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At Adelphi, he's Quarterback for a Wider Community

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As a Syracuse University student in the 1980s, Don McPherson had a hard time fitting in.

A star quarterback at West Hempstead High School, he suffered injuries at Syracuse that side-lined him for his first two years. When he started to play in his third year, he began to make an impact on the field. Yet that didn't help. The more successful he was as a player, the more attention he got on campus, but he didn't relish losing his anonymity.

"I was a little bit of a recluse and a loner," says McPherson. "I used to write letters to God: Why did you give me this ability? Why did you put me in this place? What am I supposed to do with this?"

One answer to the question came in 1987 when McPherson led Syracuse to an unbeaten season — his football skills enabled him to become a pro and earn a good deal of money.

But now he thinks he knows the real answer. "It makes the work I do now more impactful," says the 41-year-old director of the Sports Leadership Institute at Adelphi University. "That one year did so much to catapult the work that I'll do for the rest of my life."

When you sit down for a talk with McPherson you expect to hear stories of his exploits on the field, the adventures that fill his office with plaques and trophies — the Thorp Award, the Johnny Unitas Award, the Maxwell Award,

the Sugar Bowl MVP, the NCAA's statistical championship for passing efficiency.

You actually hear none of that, but rather learn about the journey of a man who has thought deeply and talked frankly about sports and race, sports and gender, and sports and life.

You also find out why one of his most prized possessions is a photo of himself with Gloria Steinem, the feminist and founder of Ms. Magazine.

McPherson is leading the 4-year-old institute at a time of change, when it's stepping up its fund-raising and launching new efforts, including a national conference on high school hazing, set for Friday at the Adelphi campus. It plans to use the conference as source material for a coaches academy aimed at helping high school coaches confront difficult issues.

To truly understand McPherson's role today, it's crucial to know his past. The son of a New York City police detective and a school nurse, McPherson grew up in Lakeview. With an older brother who became a college football star and an NFL player and another who was a professional boxer, McPherson developed his skills quietly in the shadow of his siblings.

His father, who would spend Fridays and Saturdays traveling to Don's brother Miles' football games at the University of New Haven, found out how good Don was by reading in Newsday that he had scored a couple of touchdowns in a high school game.

When college recruiters swarmed McPherson, he asked if their teams had ever had a black quarterback. "Some recruiters would respond very defensively, others would...start talking about me playing another position." But the Syracuse recruiters were candid.

Syracuse football had won only two games and lost nine the year before. "Their response was, if you can help us win, you will do what-ever you want to do," McPherson says.

The 1987 season made McPherson likely to be a sought-after player in the NFL draft. After all, he came in second in the Heisman Trophy voting. Yet in those days, when only a handful of NFL teams had black quarterbacks, McPherson wrote to every team asking that he not be drafted unless he could be a quarterback.

His attitude was "you want to find the best quarterback in college football. I'm the guy and I have the credentials to prove that ...you want a receiver, go find yourself a receiver."

People warned him that his insistence would cost him money. "I think had I not done that it would have cost me a lot more than money," he says.

McPherson was drafted in the sixth round, by the Philadelphia Eagles, and served as a backup quarterback for the Eagles and the Houston Oilers for 3 1/2 years before joining the Canadian Football League.

"If I was white and did what I did in 1987, I would have been a millionaire before the draft even

occurred — as was Troy Aikman the following year,” McPherson says.

McPherson remained outspoken on the issue during his seven years in the NFL and the Canadian Football League — and he thinks it hurt his football career. He soured on the game and found himself looking forward to off-field activities such as working with Long Island high school students on anti-drunken-driving programs.

In 1994, he retired from football and joined the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University in Boston, expecting to work on issues of race and sports. Instead, he gravitated to another issue: the way our culture's concept of masculinity breeds problems for student athletes, particularly off the field.

McPherson recalls that as an 8-year-old, he ran off the football field crying, afraid of playing with kids he didn't know. But as he gained confidence, he became a “tough player,” able to ignore physical and emotional injuries — a quality that served him in the game, but hurt him as a person. Now married and a father of two young girls, McPherson says it took many years of work to develop his sensitivity and empathy for other people.

He played for Buddy Ryan and other coaches who encouraged their players to swagger. Others, like his quarterback coach at Syracuse, Bill Maxwell, stressed a gentler approach.

McPherson thinks of the late Maxwell as “Mister Rogers with a whistle.”

He feels that coaches often don't realize that they are educators first, and that the example they set can be dangerous, particularly off the field. “If the coach is a mean, nasty guy,” he says, “the players who are mean and nasty have more of a presence.”

McPherson, who has traveled the country to speak on these issues, gives a lecture called “You Throw Like a Girl.” He finds that men of all backgrounds find that insult particularly cutting, and that it breeds a disrespect for women.

“As men who are leaders of young men and boys, and that includes coaches, we need to find a way to make our boys better without degrading women in the process,” he says.

His work landed him a seat in May as one of three men on the 13-person board of the Ms. Foundation for Women, which Steinem co-founded. The foundation's chief executive, Sara Gould, credits McPherson for “cutting-edge work with men to shift their perspectives away from stereotypical gender roles, and to end violence against women.” She adds, “He loves sports but he doesn't love what sports has become.”

The impact of the coach will be an issue at Friday's conference, which comes three years after three Mepham High School football players were sexually assaulted in a training camp hazing incident.

McPherson says the issue goes well beyond one incident, and that the hazing rituals “we're seeing nationally are becoming more dramatic, more violent.”

Coaches are typically hired to develop players and win games, but increasingly they have to be sensitive to the social issues that players bring with them into locker rooms.

Adelphi President Robert Scott, who was the celebrity auctioneer at a dinner that raised \$50,000 for the institute in June, says McPherson's program fits into the university's overall mission of preparing people to be leaders.

“It is natural for us to sponsor a program that combines leadership and ethics,” says Scott, who calls McPherson a “visionary and a great spokesman for the university.”

Someone in McPherson's position might look at the memorabilia in his office and think his glory years were behind him. But the life of Don McPherson shows there's always a new challenge coming around the corner — and it's a pretty safe bet that he'll have a thought-provoking take on what is to come.

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