed by laser at the finish.

JC: So, how did it all end for you?

GA: Dallas cut me in ‘92 and I ended up back in the CFL with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers for three years. Then in ‘95 I went to the Baltimore Stallions to win a CFL Championship before that team folded to make room for the NFL Ravens (who moved from Cleveland).

After my ninth year, I began to notice my skills and confidence were waning. I found myself thinking about injury more.

When young, you just went out and did it, you just go out without fear. I no longer felt like an invincible kid and the thought of going across the middle became a tentative act, at best. There was no more fooling myself.

My tracking the deep pass and ball judgment was off. I even watched old videos of myself, trying to get my mojo back. It was the ‘94-95 season. I didn’t have that extra gear I used to have when I was trying to get open. I used to say “If I’m even, I’m leavin’.”

And once I couldn’t do any more “leavin” I knew it was over. I had a bad training camp that year. I was making too much money and was older. Now back in Montreal where it all started for me. Coach called me in and was really nice about it— said they were going a different direction and would offer me an opportunity to retire.

I took the offer. I left with my health and dignity for my next career.

JC: That must be humbling.

GA: It is. Father Time is undefeated, And then it was, "OK, football is over, now what?"

I had a passion for and believe fully in giving back to youth. I did a bunch of camps with former teammates and then found a real job.

JC: What does the name Bill Snyder mean to you?

GA: I am excited about Bill Snyder and wish he could have coached some of the talent we had back in the day. Our record was bad, but we really did have some great athletes on those teams.

Snyder is heavy on the JUCOs, but he has made a major positive impact and it is great to be associated with him through purple pride. He is also a great mentor for young men.

JC: Gerald, you sound like you have learned a lot from your parents and have carried on that effort with young people:

GA: Thank you, yes I spend some time with the Atlanta King Center doing annual training or summer camps. Many times with our family's Historical Tours company taking bus loads to Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, Alabama — sharing and showing the younger generation, or whoever joins us, why we enjoy the freedoms we do today.

The historical tours often span to South Africa too. In July 2016 we'll be taking a group back to Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town.

JC: Do you still cheer on the Cats?

GA: Not only am I still a fan, but I live in SEC country and I like to talk trash to these guys around here when I can. I like to call into the local sports radio shows and make cases for the Big 12, because they talk so much SEC here it makes my ears bleed.

In fact, my last argument was that Texas A&M and Missouri, which were two mediocre teams in the Big 12, moved to the SEC and are dominating... They really hate that.

I am always defending the old Big Eight. I haven't been back in Manhattan, though, since I left school.

Today, Alphin is the CEO of Hope Nonviolence Foundation and works to carry on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. He spends most of his spare time mentoring youth in the Atlanta area with the Six Principles of Nonviolence. He also works for the Department of Transportation as an inspector. Alphin and his wife Jeannette have three adult sons and five grandkids.

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- See more at: <http://themercury.com/articles/catching-up-with-former-wildcat-gerald-alphin#sthash.LyUVpHgw.dpuf>