Goal-Oriented

Football player John McCluskey ’66 first put things into perspective during his senior year. “My mind was beginning to drift a bit,” he says about the fall of 1965. “I mean, football was important, but I’d pick up the newspaper and read about what was happening with [Martin Luther] King in the South. I would read about the marchers, and I began to ask questions of myself. It wasn’t that what I was doing wasn’t worth doing, but I realized there were more important things in the world. I also began to write.”

In 1964, he had become the first African-American starting varsity quarterback in Ivy League history. He knew he was a trailblazer, but didn’t give it too much thought. “It never really came up on the field,” he says. “I didn’t feel the pressure racially. I just felt the pressure in terms of my performance.”

Forty years later, McCluskey is a professor of African-American and African diaspora studies at Indiana University and an author who looks back on his gridiron accomplishments with mixed feelings. Although he’s proud of what he achieved, many of his closest friends at IU weren’t aware of his role as a sports pioneer until the Indiana Daily Student ran an article about him last May. “No matter how good my career was,” he says now, “I just wanted to move on.” But he also acknowledges, “The game was wonderful to me. I learned a lot about myself and about discipline. It taught me to prepare, it taught me to be as open and flexible as folklore, I want to be funny and I want to be as open and flexible as folklore. I want to be as free as jazz is. If Mingus and Miles and Coltrane can do it, I can do it, too.”

In time, McCluskey earned an M.F.A. in English and creative writing from Stanford; he arrived at Indiana in 1977. Academic and administrative duties—he has chaired his department and served as associate dean of the graduate school and on the last presidential search committee—have shortchanged his own writing, but he has edited several anthologies and had two novels, Look What They Done to My Song and Mr. America’s Last Season Blues, and numerous short stories published. “I’m still experimenting,” he says. “I’m exploring physical setting and geographical setting, but I tend to write things out of rural Georgia, where both sides of my family are from.” He’s just completed “a very strange novel that’s both realistic and surrealistic. I want to keep the real, what some might call the realistic, but I also want to keep it open to the surreal. I want to be as open and flexible as folklore, I want to be as free as jazz is. If Mingus and Miles and Coltrane can do it, I can do it, too.”

Four decades after he made history for the Crimson, McCluskey says he hopes that “in some small way I contributed to further racial equality.” He felt that if I could perform athletically and academically, I might be a model for somebody.” (And for the record, as a member of the freshman, junior varsity, and varsity teams, he was 4-0 against Yale.) ~Ryan Whirty


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