

McPherson, 'Cuse put it all together in 1987

Steve Megargee
May 30, 2006

Name: Don McPherson

Age: 41

Residence: Long Island, N.Y.

Claim to fame: McPherson quarterbacked Syracuse to an unbeaten season in 1987 that ended in a 16-16 tie with Auburn in the Sugar Bowl. He won the Maxwell Award ? which goes to the nation's top college player. He also won the Davey O'Brien Award and the Johnny Unitas Award, which are presented to the nation's best college quarterback. He was runner-up to Notre Dame's Tim Brown in the Heisman Trophy balloting.

McPherson now works as the founder and executive director of the Sports Leadership Institute at Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y. The institute attempts to examine the positive role of sports in teaching life lessons.

How often he's asked about his college achievements: "I think mostly when I'm up around Syracuse is when I get it. I speak at a lot of different college campuses, so sometimes I'll come around people who still remember. Usually it's if I played against their alma mater or if they were coaching there. The other thing they remember is how we won our last game (a 32-31 victory over West Virginia) at the last second. What was interesting about our last game is we were 10-0 (beforehand), and we won it with literally no time on the clock. That was back when ESPN would only cover one Saturday night game, or maybe two games. ESPN switched over to our game with two minutes left, and what people remember is our last drive of that game."

Memories of his college career: "Going into that year, a lot of us were in our fifth year, and we always knew we were good. We had talent, but we'd never really put it together. There was an expectation that this was the best chance we had ? for those of us who were seniors ? to do something, whether it's winning a bowl game or winning the Big East.

"I think for any team, when you make it to week seven or week eight, you start looking at your remaining schedule. And you start thinking it's a rough road to make it, or that on paper we should win out. We looked at week seven or week eight and realized we had a couple of home games. And obviously the West Virginia game was our last game.

"That West Virginia game, in hindsight, was actually the worst game I played all year. I threw 11 interceptions all year. I threw seven in the previous games and four in that game. Going into the huddle (before the winning drive), I literally told the team that if this is going to happen, they were going to have to get it done because I'd let them down all day. That's what I said to them. Looking back on that game, there were so many guys stepping up with individual efforts. Everybody had their best drive of the day. I threw to Pat Kelly from maybe about 12 yards out for the touchdown, and we ran an option play that Michael Owens took in for two points.

“Tim Brown was the (Heisman) favorite in May. I remember seeing in May, or maybe July, a college preview where they were talking all about Tim Brown. It wasn’t until maybe week five, when we pretty much beat Penn State handily on national television and they were the defending national champions, that was the beginning of the Heisman talk. The way I described it was that on (the) Monday (before the announcement) I didn’t have a shot. By Tuesday, I was going to make a showing. By Wednesday it was going to be close. Thursday it was going to be very close. And on Friday, people were telling me I was going to win it. More people were looking at the numbers and statistics. More people analyzed the season, and it was obvious what we did at Syracuse was a little more impressive than what Notre Dame had done that year (Notre Dame went 8-4 that season). Personally, I thought Tim was going to win it, which is why I had a lot of fun at the announcement.

“We were definitely the underdogs (in the Sugar Bowl). That was the thing about the whole season. We always felt like underdogs. We had been just about .500 ? 6-5 and 6-5 ? the previous years. We never really saw ourselves as the type of dominant team that could run the table. One of the reasons for choosing the Sugar Bowl is we were playing what we felt was the best conference in football at that time in the Southeastern Conference. That’s a big reason why we chose the Sugar Bowl. We felt we’d get the best team we could get. When we look back on it, we’re still kind of numb about it. If we’d gotten our butts kicked, we’d think it was a great ride and reality hit on Jan. 1. But that wasn’t the case. We played what we considered to be one of the top teams in college football. When you play wire-to-wire, you want an answer one way or another.”

Pro career: The Philadelphia Eagles selected McPherson in the sixth round of the 1988 NFL Draft. He was traded to the Houston Oilers in 1990, then went back to Philadelphia the following season. He also spent four seasons in the Canadian Football League with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats (1991-93) and Ottawa Rough Riders (1994).

What he’s doing now: “I was doing this work back when I was at Syracuse. I started doing work with a group called Athletes Against Drunk Driving. I got involved in different kinds of social issues and prevention work, working with schools and young people about making good decisions about alcohol and drug use and those types of issues. I just continued to work in those kinds of programs. Even when I was an active player, I was involved in community work. It really chose me, so to speak.

“I’ve been speaking about those issues and have done a lot of work learning about those issues, researching those issues and developing plans that best use sport to address these issues. The purpose of creating the institute was not just to use sports to address those issues, but also to examine what’s going on with sports in our society. It’s a much different climate now than it was close to 20 years ago when I graduated from college. The notion back then was that athletes were role models, and that alone has changed dramatically. There are different challenges. Just going out and telling kids, ‘Don’t drink and drive,’ isn’t a message that holds a lot of water. There are so much more complex issues that kids are dealing with. We felt it necessary to establish an institute to examine those issues.”