On Campus

First Class of Lions Stars Inducted into Hall of Fame

Spring 2006

Baseball fans on Morningside Heights might have guessed that they were watching a future legend when in 1922 Lions pitcher Lou Gehrig launched a 450-foot home run onto the steps of Low Library from the old South Field at 114th Street. And sprinter Ben Johnson certainly made a name for himself as a Columbia senior when in 1938 he broke the world record for the 60-yard dash twice in one night at Madison Square Garden — only to have his best time nullified by judges who thought it implausibly fast.

But perhaps no moment in Columbia sports history was more electrifying than when, on an October afternoon in 1947, with the Lions football team trailing an Army squad unbeaten in 32 straight games, lumbering wide receiver Bill Swiacki went completely horizontal late in the fourth quarter to lift off the grass tips an impossibly low pass, setting up Columbia's winning touchdown. About 30,000 fans witnessed the miracle catch at Baker Field, and it's been said that five times that number claimed they saw it.

The late Swiacki '48BUS, who went on to a respectable if brief NFL career with the New York Giants and Detroit Lions, recently joined Gehrig, Johnson '38CC, and two dozen other former student athletes as an inaugural inductee to the Columbia Athletics Hall of Fame. Their company includes Sid Luckman '38CC, the Chicago Bears quarterback credited with modernizing pro football's passing attack, Eddie Collins 1907CC, considered by many sportswriters the best second baseman in history, and Cristina Teuscher 2000CC, an Olympian gold medalist swimmer who never lost an individual race in college and as a senior was voted by the NCAA the best female student athlete in the nation.

Alongside 27 individual athletes in the Hall are the entire 1967–68 Ivy League champion men's basketball team, which ranked sixth nationally; Lou Little, football

head coach from 1930 to 1956; and Connie S. Maniatty ’43CC, a former University trustee and longtime supporter of Columbia athletics. Other recent student athletes inducted include Ula Lysniak ’87BC, who became the first Columbia woman to play pro basketball; Marcellus Wiley ’97CC, an All-Pro defensive end who has played nine seasons in the NFL, last year for the Jacksonville Jaguars; and Elizabeth “Tosh” Forde ’99CC, who holds several Columbia scoring records in women’s soccer.

“The history of the Columbia athletics program has included some of the best and brightest in the world,” says M. Dianne Murphy, the director of intercollegiate athletics and physical education at Columbia. “We are proud to honor the heritage of the great men and women who have competed wearing the Columbia blue and white, and who have made significant contributions to the University.”

Columbia has fielded intercollegiate sports teams since the mid-1800s, with some records indicating that the first competition was a rowing race in 1852. Aside from Eddie Collins, the Hall of Fame looks furthest back to Nat Pendleton ’15CC, a wrestling champ who went on to a successful film career, often portraying an amiable oaf next to such stars as the Marx Brothers and Abbott and Costello.

The Hall of Famers were selected by the Columbia University Varsity C Letterwinners Club from among more than 200 nominees submitted by the public last year. They were honored before a crowd of 400 at Low Library on February 18.All 17 living individual inductees attended, along with 12 members of the 1967–68 men’s basketball team.

Guide to school abbreviations

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Columbia Magazine