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Heisman will mean more this season

By **Wendell Barnhouse**
Knight Ridder Newspapers

(KRT) The Downtown Athletic Club, 19 West Street in lower Manhattan, is one of college football's most storied addresses. The 35-story, 71-year-old building is the home to the Heisman Trophy.

Each December, that season's top players gather with past winners to celebrate their sport. The announcement of which player winds up holding the 25-pound bronze trophy is one of sport's more dramatic and traditional award announcements.

On Sept. 11, the Downtown Athletic Club was taken over by New York City police and turned into a makeshift triage unit. Two hijacked airliners had crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, turning lower Manhattan into a war zone. The athletic club is eight blocks south of what is now known as Ground Zero.

"I walked outside and saw the first tower burning and was thinking how are they going to get that fire out," club president James Corcoran said. "Then the second plane hit, our building shook and lights went out."

Corcoran is a senior vice president at Morgan Stanley, which occupied nearly a third of the South Tower. Corcoran was at the athletic club when Sept. 11 became an appalling date in U.S. history.

"We closed down the building and got about 150 of our people down to the lobby," Corcoran said. "That took us about 45 minutes. Then we heard people screaming and crying and this big whoosh sound. We looked out of both sides of the building and realized we were trapped by that cloud of smoke, dust and debris."

"It was pretty scary because the smoke was filling the building. I thought we were all trapped in there."

What got everybody shook up, you looked out both doors, it wasn't dark, it was black. You couldn't see, period. And the smoke and dust was coming in the doors."

The doors through which college football's best pass each December became a passage to a haven for police and fire fighters who had been injured in rescue operations. Other refugees included a man with a broken neck, one with a broken leg, a pregnant woman, two people on respirators and two others in shock.

After running out of breathing masks, the people in the lobby started making their own. They used table cloths from the lobby bar, tearing them into strips and wetting them.

When the second tower collapsed, another wave of smoke and dust hit the athletic club. Because of a threat of gas leaks, the club was evacuated early Tuesday afternoon.

In addition to housing the Heisman Trophy, the club had 2,000 members who frequent the building's fitness center, gymnasium, an Olympic pool, squash, handball, racquetball, basketball and volleyball courts. It is a certainty that the club lost members who worked in the World Trade Center.

"We don't know how many," Corcoran said. "We think there's a dozen at least. Within a week, we'll probably know how many members we lost."

As of Wednesday, there was no gas or electric service at the athletic club, and the building is closed. Corcoran said there are plans to reopen and make it "better than ever, like the rest of lower Manhattan."

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