

Former LSU Tiger Booger McFarland tackles Tampa air waves as sports talk-show host

Jim Kleinpeter - NOLA.COM

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TAMPA, Fla. -- Before there was Buga Nation, there was Booger McFarland. Nearly 20 years before LSU recruit Leonard Fournette launched his Twitter-verse collective, McFarland laid claim to the moniker as a star defensive tackle in purple and gold.

While the 2013 Tigers are coincidentally in his town for the Outback Bowl, McFarland is trying to turn Tampa sports radio into his own "Booger Nation." The former Tampa Bay Buc and two time Super Bowl champion is 15 months into his career as a sports talk radio host on 98.7 The Fan, CBS Radio's foray into FM sports programming.

McFarland, who rarely goes by his given name, Anthony, has parlayed his popularity as a player, his natural effervescence and driving work ethic into a popular radio show trying to challenge the local giant WDAE 620-AM. Listening to him suggests a polished pro with many more years of experience with the additional benefit of insight only former players or coaches can provide, and the personality to pull it all off.

The guy whom one former LSU assistant coach dubbed a natural at defensive tackle looks and sounds like a natural in his second career.

McFarland dabbled in broadcasting as a player, doing one-hour-a-week player shows and again when he retired after nine seasons in the NFL. Marriage, family and golf filled his life for the next five years before he took the plunge and was hired after an audition in June of 2012.

"When I got out it was something that crossed my mind," McFarland said prior to his Friday drive-time show, which runs from 3-7 p.m. "I got a feel for it. I wouldn't say it was second nature but it was something I experienced and enjoyed. I've always had an ability to relate to people. I'm a people person."

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McFarland prides himself in pulling no punches, whether it's Tampa coach Greg Schiano and Buc players, the NHL's Tampa Lightning or Major League Baseball's Tampa Bay Rays. With the help of show partner Rick Herrera, he quickly expanded his knowledge of sports into the latter two through research and preparation, and smoothly slips from one to the other without hesitation.

He's especially "tough" on Herrera, a broadcast media veteran, in the context of their on-air shtick.

"For my money he's one of the few people worth listening to on sports talk here in the bay area," said Ira Kaufman, who covers the Bucs for the Tampa

Tribune and is an occasional guest on the show. "He's insightful and funny.

"He and Herrera have this little patter going. Herrera is kind of the punching bag. He understands that and plays his role well. He's always poking fun at him (Herrera), which comes easily for Anthony."

Herrera thinks the two are a perfect pairing because of their dissimilar backgrounds: one guy an athlete from the deep south and the other Californian and media observer for 30 years as a show host and sideline reporter.

"He's very unique," Herrera said. "He'll never sugarcoat it. Most athletes come off the field (into the booth) and they're reticent to say anything, always looking over their shoulder. He says exactly what's on his mind, like he was when he was a player.

"His work ethic is ridiculous. He's up at 5 a.m. text messaging me about a story he wants to do. I tell him 'I'm not even up yet.' He's relentless. I've worked with a lot of guys who come off the field, but the drive Anthony has is remarkable."

Broadcasting in the heart of Florida Gator country, Kaufman and Herrera say McFarland especially enjoys tweaking Gator fans who call. He especially likes to remind them he scored his only college touchdown as a freshman in a 1995 loss to Florida when he entered the game as a blocking fullback.

McFarland also enjoys touting the SEC as the nation's best conference.

"Oh, does he just give it to the Gator fans, the Georgia fans and he just homes for the SEC like nobody's business," Herrera said.

Said Kaufman, "He wears his LSU affiliation on his sleeve, loves to talk about the SEC dominance and dismisses interlopers."

He's still beloved in his home state. When he traveled to New Orleans last February to base his show from the site of Super Bowl XLVII, Herrera said it was "like traveling with Elvis" because of the myriad people asking for

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autographs or wishing him well and thanking him for his career as a Tiger.

He's already been out to multiple LSU practices this week and been to dinner with LSU acquaintances.

"I'm very excited about LSU being here," he said. "It's good to have some purple and gold in this town that is dominated by Gator Country.

"Everybody here knows I'm an LSU guy and they always give it back to me. LSU is having a down year so they're giving it to me but I always remind them he who laughs last, laughs best."

McFarland will occasionally talk about his LSU days where he was a star from 1995-98 and started every game but two in that span. His size and quickness as a freshman had teammates calling him "Baby Sapp" after Hall of Famer Warren Sapp, who would later become his teammate and close friend.

McFarland was the Bucs' No. 1 draft pick in 1999, the 15th player taken overall. He played seven seasons in Tampa where he won a Super Bowl title after the 2002 season. He played two seasons for Indianapolis and won another title in 2006.

After the 2007 season he was coming off an injury and tried out with the Raiders and the New Orleans Saints, but turned down an offer from the Saints to retire while still reasonably healthy. He's still around his playing weight and is still able to work out once he gets warmed up.

McFarland made Tampa his permanent home and became an active member of the community. He promotes a charity golf tournament along with former Bucs coach Tony Dungy for a prison-release program that assists the previously incarcerated in their transition back into society.

He's also part-owner of a health club called Performance Compound frequented by athletes such as Derek Jeter, Ryan Howard and B.J. Upton. That has helped him build a roster of elite guests for his show that is hard to duplicate.

McFarland's short run as a radio talk show host is only the beginning, he said. He's already branched into TV work with the NFL Network as a co-host with Rich Eisen and his buddy Warren Sapp, among others. He also currently has an independent radio show on Sirius XM 88.

"I'm thinking much bigger," he said. "This is not the end of the road. This is a small step. I'm looking forward to doing bigger and better things. It's a vast industry and a competitive one.

Said Herrera: "He's a natural on the radio and he's really good on TV. His warmth and million-dollar smile blow everybody away. He's going to be a big star."