

BU

BETHEL

FOOTBALL

MIAC CHAMPIONSHIPS: 2000, 2001, 2006, 2007, 2013 | NCAA REGION CHAMPIONSHIPS: 2007, 2010

Former Bethel star terror on the field but a humanitarian off it

This article appeared in the Minneapolis Star-Tribune on December 28, 2014. Jesse Phenow was a four-year starter as a running back for the Royals. He earned All-MIAC honors and was a leader on team and in the entire Bethel community.

By: PATRICK REUSSE | <http://strib.mn/1DKyBri>

Jesse Phenow was on occasion the third option for carries entering Bethel football games, even in his junior and senior seasons of 2012 and 2013, and yet in rugged circumstances the Royals often found themselves leaning on Phenow.

He was impossible to miss, always for spectators and generally for defenders. He had a fanatical running style dramatized by long hair flowing from under his helmet, and a desire, it seemed, to run through potential tacklers rather than around them.

Asked for a review of Phenow, Bethel coach Steve Johnson responded:

"Volatile, tough, crazy, powerful, ferocious, angry at injustice and a hard worker. . . . He was an excellent athlete who looked like a bowling ball with long hair. He had to play through injuries, but he did that loudly, too. Jesse demanded all from himself, his teammates and his coaches."

There's also this: "Jesse is not shy about his feelings concerning the rich, the 'overdogs,'" Johnson said. "He is dedicated to folks in need."

Phenow grew up in Richfield and played football and hockey for the Spartans. His parents, Rich and Jody, are associate pastors at Christ Presbyterian Church. Attending a high school with ethnic diversity and mostly underdog athletic teams. Growing up in a religious family with a belief in helping others.

Add it up and it's not a shock Phenow spent this Christmas in a small rented room in Mae Sot, a town on the Thai side of the Thailand-Myanmar border. Myanmar is more familiar to Americans as Burma.



Phenow is there with the hope of spending most of the next six months in the Karen (Kuh-REN) State, which has been ravaged from war between Myanmar's ruling military junta and Karen forces seeking independent rule.

The junta is no longer technically in charge, but the woeful conditions and refugee camps remain.

Phenow's interest in the plight of the Karen people dates to taking a class in intercultural communications at Bethel. Part of the class was to meet immigrant families. Phenow and his friend Kellen Kersten were connected in February 2013 to a Karen family living in St. Paul.

There was a mother, father and six boys in the family at the time. Phenow and Kersten spent every Sunday with the family for the next year, playing sports and coming up with other activities for the sons.

The Burmese family had lived for nearly two decades in the Mae La Oon refugee camp in Karen before immigrating to St. Paul. Phenow became driven to learn and do more for the Karen, which fits perfectly with what Steve Johnson saw from Jesse at Bethel.

"Jesse takes serious the Biblical call to helping the poor, and the poor in spirit," Johnson said. "He looks and is scary at times, but as you get close to him, he has a high capacity for love."

This Biblical call caused Phenow to reach out to Ven-

ture Expeditions, a Twin Cities nonprofit that operates a children's home in Thailand. That group put Jesse in touch with "Outpour," an organization located in Mae Sot that helped with travel and other arrangements.

In November, Phenow flew to Dallas to obtain a one-year visa to enter Thailand. On Dec. 10, Phenow flew to Tokyo, on to Bangkok, and then took a small plane to Mae Sot.

The Karen State is right across the border from Mae Sot. As of early this week, Phenow had been allowed through tight Burmese security once and into Karen. I was able to contact Jesse by text message, and then e-mailed him a series of questions to which he responded.

Included were these:

- Asked about his goal with this expedition: "My main agenda is to learn everything I can that may help me better serve the Karen community back in the Twin Cities. I definitely would say a goal is to visit and somehow benefit the refugee camp three hours north of the border where my Karen family stayed for 19 years."
- Asked if he considers this an "obsession" based on his dealings with the St. Paul family: "More than an obsession I think it's a deep love for my Karen family, and a strong desire to have the world a better place. I know as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual male, I experience the most privilege in American society and in the world."

"I guess the trip is an effort to deny myself some of that privilege by helping where I can."

Jesse Phenow will make it to Mae Lo Oon. And he will do all he can once there. His college coach knows that.

"Jesse is blended extremes: a tough sucker with a big heart," Johnson said. "I love those guys."