

Arabesque, anyone?

Dancer guides gridders in ballet lessons

By Jim Hughes
staff writer

Most people spend their summer vacation traveling, shaping up the house and yard, or simply resting and relaxing under the sun as the hours dwindle away.

Then there's Lori McMacken, who spent a chunk of her summer hiatus teaching ballet to a bunch of high-school football players.

McMacken, a 1979 graduate of Troy Athens High School, returns to her alma mater to instruct the art of ballet to 30 Red Hawk football players. Friday, she and the Red Hawks concluded the two-week Russian Classical Ballet training session which has been an annual affair since 1980.

McMacken, a jazz major at Point Park College in Pittsburgh, is very active in dance. She says she takes ballet classes every day and is a member of Extension — a group of professional dancers who put together local shows consisting of jazz, ballet and modern dance. In addition to her schoolwork and classes, the practice for the dance shows requires 3-6 hours of work each day.

"This (teaching ballet) is a vacation for me," McMacken said. "I'm home, I'm getting paid for what I'm doing, and I'm on vacation. This is a rest for me. I had to come home and rest. My muscles were overworked."

THE GENESIS of the ballet program came about when Athens football coach John Walker was at a coaching

clinic and learned how the training can benefit the athletes. He went to Krista Hinsky, Athens' director of theater arts, and she recommended McMacken, a former student of Hinsky.

"I was looking for someone who could handle football players, and teach them flexibility, coordination, body control and body movement as opposed to just dance, and Krista suggested Lori McMacken," Walker said. "The ballet itself is minimal. The teaching approach is more in terms of movement — control, coordination and flexibility."

"This gives us a start to our summer," Walker said of the non-mandatory program. "It gives us some team unity and togetherness. Directly, it won't make them better football players. However, it is one of the little things that will help them improve and become better football players. I think it makes kids realize there's a lot that has to go into building a winning football program."

Although the Athens football team is the lone beneficiary of McMacken's program, she said she hopes to expand the training to athletes in every sport.

"All ballet training for athletes," McMacken writes in her brochure, "is geared toward related body mechanisms and the sport involved. The athlete's agility, flexibility, range of motion and endurance are most definitely increased."

The Athens football team has helped break the stereotype which puts ballet into a "non-masculine" category. And, although there were some minor problems adjusting the players to the art, most of the wrinkles have been ironed out.

"SOMETIMES THERE are problems, and other times there aren't," McMacken said after directing the troop through a workout. "At first, they weren't too sure how to handle me, and I wasn't too sure how to handle them. But, after everything eases up, they feel comfortable."

During a break between a routine put to music from West Side Story, Joe Molnar explained the program from a players' point of view.

"We're learning some balance, coordination and about muscle structure," said Molnar, a senior triathlete along with Steve Pankow and Skip Threatt. "It's a bunch of football players trying to do ballet, or at least giving it an effort."

"We have a pretty good time," the running back/defensive back continued. "We don't take it real serious, but we do learn. If we did a little each day, eventually we'd get better at it."

"It's helpful, sure. It's not real noticeable, but you know it's there — you know, the coordination, and you feel stronger," Molnar explained.

Quarterback Pankow offered similar sentiments:

"YOU LEARN some coordination, and it gives you more flexibility," he said. "It's fun, and it involves some hard work. Sometimes it's awkward trying to do some of the stuff."

"I'd recommend it to other athletes," the senior signal-caller added. "My jumping and coordination have improved."

In addition to the physical attributes, Threatt sees other advantages to the ballet sessions.

"You develop team unity," the senior lineman said. "You get to know the younger guys on the team, and you learn to appreciate the art. It's (ballet) a lot harder than people think it is."

Another stereotype McMacken hopes to shatter, deals with the delicacy of

ballet. While it does take coordination and concentration to perform ballet, strength and power also are key ingredients.

"Most people do not totally understand what dance means," McMacken, a former Athens cheerleader and theater student emphasized. "It takes coordination and concentration and muscle power and strength — all four in one. You have to have the coordination and the strength."

And to the skeptics and traditionalists who scoff at teaching ballet to football players, McMacken reminds, "The highest achievers are open-minded and always willing to learn something new."



photos by DAVID FRANKS/staff photographer

Mike Jaskae, a tight end on Troy Athens' football team, goes through the warm-up routine in the Ballet for Athletes training session.



Football players attempt to follow Lori McMacken in an exercise designed to strengthen stomach muscles.



Lori McMacken, a 1979 Troy Athens graduate, returns to her alma mater to teach football players the techniques of ballet.

Pistons draft ex-Rice star

Smith faces NBA challenge

By Roger Hart
staff writer

Former Birmingham Brother Rice basketball standout Kevin Smith is going to have a chance to show the local folks his talent.

The Michigan State University graduate has been drafted in the ninth round by the Detroit Pistons of the National Basketball Association.

Smith, a 1977 graduate of Brother Rice, played one year for coach Dick Vitale at the University of Detroit before transferring to MSU, where he finished his collegiate career this past season.

