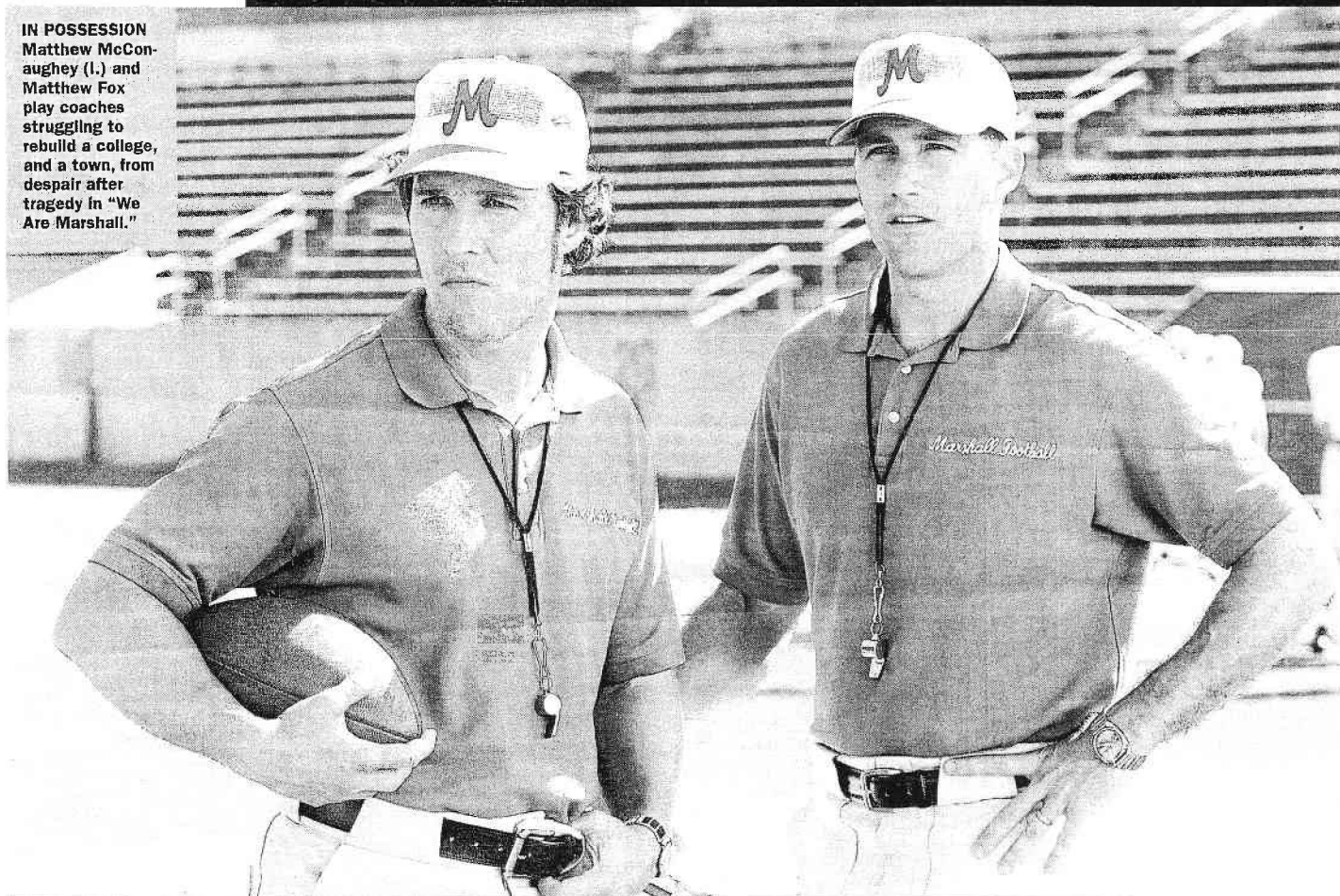


THEY ARE

IN POSSESSION Matthew McConaughey (l.) and Matthew Fox play coaches struggling to rebuild a college, and a town, from despair after tragedy in "We Are Marshall."



Matthew McConaughey and Matthew Fox team up for the football drama 'We Are Marshall' BY MICHAEL GILTZ

In 1970, West Virginia's Marshall University suffered the worst air disaster in college sports history when a plane went down and killed 75 people, including virtually the entire football team, the coaches and many boosters and school officials from the town of Huntington, W.Va.

