

By Scott Kindberg
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Caulcrick Has Never Forgotten Where He Came From

When the Clymer Pirates take the court for the Cassadaga Valley holiday basketball tournament Friday night, Howard McMullin will be on the bench, offering his support to head coach, Irv King.

It won't be hard to pick McMullin out.

He'll be the one wearing the green sweatshirt over the maroon turtleneck.

"It will be some Michigan State and a little Clymer, too," the retired physical education teacher said. "I'm not superstitious, but I don't take any chances."

For while he'll be in Sinclairville physically, McMullin can be excused if his mind will wonder a bit as he thinks about what's going on simultaneously in Orlando, Fla.

That's where former Clymer football star Jehuu Caulcrick and the rest of the Michigan State Spartans will meet No. 14 Boston College in the Champs Sports Bowl (ESPN, 5 p.m. Friday.)

"I would have loved to go down there," McMullin said.

Under different circumstances, he might have. But the Christmas holidays and the arrival of his children and grandchildren made the decision an easy one.

For McMullin, family comes first.

Of course, one could make the argument that Caulcrick is a member of his old coach's extended family.

For not only did McMullin coach Caulcrick for four years that ended up in four Section 6 high school championships (1999-2002), but he also developed a relationship with a young man that goes beyond the white lines.

So far this year, McMullin has traveled to Iowa City, Iowa; Madison, Wis.; West Lafayette, Ind.; and three times to East Lansing, Mich.; to root Caulcrick on.

"Watching Jehuu, I just felt so good for him," McMullin said, "and I felt really happy that I had the opportunity to coach him."

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When the Spartans take the field Friday night, they'll be playing in their first postseason game since the Alamo Bowl in 2003. Caulcrick was in San Antonio, Texas, that year, but watched from the sideline because it was his red-shirt season.

He won't be a bystander on Friday.

"It's going to be very special to me," Caulcrick said last week by telephone. "I'm finally going to be able to play in a bowl game after sitting home the last three years and watching it on TV."

And don't be surprised to see the 6-foot, 255 pound running back get plenty of air time, particularly when the Spartans get close to the goal line. In his final season at Michigan State, Caulcrick has carried 207 times for 813 yards and school-record 21 touchdowns in 12 games, which has him tied for sixth in Division I-A with 10.5 points per contest.

Arguably his best game came in the Spartans' regular-season finale Nov. 17 against Penn State in East Lansing. In that game, Caulcrick kept the winning drive alive by running for a first down on a fake punt, then scored from the 1 with four minutes left to give his team a 35-31 win over the Nittany Lions. The victory, which came after the Spartans trailed 24-7 early in the second half, assured Michigan State (7-5) of a bowl berth and allowed Caulcrick to finish out his extremely productive career in style.

Among those leading the cheers was McMullin.

"I got the best of both worlds," he said. "To have him have that kind of game, what else can you ask for? To me, it was a great ending, so (the bowl game) is icing on the cake. That game (against Penn State) will always be in my memory. I think how fortunate it was for me to be there and for them to come from 17 points down and Jehuu be a vital part of it"

Caulcrick's personal story is well known. He miraculously survived a civil war in Liberia, West Africa as a little boy and ultimately fled his homeland with his mother and sister when they ended up in Findley Lake.

Caulcrick was in the third grade.

"Who moves to Clymer? McMullin asked rhetorically, "How does Clymer and how do I get blessed like that? And, at the time he came along, we had some athletes to help. I don't know about you, but I didn't think Clymer would go

any place because we are so small."

Well, guess what?

The Pirates were everywhere.

To Ralph Wilson Stadium, the Buffalo Bills' home in Orchard Park, to Fauver Stadium in Rochester and to the Carrier Dome in Syracuse.

Suddenly, Clymer was on the map, too.

And Caulcrick was in the Western New York high school record book, holding marks for career rushing yards (6,559) and career points (706). Not surprisingly, he was selected one of WNY's 50 greatest players this fall.

"Western New York is going to hold a special place in my heart," he said. "When I'm talking to coaches, I always pump up Western New York because it's a hidden gem."

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Caulcrick's story will be told and retold in coming months as he prepares for what is a likely an opportunity in the NFL.

After knocking heads with Boston College (10-3), The Atlantic Coast Conference runner-up on Friday, Caulcrick will spend a few days in Orlando interviewing prospective agents. Then he and some friends will take a trip to Las Vegas for "one last hurrah" before he flies to Hawaii for the Hula Bowl which will be played Jan. 12 in Honolulu.

"Wow, the next month is going to be kind of hectic," he said. "I'll be living out of my suitcase. It's an exciting time and it's also very stressful in a way, but it's good stress.

Once he's selected an agent, he'll go into seclusion and just train.

"Whatever happens, happens, " he said. "Hopefully, I'm somewhere (on a NFL roster) come August."

If not, he'll have something to fall back on, as he graduated on Dec. 8 with a sociology degree.

"It was fantastic," said McMullin, who watched Caulcrick receive his diploma in person, "because he and I have talked about how football will be taken from you. I told him that you won't be a football player all your life, but they can't take that degree from you. That will be there forever."

So too, will be the special relationship Caulcrick has with the greater Clymer community.

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The victory over Penn State still fresh, The Michigan State fans from Chautauqua County boarded a chartered bus outside the Spartan Stadium.

But there wasn't a rush to get on the road.

Caulcrick had something to tell them anyway.

"It was just special for me that they could take the time out of their schedules to come and see me play my last game," he said. "I just appreciate the support I received in high school and in college. I just want to thank them."

McMullin received a personal thank you from Caulcrick in a different way just before Michigan State's season started. It came in the form of a letter.

"All the players had to write a letter to someone important in their lives," McMullin said. "He sent me the nicest note."

The letter and the photograph of Caulcrick that accompanied it have been tucked away in a safe place in McMullin's home. Just as important, McMullin said, was what he told his busload of fans following the win over Penn State.

"I told him, "If you never play another down of football, I'll be proud to know you just because of the person you are," McMullin said. "I've been blessed."