

YAHOO! SPORTS

Rice gives DeBartolo plenty of time to prep



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MIAMI – Eddie DeBartolo remembers the moment Jerry Rice broached the subject, and it caught the former San Francisco 49ers owner completely off guard.

“It was at Nikki’s wedding,” DeBartolo recalls, referring to the youngest of his three daughters. “We were sitting there during the reception, and Jerry asked me to be his [Hall of Fame] presenter. I was floored. I was an emotional wreck, and I was half-crocked. I figured, ‘Maybe he had too much wine.’ ”

This was in March of 2000, as Rice was preparing for his 16th and final season with the Niners. The wideout wasn’t being presumptuous or arrogant – he was simply acknowledging an inevitability that had long been evident to anyone with even a cursory understanding of modern professional football. As early as the 1994 season, which ended with Rice starring in the third Super Bowl triumph of his career, it was generally accepted that he was the greatest receiver in NFL history.

So yes, during that gala reception at San Francisco’s Palace of the Legion of Honor nearly a decade ago, it was already obvious that Rice was Canton-bound. That becomes official later Saturday when the unparalleled wideout gets selected as part of the 2010 Pro Football Hall of Fame class.

Rice, who owns virtually every major career receiving record, didn’t just set the standard at his position. “Arguably,” DeBartolo said, “he’s probably the greatest football player that ever played the game.”

Another man who has been described in those terms, Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana, remembers Rice’s raw beginning in San Francisco after coach and franchise architect Bill Walsh traded up to snag the former Mississippi Valley State receiver with the 16th overall pick of the ’85 NFL draft.

During Rice's rookie season, he struggled with a steady succession of dropped passes, and fans were questioning whether Walsh had made a sound decision. Then, in a late-season Monday night game against the Los Angeles Rams at Candlestick Park, Rice caught 10 passes for 241 yards to thrust himself into the public consciousness.

"At that point," Montana recalls, "everyone sort of sat back and said, 'Whoa.' "

Dwight Clark, who had been the Niners' top receiver for the first half of the decade, believes that breakout game was the confidence-booster Rice desperately needed.

"We were never really that worried, because he kept showing flashes of brilliance," Clark says. "We just kept getting him going, saying, 'It's OK, man. Everybody does this.' Cause he was getting really down on himself.

"He had a lot of adjusting to do. You come from Mississippi Valley State and they tell you to run a 10-yard hook, and it's a 10-yard hook. With Bill Walsh, on a 10-yard hook you had 10 different options. After that Rams game, he really started getting into this unbelievably competitive thing. He wanted to take it to another level."

Rice took his game to a level that may never be matched. In 20 seasons with the 49ers, Raiders and Seahawks (for whom he played his final 11 games as a 42-year-old), Rice caught 1,549 passes for 22,895 yards and 197 touchdowns – all records by a wide margin. No player has crossed the goal line more – Rice, with 10 rushing TDs, is the league's all-time leader with 207 scores.

He has numerous postseason records as well, including an all-time best 22 touchdowns. Rice played in four Super Bowls – the last, with the Oakland Raiders, following the 2002 season – and had standout performances in each of them, winning MVP honors in Super Bowl XXIII.

Because Rice played with two Hall of Fame quarterbacks in San Francisco, Montana and Steve Young (and another league MVP, Rich Gannon, in Oakland), some, including former 49ers teammate Terrell Owens, have suggested that his productivity was a product of his environment. It's a specious argument for anyone who paid close attention to Rice's career and his mastery of virtually every nuance of his craft. Not surprisingly, it drives DeBartolo nuts.

"I read about Owens saying he would've broken all these records if he would've had Montana and Young instead of [Tony] Romo," said DeBartolo, who previously served as Bill Walsh ('93), Joe Montana ('00) and Fred Dean's ('08) Hall of Fame presenters. "Let me tell you something – Jerry Rice could've broken records if I was the quarterback. Jerry Rice would've excelled on any team. It's not even worth arguing."

Rice's post-football ventures include a business association with the sports agency that DeBartolo owns. Not surprisingly, DeBartolo says Rice's work ethic and insistence on excellence continue to stand out.

"His perfectionism was not only in football but in his personal life, too," DeBartolo says. "It extended to personal hygiene, the way he carried himself. He's like that now, too.



"I've gotten to know him on a whole different level the last few years. We are really *friends* now. We talk to each other a lot and hang out and have fun. This is going to be a wonderful experience for him. He's not the shy kid he used to be. Early on, he was sort of withdrawn. Maybe it was the "Dancing With The Stars" experience that helped bring that out. He's extremely confident with his life."

It's likely that DeBartolo's induction speech in Canton next summer will touch on these themes, and it promises to be full of anecdotes and heartfelt emotion. After all, the man will have had a decade to prepare.

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