In 1971, against all odds — and even against the misgivings of some townspeople still grieving — Marshall began the daunting task of playing football again. Just taking the field seemed like a victory, and that story is told in "We Are Marshall," a drama opening Friday that stars Matthew McConaughey as Jack Lengyel, the new coach who arrives in a shattered town, and Matthew Fox as Red Dawson, a surviving coach racked with guilt for having given up

his seat on the plane before takeoff. McConaughey, 37, has been a star since his first major film, 1996's John Grisham thriller "A Time to Kill," landed him on the cover of *Vanity Fair* after the Texas native spent years doing small roles in "Dazed and Confused" (1993), "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Return" (1994) and "Lone Star" (1996). Pennsylvania-born Fox, 40, jumped to fame in 1994 as the oldest sibling among a family of orphans on

TV's "Party of Five," and in 2004, four years after "Party" was over, he resurfaced on the hit ABC show "Lost."

The two Matthews recently sat down to jaw with the Daily News about sports, whether telling a true-life tale was a burden or a privilege, and to share their favorite athletic moments.

[To Fox] You've joked that you know you're growing up when they ask you to play one of the coaches instead of one of the players.

FOX: Yeah, it makes you feel a little old. But I was glad to get back on the field. It was also kind of a relief. We'd been shooting the film for a while before we shot the football scenes. We'd done a lot of the real story. So it was fun to throw the ball around and have all the kids out there.

[To McConaughey] And Matthew, you'd been looking to play some sort of leader or teacher for a while, right?

McCONAUGHEY: I didn't know it was going to come in the form of an actual coach. But college sports on down, I realized you are more of a teacher than a coach. You have to be more of the father figure, the big brother. If a kid goes in there who has a great ability and runs a sloppy route, he needs his face mask grabbed and have his ass chewed out. A kid goes in there who doesn't have great ability, who runs as hard as he can and misses the ball, but he's still tryin' — he's the one who needs an arm put around him.

[To Fox] Was your greatest athletic experience breaking the streak at Columbia University, where you had been a wide

MATTHEW

NO LONE STAR
McConaughey most recently starred in "Sahara" (top, with his ex-girlfriend Penélope Cruz) and "Two for the Money," with Al Pacino.



FOUND ON TV
Fox was the eldest sibling on "Party of Five" (top, with Paula Devicq) and now leads a group of plane crash survivors (including Evangeline Lilly) on "Lost."



receiver in football?

McCONAUGHEY: What'd you do? What streak did you break?

FOX: I was part of a Columbia team that was setting the longest losing streak in NCAA history. When I was recruited, it was already 20 games deep. We finally — my senior year — ended the losing streak, by winning our homecoming game against Princeton. It was 44 games.

McCONAUGHEY: 44! So you were 0 and 24 leading in? Well, well!

FOX: It was rough. But that's the great thing about football and any kind of team sports: You learn so much from that that you apply in your life. Certainly, I learned a lot about perseverance and believing in yourself and working hard and playing under intense adversity. But when we won that game, the fans came out of the woodwork. That was a three-day party.

[To McConaughey] And you're a golf fanatic. What's your greatest athletic moment? A hole in one?

McCONAUGHEY: I've had four hole in

ones! My first two were 11 days apart. Eleven days apart, man! And one I made in this tournament where whoever made the hole in one wins a brand-new Suburban. And no one had ever made a hole in one at the tournament — but I did. And then I found out: There never really was a Suburban! [Laughs] People wanted to take 'em to court. We were like, "You know what man? Y'all handle it and get the money to the Elks Lodge or whatever." So it was like a big insurance scam and there never really was a truck.

[To Fox] You've certainly waited a while to make the leap to movies. Obviously, with TV success on "Party of Five" in the '90s and now "Lost," you've had all sorts of opportunities. What made you finally say yes to this one?

FOX: Sometimes I'll read scripts that are really well executed but I just don't feel it. And then with "We Are Marshall," I just

felt compelled to do it.

McCONAUGHEY: Me, too. [Leans over conspiratorially] But I didn't tell my agents! [Laughs] I wanted to make sure they negotiated all right, but as soon as they closed I was like, "I'm in." It's sort of a privilege and an honor to be part of something that is bigger than myself.

One thing that was cool for me — [turns to Fox] I don't know about you — but we were portraying real people, and dealing with a tragedy that they had in their life. We could have had that weight — W-E-I-G-H-T — of responsibility. But I never felt that; it was almost like it was lighter. After we talked to the townspeople, our minds and hearts were true and they were embracing that and it was a privilege more than it was a weight.

FOX: I totally agree. It was the most amazing experience. And my first one out of the gate! It's all going to be downhill from here. ♦

**Fox says
that he 'felt
compelled' to
do the film.**