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Purdy: Jerry Rice enters Hall of Fame with typical grace

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CANTON, Ohio -- This should surprise no one. But when it was Jerry Rice's turn to talk here Saturday, the man was prepared.

Know why? He was scared. He has been scared all along, as he acknowledged in his meticulous yet powerful acceptance speech at the Pro Football Hall of Fame induction ceremony.

"I'm here to tell you that the fear of failure is the engine that has driven me throughout my entire life," Rice said. "It flies in the faces of all these sports psychologists who say you have to let go of your fears to be successful. But not wanting to disappoint my parents, and later my coaches, teammates and fans, is what pushed me to be successful."

Rice then added: "When I was a kid "... I was always running, even before I played sports. I ran everywhere. I didn't even know why. But I guess I was preparing myself for something, destined for something, but I didn't know what."

Saturday, of course, was the "what." It was the ultimate "what," really. Rice could finally stop

running. He officially joined the most elite club in his sport. In doing so, he looked and sounded like a million bucks. It was no upset for a football player who always paid painstaking attention to detail.

An induction ceremony is not a contest. But while some of the seven inductees seemed to spend a lot of time rambling or shouting, Rice made a contained, impressive and moving 16-minute presentation.

Rice was so well-organized and rehearsed

in addressing the crowd of 19,300 at Fawcett Stadium, he did not appear to shed the tears he had said he might leak, although he did sniffle when mentioning his late father.

Rice saluted his 72-year-old mother, Eddie B. Rice, who rode here with most of the extended Rice family on a chartered bus from Mississippi. She sat, beaming, in the front row. Eddie is in a wheelchair. She is not in terrific health. But she was not going to miss this.

"I was thinking about all the good times and how his mom is still around to see this," Eddie said a few minutes before the inductions began, staring up at the stage. "It's a blessing. I just thank God I can be here."

And of course Eddie had her own favorite Jerry Rice anecdote. It was when he was maybe 7 or 8 years old, playing catch with his brothers in the backyard.

"Jerry would catch everything," said Eddie. "If you threw it into a thorn bush, he would catch it."

Maybe that's how Rice was able to shred so many secondaries, none of which had thorns. Rice is one

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of 29 receivers in the Hall of Fame, but he almost deserves a separate category.

That was certainly the contention of Rice's presenter, former 49er owner Eddie DeBartolo Jr., who boldly proclaimed in his videotaped introduction that "there's no question that Jerry Rice is the greatest athlete and greatest football player that has ever put on a uniform."

Actually, there is a question about that, especially from Jim Brown and a few others. But there is no question that Rice is the best NFL receiver ever to run pass routes.

Just as precisely, Rice's speech touched every necessary element. He thanked his many former teammates in attendance. He put in a plug for DeBartolo to join all the 49ers players in Canton. He specifically acknowledged Joe Montana and Steve Young, his two principal quarterbacks with the 49ers, seated in chairs flanking Rice on the stage along with the other Hall of Famers.

Also, in a touching interlude, Rice spoke lovingly of former 49ers coach Bill Walsh, who did not live long enough to see this night ("I never wanted to let my father down, and I was afraid to let Bill Walsh down."). Although Rice gave a nod to the Raiders, his team for three-plus seasons, he focused the bulk of his remarks on the 49ers.

"There will never be another organization like that in the history of sports," he said.

Brent Jones, a former 49ers tight end, was among those impressed -- although he joked before the ceremony that the only glimpse he had been caught of Rice was when his limousine drove past and Rice waved out the door to Jones and his wife.

"It was like seeing the King of England," Jones said.

Hey, royalty is royalty. But for once, Rice allowed himself to enjoy the ride. He concluded his remarks by saying that if he had a regret about his career, it was that he didn't take the time to properly enjoy it. He conceded that when he learned of his Hall election, a lot of submerged emotion surfaced. He also faced a realization that his football life had reached its conclusion.

"This is finally it," Rice said. "There are no more routes to run. No more touchdowns to score. No more records to set. That young boy from Mississippi has finally stopped running. Let me stand here and catch my breath. Let me inhale it all in, one more time."

And then he stepped to the front of the stage and waved his hands, soaking up the standing ovation. After perhaps 30 seconds, he returned to the microphone.

"Thank you," Rice said. "You know what, guys? I feel like dancing."

And then he was off to the post-ceremony party thrown by DeBartolo in a tent adjoining the stadium. Once again on a football field, Jerry Rice used his fear to nail it.

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