

A Road Trip and Catching up with Wildcat Legend Steve Grogan

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Q & A with Wildcat and Patriots Legend Steve Grogan

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Former K-State Quarterback Steve Grogan

Steve Grogan, the product of Ottawa, Kansas who made it all the way to the New England Patriots Hall of Fame, took a ride with me to Manhattan and back recently to attend his first KSU home basketball game since he graduated. He has been a hero of family and friends since my childhood and while we've hung out and become friends over the years, even catching some Red Sox games at Fenway; today was a first. We were going to see a basketball game at Bramlage.

CHAPMAN: Steve, does my seat go back far enough?

GROGAN: We're good. My back hurts all the time and my knees, I'm old ya know.

CHAPMAN: You were a punishing runner in your day and not the usual quarterback. I am not surprised you're a little banged up.

GROGAN: I never wanted the other guys on the team to think I was some prima donna, or soft. I figured if they could tackle and get hit, so could I. So instead of the slide or avoiding hits. I took them, I made them and I played football tough, like it is supposed to be played.

CHAPMAN: 16 years in the NFL, punishing your body and now in the Hall of Fame. Is that special to you?

GROGAN: True. I really can't believe it to tell you the truth. None of it. I wasn't really very good at football, ya know. I am in the Ring of Honor at K-State, my jersey number 11 was retired and I got drafted by the Patriots. That still baffles me, so yes, it's pretty special.

CHAPMAN: How can you possibly say after your successes that you weren't very good? You don't just do what you did without some talent and sports smarts.

GROGAN: If you look at my stats at K-State, I wasn't too great. We weren't the best. My coach got fired. And so after that I go to Foxboro and play and my stats aren't very good and the team wasn't consistently good and several coaches got fired. There were two quarterbacks after me in New England, (Bledsoe and Brady) who were the real deal and brought Boston the trophies that eluded me.

CHAPMAN: OK, so you win the humble pie award... Let's talk about that Super Bowl. Getting into the Super Bowl isn't easy, and if I recall history correctly, New England doesn't make it there without your mid-season heroics in 1985.

GROGAN: True. And thank you. I will tell you one other humbling story. My son brought home a (baseball/football) card magazine one time, so I was curious what cards were worth. Walter Payton's rookie card was \$10 and mine was 25 cents!

CHAPMAN: Hahaha... I have both cards. So it was you versus Eason versus injuries in 1985.

GROGAN: It was a crazy season with Tony Eason and I both starting a few games, having injuries, and finally making the Super Bowl. It was a fun ride.

CHAPMAN: You didn't start the game though, and as a guy that likes to hit people, tell me about that:

GROGAN: There were only 2 guys on the roster that weren't slated to play in the game. On offense, defense or special teams. Me and the third string quarterback. Obviously because they don't want us hurt. But I didn't care. I went to the special teams coach and begged all week to play. "I'll cover kicks, I'll block for punts, I will do anything, just put me on the field!"

CHAPMAN: Well you did get in and fairly early.

GROGAN: I did. Tony was like 0-6 passing and was getting killed.

CHAPMAN: And your run game was pretty dead against the Bears too.

GROGAN: Well we would have probably had more success if our game plan would have worked. Unfortunately in the first series our tight end (Lin Dawson) tore his ACL and was out. So our two tight end running game we had relied on to get to the playoffs was done and he was also one of our best pass receivers, so we were really in trouble.

CHAPMAN: So how did you get in?

GROGAN: It was the most bizarre situation. .. I still can't quite comprehend the conversation I had with Coach Barry.

Still darting through Kansas City rush hour traffic to get on the highway, we pass by the exit for I-35 towards Ottawa. The high school where the stadium is named for its local sports alumni hero, Steve Grogan. The junior high and local community college where Steve's dad, Jim, coached football. The conversation switched to Steve's parents.

CHAPMAN: How often do you get back to Ottawa?

GROGAN: I am back about once a week. I go over to check on mom and dad. Mom has some health issues and my dad who is now in his 80's tries to help out as much as possible. He's pretty solid on them avoiding ever moving into assisted living, so he is doing more than ever. Even cooking.

CHAPMAN: Since your dad was a coach, I assume that had to help in recruiting?

GROGAN: It definitely helped keep things in perspective.

As we turned west on I-70 and were finally clear of city traffic, Steve took a deep breath.

