Marshall's Moss has taken long road to Heisman trophy candidate

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. (AP) — When Randy Moss showed up at Florida State, coach Bobby Bowden was almost giddy over his new wide receiver.

"He can run, he can jump, but what he does best is run like a scalded dog," Bowden said before Moss ran afoul of the law and was kicked off the team.

A year and another school later, Moss has not stop running. And no one can catch him.

"Nobody in America can cover him," Ball State coach Bill Lynch said after Moss caught five touchdown passes in Marshall's 42-16 victory against the Cardinals.

The only sophomore among this year's Heisman Trophy candidates, Moss set the Division I-A single-season mark with 25 receiving touchdowns — five covering 70 yards or more — and has caught 90 passes for 1,647 yards to set a Mid-American Conference record.

In two seasons, he has scored 53 TDs for Marshall.

"He's doing this with people putting triple coverage on him," Marshall coach Bob Pruett said. "They doubled and triple-teamed Randy, but he always seems to find a way to make big plays."

At 6-foot-5, Moss is taller than most defensive backs and he is faster, with 4.25 speed in the 40-yard-dash. He has also got an impressive 39-inch vertical leap and huge hands with tentaclelike fingers that rarely drop passes.

The 1997 Randy Moss highlight film begins with a 90-yard touchdown against Army.

Cradling a screen pass behind the line of scrimmage on his own 5, Moss took off across the field, faking two linemen off their feet, stiff-arming another defender, hurdling yet another and, without losing a step, accelerating down the left sideline while the rest of the field seemed to be in slow motion.

Already named the MAC player of the year and a finalist for the Biletnikoff Award given to the nation's best receiver, Moss is setting new standards for receivers, having scored at least one touchdown in each of his 27 college games.

But Moss says he would rather watch the Heisman Trophy ceremony Dec. 13 on his living room television than in person. He is one of four players invited to New York for the ceremony.

"I think just for the fact that I'm coming out of a small school here in Huntington, it would be very difficult for me to win it," Moss said.

"Hopefully it's not that big of a factor, but deep down inside I think it is."

Moss' college career was almost over before it began.

One of West Virginia's most celebrated high school athletes, Moss was headed to Notre Dame but the Irish revoked the scholarship after he was charged with attacking another student at DuPont High School.

Moss pleaded guilty to battery and was sentenced to 30 days in jail. He was allowed to defer most of the sentence until after his freshman year in college.

Florida State was quick to roll out the welcome mat, but a year later rolled it back up when Moss violated his probation by smoking marijuana. A one-year jail sentence was reduced a month later to time served after he completed algebra and speech communications classes in a work-study program.

Although Moss never played at Florida State, Bowden was well aware of his talent.

"He's just got so many tools, limitless tools," the coach said after watching Moss practice.

After his release from jail, Moss walked on at Marshall and scored 28 touchdowns, leading the Thundering Herd to the Division I-AA championship and a 15-0 record. This season, Marshall (10-2) returned to Division I-A after a 28-year absence and faces Mississippi in the Motor City Bowl on Dec. 26.

But can a wide receiver in the MAC win the Heisman? For that matter, can a wide receiver from any school win it? The last receiver to win it was Michigan's Desmond Howard in 1991.

"If the Heisman Trophy is for the best college player who does the most for his team, I think Randy deserves a shot," said Marshall quarterback Chad Pennington. "When the offense needs a big play, he's going to make one almost every time."

Nonetheless, the award is expected to go to players at higher-profile programs such as Tennessee's Peyton Manning, Michigan's Charles Woodson, or Ryan Leaf at Washington State.

But one-by-one, Moss has made believers out of each of his opponents.

"I don't know about the Heisman Trophy because I'm not into that. But anyone who can run that fast is special," said West Virginia coach Don Nehlen, whose team defeated Marshall 42-31 despite Moss' two touchdowns.

Moss has tried to deflect some of the attention toward his teammates. But he may also be trying to avoid the kind of negative publicity that came with his arrests and frankness.

He was sharply criticized in West Virginia after he told Sports Illustrated and the *Los Angeles Times* that he did not like the state and wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

Moss also drew heavy criticism when he said he did not know much about the 1970 plane crash that wiped out Marshall's team in 1970, and while calling it a tragedy, he said it "wasn't nothing big."

Pruett says he and Moss have not discussed the Heisman or Moss' future. But he thinks Moss will go to the NFL rather than return for his junior season.

Moss says he has set no timetable and has enrolled for spring semester classes. The Heisman, Moss says with a shrug, would be nice, but losing will not break his heart.

In fact, he is weary of answering questions about it.

"This Heisman thing is not so big to me. If the trophy comes, great. I mean, if it wouldn't hurt anybody's feelings, I'd watch it on TV. I never really did set any individual goals for myself."

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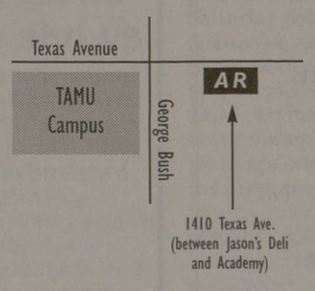

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