

Heisman has stuck with Jim Plunkett for life

Scott Ostler, Chronicle Columnist

The Stanford quarterback had a huge season, was sure to be a first-round pick in the upcoming NFL draft, but elected to return for one more year on the Farm, citing unfinished business, including a degree, and love for his teammates and the university.

That was Jim Plunkett after the 1969 season.

Side benefit of one more season: a shot at the Heisman Trophy, which Plunkett won in 1970. On Saturday, Plunkett will be at Andrew Luck's table in New York when Luck learns his Heisman fate.

Plunkett hands me his Heisman and says, "Don't drop it."

He's heavy, the little stiff-arming dude, only 13 inches high including his wood base, but 45 pounds of bronze muscle. Plunkett keeps him on a shelf in the memorabilia alcove of his home in Atherton.

"Everybody who walks in the house wants to see the Heisman," says Gerry, Jim's wife.

Andrew Luck was in the Plunketts' home last year when they hosted a dinner for Stanford's quarterbacks. Did Luck ogle the Heisman, drool on it, or even glance at it?

"I don't even know if he did" look at it, Plunkett says. "We had seven or eight guys here, there was a game on TV, I was busy cooking. You can't take a (player) out to dinner (under NCAA rules), but if you cook it yourself, it's fine. And I'm a good cook."

So Plunkett and Luck have not talked Trophy. In fact, Plunkett doesn't bring up the trophy in conversation - "Hey, wanna see my Heisman?" - but he doesn't mind talking about it.

He'll tell you how he almost left Stanford before throwing a varsity pass. On the freshman team (freshmen couldn't play varsity then), Plunkett was a disaster. He had undergone throat surgery that summer and was weak. In hurrying back to shape, he pulled two hammies and a groin.

Plunkett at defensive end?

Coach John Ralston asked Plunkett to convert to defensive end. Plunkett asked for one more chance and said if he couldn't play quarterback, he would transfer. That summer, Plunkett threw hundreds of balls every day, and in the fall, he blew the coaches' socks off.

After a redshirt year, Plunkett was the starter for three seasons. As a junior, he finished eighth in the Heisman voting. The Baltimore Colts told Plunkett they would draft him with their first-round pick.

"I could have used the money," says Plunkett, whose mother and father were blind and on welfare. His father died after his sophomore year. "I could have helped my family out immensely. ... But I was committed, to Stanford and to doing the best job I could possibly do before I moved up."

Also, Plunkett wanted to be a role model to Latino youngsters.

Luck's family bought Andrew an insurance policy for the 2011 season, a hedge against injury. Plunkett chuckles at the idea of him doing that in 1970.

"Who would have paid for it?" asks Plunkett, who took out student loans to make it through Stanford, which back then didn't give athletic full-rides.

The Heisman hoopla kicked in before the 1970 season. Sport magazine (now defunct) ran a cover featuring Plunkett and other candidates, including Notre Dame's Joe Theismann and Mississippi's Archie Manning.

Stanford wasn't a powerhouse, it had to play at max efficiency, and Plunkett knew he had to be on, every game. The Heisman was down the list of his concerns - behind beating USC and going to the Rose Bowl - but it was a slice of the pressure pie. Heisman pressure

"It became very troubling in my head my senior year," Plunkett says. "I felt the pressure, unlike Andrew, probably. From what I've read, he doesn't think about it. I felt the stress, the pressure, it was hard to study, hard going to class."

Oh, the hype. Theismann changed the pronunciation of his name, from THEES-man, to rhyme with Heisman. In Mississippi they pumped up their man with a song, "The Ballad of Archie Who?"

Stanford's Heisman pimp-a-thon consisted of sports information director Bob Murphy putting together a pamphlet: "One sheet, folded over," Plunkett says.

Stanford beat USC and later clinched the Pac-8's Rose Bowl berth with two games to go, then lost those two.

"As a team, we lost focus, looking towards Ohio State," Plunkett says. "I probably thought that I'd lost (the Heisman). So what? We're in the Rose Bowl."

Theismann disgruntled

Plunkett won the Heisman easily, with 510 first-place votes to Theismann's 242. Years later, the two men sat side-by-side at an autograph show. Plunkett was signing little Heisman helmets. Theismann grumbled, "That should be me."

The weekend of the Heisman announcement, Plunkett went to New York on business and was being interviewed on a live national TV sports show when the interviewer broke the news that Plunkett was the Heisman winner. (The Heisman-announcement TV show started in 1977.)

The presentation dinner was the following Saturday. Then Plunkett swung by Philadelphia to pick up the Maxwell Trophy. So it was a good weekend trip for cool souvenir trinkets.

Welcoming party

When Plunkett boarded the plane home, the airline had a cake waiting for him. When he landed at SFO, he was greeted by fans and the Stanford band.

Plunkett loaned his Heisman for a few months to a Stanford booster to display in his Chinese restaurant. Then, for about six years, the trophy lived at Plunkett's mom's house.

"She didn't have a clue about that kind of thing," Plunkett says, "but she was excited and happy (when he won it). As you know, she couldn't see it, could only feel it."

Plunkett bought his house in '77 and moved in with his Heisman.

All the little fella requires is an occasional dusting. About five years ago, Plunkett had the wooden base refurbished, dings and chips smoothed out. (No, it has never been dropped.)

"It has certainly meant a lot to me," Plunkett says, "in the sense that wherever you are introduced at any function, before 'Super Bowl MVP' or whatever, it's always 'Former Heisman Trophy winner.' It sticks with you for life."

Plunkett guesses that Luck isn't nervous about Saturday.

"He knows what kind of player he is, he's got so much confidence in himself," Plunkett says. "That's how I felt. ... Andrew does remind me of me - even though he's taller, thinner and better-looking."