

Don McPherson, modest as usual, will properly stroll with the giants tonight

by Bud Poliquin/The Post-Standard's sports columnist
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Syracuse, N.Y. -- Ah, yes. The life of a Hall of Famer. Bantering with the famous. Hobnobbing with the accomplished. Laughing with the elite. And everybody is so, so impressed.

Um . . .

"I went to the Sugar Bowl this year with my wife," Don McPherson recalled the other day. "And Vince Dooley came over, sat down with us and had a cup of coffee. Then, Jackie Sherrill came over, sat down with us and had a cup of coffee. Then, Johnny Majors came over, sat down with us and had a cup of coffee.

"Well, they're all telling their stories. About Mac. About Bear. About Paterno. About a lot of coaches and players. Me? I'm like a kid in a candy store, just listening. When they left, I looked at my wife and asked her, 'Do you have any idea that we were just talking with three of the best coaches in the history of college football?'"

Turns out that, no, Catherine McPherson didn't. Which isn't to suggest that she was unappreciative of the moment.

"She just kind of looked at me," said Don. "And it was, like, 'Yeah, well, the gumbo is nice.' Now you know why I haven't gotten too carried away with all of this."

Modest? Suggest to Don McPherson, the once-wondrous quarterback at Syracuse University, that he was the straw that stirred the Orange drink back in 1987 when SU went 11-0-1 and finished No. 4 in the nation . . . and he'll shake his head and tell you he might have been the coaster.

His opinion, though, doesn't matter. Of more relevance is what those who vote folks into the College Football Hall of Fame think. And they've determined that McPherson, now 44 and forever noble, is worthy of a kind of immortality. Thus, he'll be enshrined this evening in South Bend, Ind., where he will be judged (properly) by the company he'll keep.

Troy Aikman. Thurman Thomas. Roger Brown. Randall McDaniel. Rod Smith. Wilber Marshall. Sam Mills. Lou Holtz. They, and a dozen others, will join McPherson -- in body or spirit -- on that Indiana stage, and they'll hear the applause one more time.

None, of course, will deserve the huzzahs more than McPherson, who won the Maxwell Award (outstanding player), the Davey O'Brien Award (outstanding quarterback) and the Johnny Unitas Golden Arm Award (outstanding quarterback) -- and finished second in the Heisman Trophy balloting behind Notre Dame's Tim Brown -- back in '87.

And who around these parts would disagree? McPherson, remember, lost only two of his last 19 starts with the Orange. And despite the 22 school records he set along the way and the ink purchased by the barrel that was used to chronicle his exploits, never did he act like the eel who believed he was a whale.

“With all of this Hall of Fame stuff, I’ve watched a lot of videos from 1987,” said McPherson, who continues to salute his teammates all these years after playing with them. “And the more I watched them the more I realized how good we were. I mean, we were really, really good. I’m looking at our defense and we were really, really good. We were good all over. We were solid at every position.”

And the quarterback?

“There was Coach Mac who was having the dream season and everybody loved him,” said McPherson. “There was the Penn State game. There was the West Virginia game. Here was the Beast of the East, Syracuse, back where it had been for so many years and people were talking. And I was a black quarterback the same year that Doug Williams won the Super Bowl.

“The point is, there were a lot of things that happened that season -- all these watershed moments for us -- that made people take notice of me. It added to the presence. And that had a lot to do with me being in the Hall of Fame.”

Get the picture here? Cats will wag their tails before Don McPherson will boast about himself. But that doesn’t mean others have not been taking notes.

For example, while this starry class will be “enshrined” in the College Football Hall of Fame tonight in South Bend, it was “inducted” into the sacred thing back in December at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City. And at that gala black-tie event, one person -- just one -- was selected to speak for all 21.

Yep. Don McPherson.

“I think Aikman was the first guy they picked, but he doesn’t like to talk, I guess,” said McPherson, typically. “I think none of the other guys wanted to do it. So, they went with me.”

They chose wisely . . . and Don was aglow.

“I’d been in that room a few times before, but on that night it never looked better,” he said. “It was majestic and the night was magical. It was so cool to be in that room with the royalty of the game. All of the people I’d been a fan of as a kid and as an adult were there. It was a thrill to stand before them and talk about the parts of the game I love.”

This evening, McPherson will get another chance to bask. But you can be sure that the man’s hat size will not be affected. The bantering, the hobnobbing, the laughing . . . it only goes so far.

“I had a guy come up to me the other day,” Don recalled, “and he said, ‘I heard you played football. Were you any good?’ I told him I was all right.”

If there’d been any gumbo, McPherson would have offered it.