

LOCAL

Larry Csonka on legendary Miami Dolphins team: 'They would reign supreme continuously.'

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Key Points

Miami Dolphins legend Larry Csonka was the featured author at a Stark Library event on Tuesday at Don Shula's American Kitchen.

Csonka said the 1972 perfect season Miami Dolphins could still reign supreme against modern competition.

Csonka humorously recalled trying to sneak into a Pro Football Hall of Fame event as a kid.

CANTON – Larry Csonka was turned away as a youngster while visiting the site of what would become the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

The future Miami Dolphins legend was a teenager living in the Stow area at the time. A big fan of Bronko Nagurski, Csonka and a friend arrived at an event featuring the charter inductee class of 1963 before the museum was constructed.

But there was a problem – it was an exclusive event open to media members and those with passes. And Csonka wasn't invited.

Undeterred, Csonka still gave it a shot and tried to sneak into the ceremony twice.

The football hero recounted the memory with laughs and big smiles during an interview with The Canton Repository on Tuesday prior to his presentation with the Stark Library at Don Shula's American Kitchen at the Hall of Fame Village. He discussed his life and football career before signing copies of his 2022 book, "Head On: A Memoir."

"You had to have a pass to get in, so we being farm boys, parked around in the back of the bushes and snuck through the bushes and promptly got thrown out."

Csonka, however, didn't stray far. And when Csonka spotted Nagurski, he boldly made his move again.

"I thought hell or high water, this is my only shot to ever get up and stand in front of Bronko, so we made a break for it and went in a second time and I got right up about 4 feet from Bronko," Csonka said with a burst of laughter.

Nagurski grinned and nodded at the boy, warning him he was about to be shooed away.

"So I got thrown out twice and the third time they asked me back and I got inducted," Csonka said.

Following a stellar career at Syracuse University and with the Miami Dolphins, football credentials wouldn't be an issue for the Ohio native.

Welcomed into the hall in 1987, Csonka played for the Super Bowl champion Dolphins, who remain the only team in NFL history to record a perfect season, going 17-0 in the 1972 campaign.

Once known for his manhandling and bruising running style, Csonka became reflective and even sentimental when discussing the prestige and significance of being among the greatest ever to step onto the professional gridiron.

"I think it continues to amaze me at how much it has grown every year," he said of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. And "how enthusiastic not just the inductees are but the surrounding community and the public in general. I think in our society today, there's great political strife, and there's always been in a democracy; it's always going to be there, but I think there's some relief they find in sports and sports history and the continuity of sports history."

Following are the highlights of the roughly 20-minute interview, edited for brevity.

The sports time machine: 1972 vs. all other teams

So how would the perfect season Dolphins fare against the modern NFL? And specifically the 2023 Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs?

Csonka gave a thoughtful and nuanced answer.

"I think from the time when the 1972 Dolphins did what they did, coming forward from there, they would reign supreme continuously," Csonka said. "If you took that team and went

the other way with it, back in the time (of) Bronko Nagurski, you've got to realize that there were great rule changes that were about to take place.

"So it comes down to this," he said. "Whose rules do we play by? Granted, players get bigger, faster and stronger, but they have to play ... within the rules, so the rules reign supreme. So if you take a team, no matter how big, fast and strong and incredibly adept they are and put them in a different set of rules that are more prone to help the team of that era, it gets to be a real question."

Csonka has one regret about writing his book

Csonka admitted he regrets not writing and releasing his book before Miami coach Don Shula's death in 2020.

"I would have liked to have handed him the first copy and said thank you because he wrote a lot of my book," Csonka said, referring to the time spent and lessons learned with the Hall of Fame coach during his playing days.

Pulling a prank on Coach Shula

In his memoir, Csonka recounts an episode at the team hotel for the 1974 Super Bowl in Houston. Miami was playing in the big game for the third consecutive year.

Csonka discovered that the hotel room next to his was for Shula's guests. So he decided to have some fun at the expense of the strict, rule-minded coach.

Inviting several Ohio friends to the hotel, Csonka and the group partied in the room, hanging out for a few hours and ordering drinks and snacks.

Known for a mischievous streak, Csonka signed Shula's name to the tab totaling more than \$200. When the team checked out, Csonka noticed Shula complaining and questioning the bill.

"There wasn't many times that I got the last laugh, maybe once, maybe twice," Csonka said with amusement. "That wasn't even the last laugh, it was kind of a giggle. It was just funny to see the expression on his face when he found out.

"... It was a humorous thing. Later on, we talked about it. I'm sure he knew the truth. He wouldn't look too far before he found the guilty person."

Talking football with Elvis

"I was 10 years old in 1956-57 when Elvis came on the scene nationally, and the image you have of someone being so far removed. I was a kid on a farm, and Elvis was going around the country doing all these wild things and very out of character from the way I was growing up. Not good or bad, just different.

"Then to be in Memphis (playing for the Memphis Southmen in the WFL) and see him sitting in the stands, and then having him call (Miami and Memphis teammate) Jim Kiick and asking Jim Kiick and I to come over and shoot pool with him (was enjoyable). ... And to sit and watch them joke and have a good time and then the questions that Elvis asked, he was very much a student of the game, perhaps more so than Kiick and I in some respects – it was an interesting conversation.

"And then to see that side of him versus what I had seen on the Ed Sullivan show and the few times I had seen Elvis on TV performing was to realize how different, what a broad scope of personality the man possessed, and he was very much a showman, but he was also very much a scholar of athletics, of football particularly."

Growing up a Cleveland Browns fan

With more laughter, Csonka recalled sneaking into the stadium with friends in the 1950s to watch the Cleveland Browns.

"It was a thrill to be in the stands and watch Jimmy Brown and some of the others perform," he said. "Luckily, I got a little older and ... was a legal entry into the stadium. I did sneak in a couple of times and it was a lot easier back then."

"I was very much a Browns fan," he said. "I'm a Browns fan unless they're playing the Dolphins, so that's how that comes down to. You don't ever lose that."

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