GROGAN: This is the best part of this drive, Jeff. These Kansas sunsets are simply amazing. You never truly appreciate them when you are here, but after living for 40 years in Boston, I always love it.

CHAPMAN: Hopefully we can make it to the Flint Hills in time to see it better.

We both see the signs for Lawrence and the University of Kansas and he just starts right back in.

GROGAN: So back to why K-State. I always kinda just knew that's where I wanted to play. Vince Gibson was recruiting me, but seeing the KU sign made me remember a funny moment.

CHAPMAN: The Jayhawks recruited you I assume. Wasn't your dad friends with Coach Don Fambrough?

GROGAN: No they weren't friends, but my dad told him I would go have a look, so I did, just to see what they had. (He starts laughing to himself).

CHAPMAN: I have a feeling this is a good one:

GROGAN: Two assistant coaches met with me in some small room under the stadium. They locked the door and said "Here's the deal. You aren't leaving until you sign with us." I was kinda scared, and wasn't sure what to do. I just sat there. I was thinking how do I get outta here in time to meet Vince Gibson for dinner later in Ottawa?

-----Where the Manhattan Mercury cut the story off -----

CHAPMAN: Who were they do you remember?

GROGAN: Yes, they both became head coaches and were successful elsewhere. It was Terry Donahue (UCLA) and Don Cooper (Ohio State).

CHAPMAN: You played after Dickey and before Dan Manucci. I know there were a couple other guys who played for Rainsberger. Can't recall the names. Joe Hatcher?

GROGAN: Yes. Dennis Morrison was right after Lynn and before me. Lynn was my sports idol at the time. He was always so good. Even though the guys thought Coach letting Lynn wear white shoes made him too much of a favorite, like he was Joe Namath or something, but he played well enough on the field that everyone kinda forgot he had the shiny shoes.

CHAPMAN: You said earlier that you weren't any good, but you know you won 16 games while at K-State and 9 as a starter. In that era, K-State fans considered that a pretty successful run with a few 4 and 5 win seasons.

GROGAN: Admittedly, we did have some good quarterbacks. Several made the NFL during that time. I am proud of that.

As we pulled onto Bill Snyder Highway, we talked about the current status of K-State Football.

CHAPMAN: Your thoughts on Coach Snyder retiring and the new guy?

GROGAN: You really can't even say enough about Coach Snyder and how all of us old guys found purple pride when he started to turn things around here. It was truly remarkable in so

many ways. I watch every game I can and am a huge fan. I am sure he knew it was time (to retire). Recruiting today and the game are so different since he started here, but he was awesome.

CHAPMAN: I like this guy from North Dakota State.

GROGAN: I think he is a perfect fit for K-State. He's got great energy and knows how to win with few resources and has the underdog mentality it takes here. He's kinda like Bill Snyder plus some new passion and enthusiasm all in one. I'm looking forward to see how we do.

We turned onto Jack Hartman Drive to Bramlage, the west side of Bill Snyder Family Stadium is all lit up.

GROGAN: Wow, what a beautiful facility. I've never seen it at night like this.

CHAPMAN: You should look at some old pictures. The old press box had sand bags in the bottom and log chains to keep it from toppling over into the stands. A true K-State engineering wonder.

GROGAN: Haha. I remember it was small, but not that bad. This whole complex is something. This is my first game in Bramlage and first time back for a game since college.

CHAPMAN: Wow, 43 Years!

GROGAN: Who is the statue?

CHAPMAN: Mr. K-State, Ernie Barrett.

GROGAN: He is a great guy. I think he crushed my wife's hand when we met him.

CHAPMAN: She's not alone! Your #11 was retired here, but why did you switch to #14 for the Patriots?

GROGAN: 11 was taken and they didn't figure I would be around long so I got 14.

The game against Texas wasn't exactly the loud crowd and big home win we were expecting, but nonetheless we had fun. Steve entered and left the game without fanfare. No handshake or welcome to town by the athletic director or time on the jumbotron. Steve was just happy to be there among the purple family cheering on our Wildcats. Unfortunately, we got stung by 20 at home.

GROGAN: I like Bruce Weber. He seems like a good fit for K-State too.

CHAPMAN: Yes, that was a rough home loss though. We better get it together. (apparently we did)

So we are back in the car heading home to KC and we started where we had left off...

CHAPMAN: So Coach Barry was about to say something crazy to you in the Super Bowl?

