

Cardinal Newman Teacher Keith Dorney Entering College Football Hall of Fame

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As a high school senior in tiny Macungie, Pennsylvania, Keith Dorney was tossing around offers to play small-college basketball when a life-altering incident occurred.

"I came home from basketball practice one day, went into the kitchen to get a soda, and when I got to the living room there was Joe Paterno sitting down drinking a scotch with my dad," Dorney said.

The renowned Penn State coach recruited him to play football, and Dorney became a two-time first-team All-American, played in a national championship game, was a first-round NFL draft

pick, played nine seasons at right tackle for the Detroit Lions and earned All-NFC and Pro Bowl distinctions.

On December 6th, 26 years after graduating from Penn State, Dorney received an ultimate honor in a ceremony at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York: He was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame.

"Football still flashes into my head even though I've tried to distance myself from the game," said Dorney, 48. "This year with the Hall of Fame festivities it has come roaring back, and I think of the athlete I once was and never will be again."

Dorney retired from professional football in 1988 and worked briefly as a sports agent before settling down 12 years ago with his wife and young children on a 13-acre farm between Sebastopol and Bloomfield. He now teaches English at Cardinal Newman High School, where he is the football team's offensive line coach.

"I loved the incredible mercurial highs, but the counterpart to that is the incredible sorrow and lows," Dorney said. "You don't get that disparity in everyday life. You don't get it as a coach, either. I could see it in my boys' eyes when they won the (North Coast Section championship) this year. I was very jealous."

Dorney attributes his success to a work ethic instilled by his father.

"My dad was the most non-athletic person," he said. "If I wanted to throw a ball around, I'd rather go get my mom. But he worked his rear end off. I learned if you want to achieve, just work 10 hours longer than the other guy."

Dorney's high school career began inauspiciously, when, as a gangly 6-foot-5, 160-pound sophomore basketball player, he was persuaded by Emmaus High School coach Fritz Halfacre to try football. He began as a defensive end, with little success.

"I was having all kinds of trouble," he said. "These guys with beards were rolling me over. Finally in a game against Parkland High School in Orfield I just made up my mind that wasn't going to happen any more. I just kind of got it -- getting lower, ripping people, flowing to the ball. It was a turning point for me."

He soon began a rigorous off-season conditioning program that he continued throughout his collegiate and professional careers.

"I started running up the Macungie mountain to the watershed area, a mile-and-a-half straight up," he said. "That led to going to the basement of the Allentown YMCA and hooking up with some real weightheads. Weight training was just coming on then."

By his senior year, Dorney was up to 220 pounds. He reached 275 at Penn State, and during his last two seasons with Detroit he tipped the scales at 300 pounds.

"Between my sophomore and junior year in college, I worked at Joe Namath's football camp in Massachusetts," he said. "A lot of old Raiders and old Jets would stop by. We had this donut-eating contest at a Dunkin' Donuts, and I won the contest by eating 50 donuts. That's when I first eclipsed the 270 mark."

Even at 300 pounds, however, he considered himself slim by today's standards.

"These guys now are so big they can't move effectively," he said. "We ran a play at Detroit with Billy Sims called Flow-38, where we'd pull both guards and the onside tackle and attack the perimeter. I haven't seen a play like that in the NFL in the last five years."

Dorney offered candid opinions on a variety of topics:

Dirtiest player -- "In Cleveland, a preseason game my rookie year, Lyle Alzado was playing defensive end late in the game and I was

trying real hard, and he didn't appreciate that. He bit me in the leg."

Favorite place to play -- "Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis. My fondest memories were in those conditions -- minus-2 with a wind chill of minus-20. That's football weather, baby!"

Recommendations for young athletes -- "The parents are the problem. My dad put no pressure on me whatsoever. The kids need to have fun in high school with less emphasis on what happens later."

How the NFL is different now -- "The money. We went on strike twice for what has been achieved, which is free agency. I never benefited from it myself."

Strangest game -- "We played the Vikings one time where both team benches were on the same sideline. It was the only time I've ever seen that. Sure enough, a huge donnybrook started."

Toughest moments -- "Eddie Murray missed a field goal against the 49ers in 1983 that

would have put us in the NFC championship game. On the plane ride home, he's lying across three seats, snoring like nothing happened.

"In the Sugar Bowl in 1978, for the national championship, Alabama stopped us on the 1-inch line. That play made the cover of Sports Illustrated. The guy that made the hit is writing a book about that one hit."

Dorney has written a book of his own. "Black and Honolulu Blue," published in 2003, is a behind-the-scenes look at the NFL. And he is putting the finishing touches on "F.O.O.L.'s Paradise," a novel spanning one week in the life of a pro football team.

He will be honored with the other 2005 Hall of Fame inductees at the Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 2, when Ohio State meets Notre Dame. It is a moment he can savor, unlike his Emmaus High School "senior night" long ago, when he and the other senior football players were introduced in a ceremony before their final home game.

"A Newman parent asked me recently if I remembered my senior night, and I said 'no,'" Dorney said. "I don't remember it. It meant nothing to me. I had something to do that day."

-by Ted Gross

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