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CU coach McCartney reflects on career, late wife

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College Football

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WESTMINSTER, Colo. — The day former Colorado coach Bill McCartney found out he was elected into the College Football Hall of Fame should've been one of the happiest moments of his life, the crowning achievement in a career that included a national title.

And it was, too.

Only, someone was missing, someone who should've been there to celebrate with him. Lyndi McCartney, his wife of 50 years, died of emphysema just weeks before he learned of his induction.

This was the person McCartney sought out in the stands after each game — to revel with when they won, to seek comfort with when they lost. She was his muse, his good luck charm during a 13-year-career in Boulder in which he went 93-55-5 and won a share of the 1990 national crown.

"I still reach for her at night," said the 72-year-old McCartney, whose wife died on March 21. "She was precious in every way."

He will take her memory with him when he's inducted into the Hall on Dec. 10 in New York City.

"She deserves that," he said. "She made so many sacrifices so that I could coach. That's why I want to celebrate this award with her."

McCartney didn't coach all that long (he got out early to spend more time with his wife). But his coaching impact was still immense as he led Colorado to prominence on the field. During a six-year span in the late '80s and early '90s, his teams were on pretty much equal footing with Miami, Florida State, Nebraska and Alabama — the powers at that time.

Even more, he groomed the next wave of coaches, mentoring the likes of Gary Barnett, Gerry DiNardo, Les Miles, Rick Neuheisel and Jim Caldwell.

"When I was 7 years old, I wanted to be a coach," said McCartney, who will be the seventh CU member in the Hall. "Most kids at that age, they want to be president or governor, they don't want to be a coach. Coming up through the ranks, I was always on

a collision course with coaching."

Through the journey, his wife was right there. That's why making the Hall is so special, and so emotional to accept without her.

"Coaching is intoxicating," McCartney said. "But for a wife, it's a whole new experience, because that's your budget running up and down the field. She loved it, though."

McCartney went to the University of Missouri on a football scholarship, playing center and linebacker for the Tigers. It was there, in Columbia, Mo., that he met Lynne "Lyndi" Taussig.

So confident on the field, Bill McCartney suddenly turned shy after spotting her in a bar, before finally working up the courage to ask her out.

"She had striking good looks. I was goofy looking," McCartney recalled. "It was hard for me to believe I could get her attention. I fell in love fast, too."

Less than a year later, they were married. A short time after that, McCartney landed his first coaching assignment as an assistant at a high school in Joplin, Mo.

It wasn't long until he had a head coaching job of his own, taking over the basketball and football programs at a high school in Dearborn, Mich. His teams were good, too, each capturing the state title in 1973.

He caught the eye of Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler, who wanted McCartney to join his football staff at Michigan.

He also caught the attention of Johnny Orr, who urged him to join his basketball staff with the Wolverines.

The hardwood or the gridiron?

Follow his heart — that was her advice.

And so he stepped into the world of college football.

He learned under Schembechler for nearly eight seasons, until an opportunity came up to guide his own team. When the late Chuck Fairbanks stepped aside at CU to become involved with the New Jersey Generals in the upstart United States Football League, McCartney asked Schembechler if the Hall of Fame coach would put a good word in for him.

He did.

And of course the backing of Schembechler carried a lot of weight, with then-athletic director Eddie Crowder giving McCartney the position.

McCartney started slow — winning seven games in his first three seasons — but he quickly got things headed in the right direction.

The Buffs capped off the 1990 season with a 10-9 victory over Notre Dame in the Orange Bowl and the school's only national title.

The first person he located in the stands that night? Hardly a surprise.

"Searched her out after EVERY win," he said. "We were bonded, our hearts were knitted together."

His last season with CU was 1994, when he went 11-1 with a team that included Kordell Stewart, Michael Westbrook and Heisman Trophy winner Rashaan Salaam.

After that, McCartney decided to switch priorities.

"The reason I got out of coaching was to make sure that I was a good husband," he said. "I realize that's unusual. I don't regret getting out, because now that she's gone ... "

His words trailed off.

"... She was more important than coaching," he continued.

After stepping aside, he and his wife did some traveling. He also got more involved in a ministry he helped start called "Promise Keepers," one of the fastest-growing Christian organizations in the late '90s.

Oh, and he also slipped in some coaching since his son, Tom, is a longtime high school coach in Boulder.

"I'm still coaching. I just don't have a team," said McCartney, who has four kids and 10 grandchildren, including two involved with the CU football program. "You never stop being a coach."

Or a husband.

"No one has ever explained to me how to let go of her, and I'm not sure it would help even if they did," McCartney said. "I loved her with all my heart."

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