GROGAN: Yea, after Tony had been having a tough time, he says, "So what do you think I should do here?" He was asking me if I wanted to play, but in his own way. He told me to get warmed up and I was going in. I had to look around for my helmet. I didn't even have it on. Not even for the coin toss. I was a captain of the team, but I truly never thought I would get to play that day.

CHAPMAN: We know the outcome, The Chicago Bears won 46-10.

GROGAN: Richard Dent, the Super Bowl MVP and I spent a lot of time together that day. I don't know for sure, but I was told that I attempted 31 passes and was hit, hurried or sacked on 29 of those. That makes for a pretty tough day to complete passes, let alone score.

CHAPMAN: You did have some good ones though.

GROGAN: I threw two touchdown passes that day. One to Irving Fryar in the 4th quarter and one to their (Bears) guy Reggie Phillips. Their cornerback returned it 28 yards for a touchdown after the interception. (He laughs)

CHAPMAN: You laugh today, but you're such a competitor, I can't imagine it was funny then.

GROGAN: Oh I scored another time.. 2 points. I got sacked in the end zone for a safety. So really the Bears scored 38 and I scored 8 for them that game. Ha-ha.

As we pass old Griffith Park along Ft. Riley Blvd, Steve starts laughing to himself.

GROGAN: Something really funny happened on that field. I was recruited by teammate Bud Peterson to play soccer once. I don't know anything about soccer. I had never played, but I was free that day so what the heck. We were playing against a bunch of guys from Guatemala and they were really good, played soccer their whole life. A couple of times the ball was loose and out of instinct, I just dove on it! The international guys were funny in their accents trying to explain to me that I couldn't use my hands. There was also a kicking incident when I grabbed a guys' leg, ya know, trying to protect myself and he wasn't too happy with football guy trying to play soccer. I still laugh about it. I wasn't asked back.

CHAPMAN: Ha-ha, ok, tell me about some of the guys you played with at New England. There were a couple of K-Staters. Ever get time with them? Mack Herron, Don Calhoun?

GROGAN: Yes I played one season with Mack. He was a tough little runner and great punt returner, but he was partier and got in trouble. He went to prison for drugs and died a few years ago too young. It was a sad story. A lot of those stories happened around me in the NFL. Guys just don't know how to handle the cash and notoriety.

CHAPMAN: I know Don Calhoun retired and ended up in the waste service business in Wichita.

GROGAN: Don was a tough competitor, a good ball carrier and super quiet. He would just show up and play and then disappear. He had been playing for the Buffalo Bills and I saw him after a game. We chatted a bit. Then one day at practice, I see him sitting on the bench

in our Patriots locker room. He never said a word to me that he had arrived. He just said, when I asked him “Yep, they traded me here.”

Don was a good blocker and could run, but couldn’t catch a cold... so I didn’t throw to him much. He went home after every season back to Wichita and worked I think, but I haven’t seen him since he left the team.

CHAPMAN: Don is another one of those past K-State players that has been kinda forgotten. He’s in other halls of fame but not even K-States’, same with Mack Herron.

GROGAN: Yea, we were all kind of lucky to get to play professionally back in those days and K-State Football was definitely not made up of superstars.

CHAPMAN: How about Stanley Morgan or Irving Fryer, John Hannah?

GROGAN: Stanley Morgan was super intelligent and just a great teammate all around. He and Irving were great receivers and I enjoyed playing with them. John Hannah was intense. He wouldn’t speak to anyone from Friday through game day. Not even his own family. He had a routine and nobody messed with it. He was a great athlete and super focused on football only.

CHAPMAN: So what’s the craziest story you are willing to tell about your football days?

GROGAN: That’s easy. Remember Mel Lunsford? He played defensive line for the Patriots for several seasons. Well Mel didn’t like to fly. And for any games east of the Mississippi he would drive his giant silver Lincoln. He would leave on Fridays and show up for the games on his own on Sunday. If we did go way out west, he would have to be heavily sedated. It was hilarious.

CHAPMAN: He didn’t play for anyone else did he?

GROGAN: No, just the Patriots. Anyway, we were playing out in his hometown Cincinnati against the Bengals one season and after the game we board the plane and Mel gets in his car. But on Monday, no Mel at practice. Not Tuesday or the following week or strangely, for the rest of the season. We had no idea where he went or how to get ahold of him then. So on the depth chart on the locker room chalk board it just said “Mel Lunsford: Missing.”

CHAPMAN: So was everyone worried, was there an investigation?

