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McCusker Took Up ‘Bowling’ At Pitt

When Jim McCusker accepted a football scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh in 1953, he made the choice because of the institution’s engineering department. Playing in a bowl game was probably the furthest thing from the Jamestown High School graduate’s mind because Pitt hadn’t played in one since 1937. However, McCusker ended “bowling” twice in one year while playing for the Panthers.

The bowl appearance that ended that drought was when Pitt played Georgia Tech in the Sugar Bowl on New Year’s Day of 1956. The last time the Panthers played in the postseason was 19 years earlier when they defeated Washington in the Rose Bowl to win the National Championship.

The Sugar Bowl following in 1955 regular season is fresh in the McCusker’s mind because the members of that team were honored at last Saturday’s Pitt game against Penn State at Three Rivers Stadium. McCusker was one of about 25 players from the roster of 42 or 43 Panthers who made the trip to New Orleans for Jan. 1, 1956 game against Georgia Tech.

“The reason we went to the Sugar Bowl was we went out and played Penn State at Penn State and beat them 22-7 and they were a very heavy favorite” recalled McCusker, who owns The Pub restaurant in Jamestown. “They had Lenny Moore, they had Rosey Grier and they definitely were supposed to be the Sugar Bowl pick. And we just beat them, beat them bad, and now we got picked to go to the Sugar Bowl.

And after nearly 20 years without a bowl trip, the fans were ready.

“Everybody from the school came, too.” McCusker said. They had trainload after trainload.”

There was another first involved in that bowl game other than the Panthers’ final postseason appearance in 19 years. The Pitt fullback, Bobby Grier, was black and that did not please Georgia Governor Marvin Griffin, who said if Grier played in the Sugar Bowl, Georgia Tech shouldn’t.

The Georgia Tech students didn’t agree and staged a three-hour demonstration on campus. Then hundreds marched on the state Capitol and eventually occupied the building.

Three days later the Board of Regents permitted Georgia Tech to play, but confirmed its opposition to "contests within the state in which races are mixed."

McCusker recalled, "That's the way it was understood still in the South before any of the so-called changes. You still walked into the airport and you had the colored restroom and the regular restroom, white restroom."

But the team had no problems because McCusker noted, "New Orleans is a very liberal town."

Grier was able to room and eat with the team as it prepared for the Sugar Bowl, which Pitt ended up losing 6-0 on a Georgia Tech touchdown late in the first quarter. A pass was over a Georgia Tech receiver's hands in the end zone, but an official ruled a Pitt player, who had fallen to the ground had interfered on the play. After the penalty, the ball was placed at the 1-yard line Georgia Tech scored.

Oh, who was the Pitt player called for the penalty? Grier.

When he was a junior, McCusker went to another bowl game in December of that year – the 1956 Gator Bowl. Pitt took on Georgia Tech again and lost again 21-14.

The 1957 season, McCusker's senior year, the Panthers fell to 4-6 and that was the start of another bowl draught for Pitt.

"We had a sophomore quarterback and we lost a lot of personnel," McCusker said.

But the 1955 and 1956 seasons were ones to remember.

"We were a tremendous defensive team," McCusker said. "If we scored 21 points in a game, that was big. We'd score 14 and we'd win."

Meanwhile, the opposition's offense was usually grounded. In 1955, Pitt held Jim Brown of Syracuse to 28 yards on 12 carries and Moore of Penn State to 10 yards on 13 carries. In 1956, Brown gained only 52 yards against the Panthers while Notre Dame's Paul Horning collected 59.

The Panthers' success against Brown was what stands out for McCusker.

"It was just the fact that we keyed on him and went at him as a team," he said was the strategy. "He hardly got out of the backfield. He never even got to the line in most cases."

Syracuse coach Ben Schwartzwalder had said, "The best way to play that McCusker is to stay away from him."

The success was attributed to Pitt's defensive front, which Myron Coe of the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* name the Five Jumbos. McCusker was reportedly the heaviest of the Five Jumbos at 245 pounds.

"I played at 265!" McCusker said with a laugh. "I went to college at 245! You see all those weights are lies. And they're lies in the pros."

While McCusker was a three-time Associated Press All-American as an offensive tackle at Pitt, the Panthers played one of the toughest schedulers in the nation because they weren't in a conference.

"The fact that you're an independent, by the end of my four years, I had been throughout the whole country", he said." I had been everywhere. From Oregon to California. You name it, I'd seen the whole country which is not what most 22-year olds could say,"

And that included extended stays on the West Coast.

"We'd stay on the west Coast for three weeks," McCusker said. "We'd play like Oregon and we'd come down to San Francisco and play California and then we'd go down and play either Southern Cal or UCLA."

And what about the classes they missed?

"We'd have a couple of professors with us so we could go over the stuff because it would a three-week ordeal," McCusker said.

After being drafted by the Chicago Cardinals in 1957, McCusker was traded just before the start of the 1959 season to the Philadelphia Eagles where he played in the 1960 NFL championship game and helped defeat the Green Bay Packers. He then joined the Cleveland Browns in 1963 and finished his career there. But he still has a soft spot in his heart for Pittsburgh.

"It's a tremendous city" he said. "I love the city."

And he loved the Pittsburgh campus in the Oakland section of the city. Unfortunately, when he was honored with the remainder of the 1956 Sugar Bowl team last Saturday, it wasn't at the Pitt Stadium, which has been demolished and soon the Panthers will join the Steelers in a new stadium downtown.

"If I had to be honest about it, it's too bad the stadium isn't up at Oakland," McCusker said. "You can't beat a campus atmosphere."

He added, "You know what was so great about the old Pitt Stadium was the fact that it had that wall and the big track around there. You were never bothered at all by the fans. You so some places like Notre Dame or the Big Ten schools where those stadiums are huge, 110,000, but they're right on top of you."

From 1955 to 1957 at Pitt Stadium, McCusker was right on a top of opposing rushers. Just ask Jim Brown.