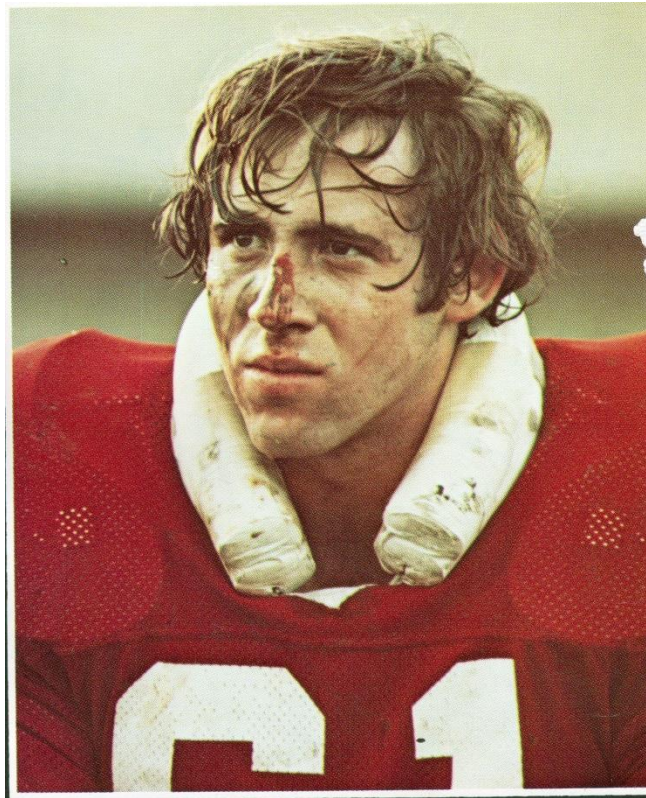


Going to the Edge

One athlete's journey from the locker room to the board room



By **RUSS COOKE**

with **JIM FLOYD**

FORWARD:**Dick McPherson**

I first met Russ Cooke late in the summer of 1973. He had just arrived on the campus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where I was the head football coach. Like many of the non-scholarship student-athletes we attracted to what was then a modestly successful Division 2 school playing in a mid-level Yankee Conference, he'd seen little to no recruitment as a high school player, but had achieved a modest level of success playing offensive tackle during a post-graduate year at Tabor Academy, one of those private prep schools that seemingly dot the New England landscape.

The previous fall, my late great Assistant Coach Bill Maxwell, during one of his marathon area scouting trips, had driven down to Tabor one afternoon to look at Russ and a couple of other potential players, and had returned with high praise for the young man. Bill reported that Russ possessed a nice combination of size, speed and dexterity. But what had mainly stuck out for him were the intangibles...that Russ possessed a palpable eagerness to learn, a demonstrated willingness to work hard, and the natural gift of leadership. That he hadn't stood out his senior year at Greenwich High School in Connecticut and had instead blossomed later was very likely why he had slipped through the recruiting net that is Division 1 football. But that combined with Bill's assessment of his character made him the kind of player we sought to attract to UMass as we aimed to build on our recent winning ways.

With players like Russ back in those days, we did not sugarcoat things. UMass was D2. Among other things, that meant we were limited in terms of scholarship money. In many instances, we recruited players who were willing to come to campus and earn a spot on the team before we'd commit to covering any tuition. And that's what Russ was told...show up, work hard, and find ways to contribute. And if he won a starting spot, then and only then would we talk scholarship.

What I saw in Russ that summer, and in all the time I coached him, confirmed Bill's initial assessment. Here was a young man that was honest, energetic and

enjoyed learning and growing with his other teammates. His leadership extended beyond the playing field. And he was versatile, switching from a prep school offensive tackle to defensive end his freshman year before seeing an opening in our starting offensive line and switching positions again, moving back to offense as a starting varsity offensive guard by the end of spring workouts...the recipient of a full football scholarship beginning his sophomore year.

I remember Russ leaving the football office the day we told him he had earned both the starting spot and, in so doing, a scholarship. He all but burst through the door and lunged across the hallway to grab the receiver from the cradle of the pay phone that hung on the wall then. I think he may have been so excited that he misdialed the first time. But as the door swung shut, you could hear him stammering as he shared the news with his father, pride and joy oozing from every pore in his body.

Unfortunately, Russ suffered multiple concussions throughout his tenure at the UMass, in large measure because of his tenacious approach to the game. This was not only upsetting to him, but to his teammates as well, because he was a respected individual for the way he played his heart out each and every game.

Even injured and restricted from game play, Russ never gave up. In fact, most days he could be found in the weight room or out running, preparing his body for its next big chance. That somehow the Jets discovered him and signed him to a three-year contract to play yet another position, this time at outside linebacker, had to have been a dream-come-true for him. Yet it was, again, a dream well earned.

That his Jets experience came to a premature end with a final concussion suffered at Jets camp was a tragedy. He had worked so hard for so long, and had felt the game's ultimate glory ever so briefly in his grasp, only to have things end in the blur of a singular catastrophic hit. And perhaps few would have blamed him had he decided to quit on life altogether at that point. But I would have been one of them. Because that's not how successful athletes should approach life. Rather, they should take on all challenges with the same vigor they took on would-be blockers and tacklers and not accept the status quo that says that athletes can't

apply the skills and traits they hone in sports for use in very productive, post-sports lives.

That the Jets experience did not become an ending point for Russ...that the end of his time as an athlete merely served as a starting point for greater things to come, did not shock me because I never doubted his ability to take his leadership skills and motivation from the grid iron into the business world and be successful.

Russ and I lost touch after our time at UMass. I knew of his untimely ending with the Jets, but knew nothing of what had become of him. I left UMass for a short stint as an assistant coach of the Cleveland Browns, then returned to college football as the head coach of the Syracuse Orangemen for almost a decade. And that's where my focus was. But years later, when I accepted the job as head coach of the New England Patriots, I was happy to receive a congratulatory note from Russ, not for the pat on the back, but because it was apparent he had indeed scaled the heights of the business world and captained an effort to build a magnificent brand and organization...one that became one of the largest livery companies in the country.

Since that note, we have kept in touch. And I am glad to know that he has decided to share his story in the form of this book. Because he learned the biggest lessons...the ones about team work...the ones about listening, and working hard...the ones about showing compassion and respect for anyone and everyone you encounter in this life...and the big one that says no matter how many times you get knocked down, you pick yourself up and keep moving forward, because that is how you empower yourself to live life to the fullest.

Coach Dick MacPherson

Former Head Coach University of Massachusetts

Former Head Coach Syracuse University

Former Head Coach New England Patriots