GROGAN: No, funny thing. Nobody really tried to find him, the whole rest of the season. Then one morning in the summer on my way to training camp, I was driving through Ohio and I come up on this big silver Lincoln. I wonder, could that be Mel? And sure enough when I got to the stadium, there was that same car and in the locker room was Mel. Somehow he still had a job and it was as though he never left.

CHAPMAN: So what happened?

GROGAN: His wife was in the military and had gotten transferred to Panama. They had had some rough times, so after the game in Cincinnati, I guess he found out and just drove to Panama. He stayed down there with her until her deployment was over and then returned.

CHAPMAN: But he didn't call anyone or anything?

GROGAN: Nope, crazy ol' Mel. That Lincoln went everywhere!

CHAPMAN: So you and your wife (Robbie) are back in Kansas and helping out with your parents. And what about the business back east?

GROGAN: Yes I am officially here full time now. No more Boston winters. My oldest son is taking over my sporting goods business, Grogan Marciano Sports and doing quite well with it.

CHAPMAN: How did you get that started?

GROGAN: After football I purchased the business from a guy who had bought it from Rocky Marciano's brother and started selling sporting goods to area schools and have done that my whole life since retiring from sports. I did some television and radio for a few years for the Patriots, but lots of the more recently retired Super Bowl champs have taken all those jobs and old retired guys like me just stay at home on Sundays now.

CHAPMAN: Do you keep in touch with any of your former teammates?

GROGAN: Yes, Patriots guys, but nobody from K-State. Russ Francis (former NE Tight End) and I talk occasionally. He was a great player and teammate.

CHAPMAN: Now that you are in Kansas City, hopefully you can connect with more. Didn't you have a star-dazed golf outing recently?

GROGAN: I already have connected with Paul Coffman. He invited me to play golf last summer with Lynn Dickey and Jan Stenerud. Dickey and Stenerud were studs of the game when I was in high school so it was great to spend some time with them. Coffman was a freshman my senior year. Who would have thought a walk-on from Chase, Kansas would turn out to be such a good tight end in the NFL. He was amazing.

CHAPMAN: Steve, thanks for going to the game with me today and cheering on the Cats and for some great stories.

GROGAN: Let's do it again Jeff. Go Cats!

From the New England Patriots, K-State Athletics and Wikipedia:

Grogan's best season was 1979, when he completed 206 of 423 passes for 3,286 yards and 28 touchdowns, rushing for 368 yards and 2 touchdowns. His 28 touchdown passes led the league, tied with Brian Sipe of Cleveland, and his rushing yards led the league for quarterbacks.

Grogan rushed for 2,176 yards (4.9 per carry) and 35 touchdowns during his career, a mark which places him as the Patriots' fourth overall in rushing touchdowns. With Grogan, the Patriots made the playoffs five times (1976, 1978, 1982, 1985, and 1986). Before Grogan was drafted, the Patriots made the playoffs just once from 1960-1974.

Grogan's injuries and his toughness in response to them are also part of his legacy. One sports writer for the Boston Globe, wrote of the "Grogan Toughness Meter" in 2003. The partial listing of Grogan's injuries over his 16-year career: "Five knee surgeries; screws in his leg after the tip of his fibula snapped; a cracked fibula that snapped when he tried to practice; two ruptured disks in his neck, which he played with for 1 1/2 seasons; a broken left hand (he simply handed off with his right hand); two separated shoulders on each side; the reattachment of a tendon to his throwing elbow; and three concussions.

Kansas State has retired the number Grogan wore for the Wildcats, #11, to jointly honor him and Lynn Dickey, who also wore #11. It is the only number retired by Kansas State. (Grogan wore #14 with the Patriots.) He was named into the K-State Athletics Hall of Fame in 1995 and the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame in 1999 and the Bill Snyder Family Stadium Ring of Honor in 2002.

Grogan was named to the Patriots 35th Anniversary Team in 1994 and was elected into the Patriots Hall of Fame in 1995. He was also elected to the Patriot's All-Decade teams of the 1970s and the 1980s.

Steve and his wife, Robbie met at K-State and have three sons, Tyler, Tanner and Tate.



Steve Grogan in 1974

The published version: http://themercury.com/q-a-with-wildcats-legend-steve-grogan/article_f690f424-eb15-5cf1-b2c2-5d69e4b99126.html



Photo: Courtesy of New England Patriots