"I really feel good about having an opportunity to play in front of people who have followed my career," Smith said. "I think the Pistons are an organization on the move, and I am glad I have a chance to be part of it."

Smith was the eighth of nine players drafted by the Pistons in this year's draft. He is one of four guards selected by the NBA club.

"I thought all along that I would be taken in the draft. I was definitely happy the Pistons got me."

"All along, I was thinking they would, and I even told my mom the day before the draft that I hoped I went to the Pistons."

IN FEBRUARY 1981, Smith was implicated in a shop-lifting charge after he allegedly stole some merchandise from a drug store. The matter was complicated when he failed to show for a preliminary examination.

But he was cleared of all charges against him in June of this year.

"The theft charge was dropped. It didn't go to court. There were not any

witnesses against me. It was a very unfortunate incident, and then it got blown way out of proportion once the press got a hold of it."

Through his college career, Smith was said to have an attitude problem. But he dismisses these allegations as being unfounded.

"I would read in the newspapers that I had attitude problems, but I never heard that from any of the coaches I played for."

Smith has been keeping himself in shape for the Aug. 17 opening of the Pistons' rookie camp at Oakland University.

"I have been doing a lot of running and a lot of weight work, and I play just about all day long."

IN HIS THREE years at Michigan State, Smith played in 82 games and started in 65. He had 349 assists and 123 steals. Smith shot 48 percent from the floor and 73 percent from the free-throw line for an average of 12.5 points per game. He scored 1,028 points in his career at MSU.

"I think I had a good career here (at MSU), and I don't have any regrets about coming here. I just would have liked to have won more games."

"It's so funny how I was getting blamed for losses here, but I would have liked to have seen the team without me."

At the University of Detroit, Smith played in 28 games, starting one. He shot 47 percent from floor, 79 percent from the line and averaged eight points per game. He had 139 assists and 37 steals.

"I think I can add another dimension to the Pistons. They don't have any other quick guards other than Isiah

"I really feel good about having an opportunity to play in front of people who have followed my career."

— Kevin Smith
Piston draftee

(Thomas, the Pistons' first pick in the 1981 NBA draft), and I think my floor leadership can help.

"I look at it like I am definitely going to make the team. I am very confident about it."

While at Brother Rice, Smith played under coach Bill Norton, who left Rice in 1981 to take an assistant coaching position at Michigan State under head coach Jud Heathcote.

"Coach Norton is a real good coach and not only is he a fine coach but he is a real good person. He has helped me with my development as far as a basketball player and as a person."

"I really owe a lot to coach Norton."

Norton left MSU this spring after only one year in the Big Ten. He returned to Brother Rice to serve as the school's director of development.

WILL ROBINSON, assistant to Pistons General Manager Jack McCloskey, was the man responsible for scouting and drafting Smith.

"His dad played for me when I first started coaching basketball in Detroit at old Miller High School. It was in the

ghetto, and it doesn't exist anymore."

When told of Smith's confidence about making the Pistons ball club, Robinson said he will have a fight on his hands.

"We already have Isiah Thomas playing that spot (point guard). Need I say more?"

"But I think a person has got to have confidence. If he doesn't have confidence, he doesn't have a chance of making the team," Robinson said.

"So I can understand his feelings, and I am glad he feels that way. That is half of the battle right there."

"The one player that will be giving Smith the most trouble for the spot will be Walker D. Russell, Campy's brother," Robinson said.

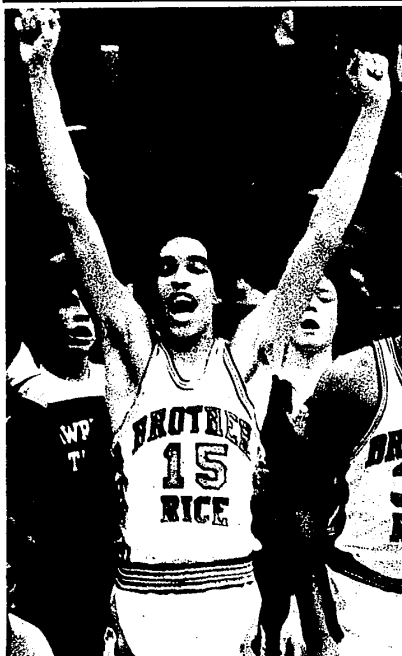
Walker D. is from Western Michigan University, and the brother of former University of Michigan star Campy Russell, who went on to play in the NBA.

THE PISTONS had two first-round picks and chose Cliff Levingston, a power forward from Wichita State first, and Ricky Pierce, a guard from Rice University, second.

"Ricky Pierce will be playing what we call a wing guard position, not the point guard position that Smith will be shooting for," Robinson said.

"Smith is fighting for a guard position, and we will only keep four or five guards on the 12-man roster. If he (Smith) wants to be on the team, he has to fight to make it," Robinson said.

Smith, 23, graduated this past spring from MSU with a degree in urban development and social science. He lives in Oak Park.



Kevin Smith, a Detroit Pistons draft choice, whoops it up after a Brother Rice state tournament victory in 1977.