

Coach Shared His Love Of Sports, Jazz

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Chester H. McPhee was a coach and mentor whose second act as a radio host brought him fans among the music lovers around Hartford. He was probably one of the few college football coaches with a Ph.D.

McPhee, who was 83, died on Dec. 14 of a heart attack in the studio of WRTC 89.3 FM, the Trinity College station where he was about to begin his weekly jazz show. He lived in Newington.

McPhee grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, where his father was the coach at the local high school. He played halfback for his father, learned to play the saxophone and won an academic scholarship to Oberlin College, where he played three sports.

After graduating in 1951, he was drafted, but the Army considered his musical ability when assigning him, so he spent his two-year enlistment playing sax in the army band in Korea.

After he was discharged, he taught and coached at an Ohio high school, and enrolled at Ohio State to study education. To support himself and Jane Deschaux, his new wife, he worked in the athletic department and started a lacrosse program.

A friend who was interviewing for a Trinity College athletic position suggested that McPhee might be a perfect fit as freshman football coach, and McPhee got the job in 1957. He also started the men's lacrosse program and coached men's varsity swimming, and after Trinity school became co-ed in 1969, he started the women's swim and diving teams. He was an assistant coach for women's soccer and men's and women's track and field teams.

He retired in 1994, after coaching and mentoring thousands of young athletes.

"It was never about the W," said Bob Parzych, who played on McPhee's freshman team and then helped McPhee coach when he was an upperclassman. "It was more



McPhee

about being a team player."

"Everyone loved him," Parzych said. "He was one of those people, if you talked to him, it was always about you."

An advocate of lifelong learning, McPhee spent a sabbatical year at Ohio State earning the credits for his

doctorate, and then wrote his dissertation on kinesiology, the scientific study of body movement, after he returned to Hartford. He was awarded the degree in 1968 — but never wanted to be known as "doctor," or even "coach." He preferred to be known simply as Chet.

"He was very learned," Parzych said.

As coach, McPhee gave his players a lot of independence.

"He would give them the fundamentals, but he would let them make the decisions: 'You're the quarterback; you make the call.' He put it on their shoulders," said Parzych.

He also expected his students to study. "Sports was part of the program, but not the program," Parzych said.

Central Connecticut State University offered McPhee a job teaching philosophy at the midpoint of his career, but McPhee turned it down. "When would I coach or teach PE?" he asked. "This isn't for me."

Trinity named the scoreboard in its swimming area for McPhee.

McPhee had a folksy quality about him that he displayed on the field and on the radio station.

"He was a master of the long joke. You knew what was going to happen, but you didn't walk away," said Parzych, now the jazz and sports director of WRTC.

Parzych introduced McPhee to the Trinity radio station, and McPhee began with "Chet's Corner," a half-hour of jazz, on

Mondays in the late 1970s. Then he began doing a three-hour jazz show, "Sunrise Serenade," on Fridays and also hosted a classical music show on alternate weekends, "Sunday Concert."

"Chet's delivery was very much like Bob Steele's," said Parzych. "A very home-grown, hambone sense of humor," all delivered in McPhee's Midwestern accent that turned "Ohio" into "Ahaya."

Most shows on the station are broadcast live, and few people knew that McPhee pre-recorded his. He had macular degeneration that hampered his vision, making it hard for him to find albums quickly, or find the precise track. As a result, he spent hours at home preparing his shows, which were on the air for 18 years.

In a blog after McPhee died, former Courant TV critic Roger Catlin, who at one time hosted a program on the Trinity station, wrote:

"He had a patter that was so familiar. ... 'Oooh kay,' he'd say at the end of a track. 'And now, here's ...' He gave the listeners what they wanted, with lots of details about players, track names and albums. When it came time to raise money, his listeners called in so fervently he had to have a staff of people answering phones."

Although he spent 40 years as a coach, McPhee freely admitted that he preferred playing music.

"He was a musician at heart," said his son, Jeff, quoting his dad as saying, "I only became a coach to pay the bills."

Over the years McPhee played in various combos, but his steadiest gig was at the Mill on the River restaurant in South Windsor, where he and keyboardist John Daniels played frequently. The jobs stopped once the owner learned that playing live music during dinner triggered the payment of a state cabaret tax, and said he could not afford that.

McPhee also played the acoustic and electric bass in jazz combos at private parties and weddings.

Toward the end of his career, talk emerged that the athletic director at Trinity was planning to retire and that McPhee was being groomed for the job. But he turned it down, saying that despite the higher pay and greater prestige, he preferred the daily contact with students that he enjoyed as coach.

"He wanted to work with kids," said his son. "He loved what he did. Money wasn't the object."

"He had a way of motivating people," said Chris Cowles, a financial adviser who also hosts a radio program at WRTC. Sometimes that motivation came through humor or sarcasm, "but never in a negative way."

McPhee's influence extended far beyond the football field. He became a father figure to many boys, such as Jim Balesano, who had no father. McPhee was his freshman adviser and later became a close friend.

"He gave me advice that was spot-on," Balesano said. "Remember: Be interested in people. Be interesting to people [and they] will gravitate to you."

McPhee also divided the world into two types: People who do, and people who are. "Make sure you make the choice and want to do something," he would say.

McPhee's wife, a former teacher, died in 2009. Besides Jeff, he is survived by another son, Douglas, and three grandchildren.

When conservative columnist George Will was a student at Trinity in the late 1950s, he worked in the college's sports information office and got to know McPhee. After McPhee's death, he wrote:

"Chet McPhee knew what too few in college athletics seem to understand — that sport not only builds character, it reveals character. ... It was said by Henry Adams that a good teacher attains a kind of immortality because his or her influence radiates into an unconfined future. No one understands that better than those Bantams who had the privilege and pleasure of coming under Coach McPhee's influence."