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Chet Forte

A 5-foot-9 Ivy Leaguer kept Wilt Chamberlain from the 1957 National Player of the Year title. But that was wasn't the biggest feat Columbia's Chet Forte ever pulled off. Changing sports television was.

No one ever dominated basketball the way Wilt Chamberlain did. An athletic seven-footer who scored 100 points in an NBA game while averaging 50 a game for the entire season, no one else was in his league... before or since.

But there was an honor that Chamberlain didn't claim -- the 1957 college basketball national player of the year award. The man who beat Chamberlain was 15 inches shorter, and his life just as amazing and accomplished as Chamberlain's. In fact, Columbia's Chet Forte may have left a bigger footprint on the sports world than Chamberlain.

The son of an obstetrician and a sports-minded mother, Forte led Hackensack High School to the New Jersey state basketball championship as a junior. The New York Times reported that he was "the shortest man on any basketball team he ever played with." He was also class president.

His size, leadership and penchant for nailing driving one-handers made Forte a smash hit from his first varsity game at Columbia, when he scored 28 points in a victory over Rutgers. Ten days later he netted 39 against Navy and the fascination with 'Chet the Jet' was on.

He was simply a scoring machine. As a junior he had 34 points in a high-profile showdown with All-American Hot Rod Hundley of West Virginia. Hundley scored 23 points, but his Mountaineers beat the Lions 70-60 at the Orange Bowl Classic in Miami. Forte led Columbia to a 6-1 record in Ivy play, but was suspended for scholastic shortcomings late in the season, which may have cost Columbia the title.


That didn't stop his teammates from naming him team captain for the 1956-57 season, the first official Ivy League campaign. Forte was up to the task, scoring a school-record 42 points in the season opener against CCNY.

He upped that to 44 against Rutgers in early January, and then tallied 45 against Penn. The New York media focused on the national scoring race between Chamberlain and Forte, so much so that Columbia coach Lou Rossini told the New York Times, "we feel that the national scoring race is incidental to the Ivy League championship."

Without question part of the appeal was Forte's stature. "In this era of Gangling Goons," wrote Arthur Daley, "it's truly extraordinary that one of the undersized can demonstrate he isn't also underprivileged."

Despite Rossini's statement the media didn't feel that the national scoring race was incidental. When Yale blew out Columbia in early February, the headline read, "Yale Routs Columbia, but Forte Replaces Chamberlain as Top Scorer."

The Lions were soon out of the race, but Forte kept scoring. In his home finale against Princeton he scored 34 points and had his number (40) officially retired by the school. Incidentally neither Forte (28.9) nor Chamberlain (29.6) would lead the nation in scoring as South Carolina's Grady Wallace would overtake them with a late-season push.



Chet Forte '57

Sport	Basketball
Hometown	Hackensack, N.J.
High School	Hackensack
Major	Pre-Med
Profession	Television Pioneer
Highlights	National college basketball player of the year in 1957, beating out Wilt Chamberlain of Kansas.

International player of the year. The UPI selection -- a nationwide vote of 281 sportswriters and broadcasters -- was the only such award at the time. The wire reports called the choice "a major victory for the little men" and referred to Forte as "the serious-minded pre-medical student."

By April he was barnstorming with the College All-Stars and hit a pair of game-winning free throws to beat the Harlem Globetrotters in Omaha, Nebraska. That was his last basketball highlight, but his professional career would take him to a higher level.

Forte didn't plan to follow his father's career path. He eventually found himself in the new, high-energy field of television production, working for CBS before joining ABC Sports in 1963. He directed the network's 1964 coverage of the Olympics from Tokyo (where Princeton's Bill Bradley would win gold in basketball). He called the shots from Mexico City four years later, but would become best known for Monday Night Football.

At the time, the other networks didn't take the idea seriously -- football against the likes of Lucille Ball and Laugh-In -- how could that ever work?

Within a few years, though, Monday Night Football was drawing 50 million viewers. Roone Arledge turned direction over to Forte from the start and he responded with innovation after innovation -- twice as many cameras, music, graphics, slow motion, stop-action, camera isolations, instant replay, split screens.

Commentators Don Meredith, Frank Gifford, and Howard Cosell, as well as Forte, became rock stars with an enormous traveling act. The New York Times claimed that "Chet Forte is a conductor, the Leonard Bernstein of the isolated replay."

Forte had a special insight into the viewer. He often said that graphics were designed for the guy, sitting at a bar, who couldn't hear the announcers. He dreamed of new camera angles, as if the 20 monitors before him weren't nearly enough. "One of these days, they'll come up with a camera an inch long, and we'll stick it on the football," he told Lawrie Mifflin of the Times. Mifflin added, "he seemed to be only half-kidding."

Forte stayed at Monday Night Football until 1986. He also directed the Olympics, Wide World of Sports, the Super Bowl, the World Series, the All-Star Game, Triple Crown horse races, the Indianapolis 500, the Daytona 500 and countless college football and basketball games. He also directed ABC news specials, from space shuttle launches to presidential inaugurations and national conventions.

While he was in complete control in the director's chair, Forte's personal life was ravaged by a gambling addiction that began in the early 1960s. When he left ABC in 1987, despite 11 Emmys on his resume, he couldn't find a job in the field. He had lost \$4 million dollars and a million-dollar home in Saddle River, N.J., to that addiction. He was also in trouble with the government and was forced to deal with his addiction. "I lost all my money, I lost all my respect," he said. "I hurt my family, and I hurt my friends."

Forte moved to California and became a talk show host on a sports radio station in San Diego. Now attending Gamblers Anonymous meetings, he openly confronted and discussed his addiction, offering help to those in similar situations before suffering a fatal heart attack in 1996.

His greatest awards came posthumously. In 2000, he was the recipient of the Directors Guild of America's Lifetime Achievement in Sports Direction Award. Forte was named to Columbia's inaugural Hall of Fame class in 2005.

Despite his flaws, neither of Forte's amazing careers could be ignored.

— Brett Hoover