

The Number One Who Might Have Been

By Jay Stuller

"Joe Roths don't come along very often," sighed Rams' general manager Don Klosterman. "He had all the ingredients of a great leader who could only improve a franchise. In fact, with his personality along with those God-given talents, he could actually make a franchise. We had him rated as high as Namath."

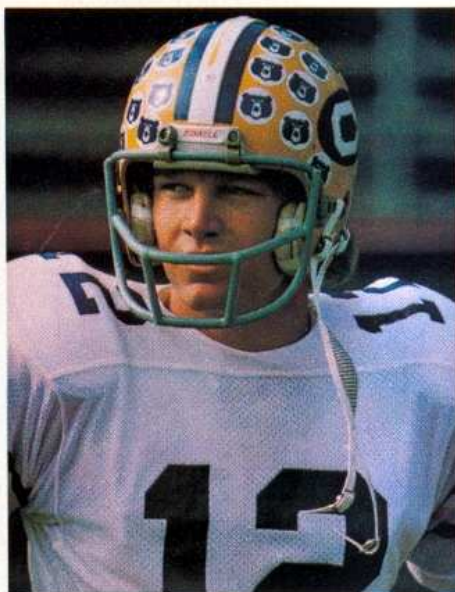
Indeed, the 6-foot 4-inch, 205-pound University of California senior with the strong arm and feather touch could have been built in a laboratory that patented the perfect professional quarterback. The 1977 draft no doubt would have been different if Joe Roth, 21, had not died of melanoma, a virulent form of cancer.

"I'd rather not talk about the cancer stuff," said Roth, shortly after the 1976 collegiate season ended. "I'm trying to work on my studies and there are these bowl games I'd like to play in. Besides, I think it's coming back and publicizing it would only upset people."

Roth, who carried a 3.1 grade-point-average as a physical education major, wanted his degree. He also wanted a pro career; after that he planned to teach and coach in high school. His reluctance to talk about his illness was not an air, for he planned to give a talk to a group of terminal patients about the effects of their condition on psyches, relating what he had learned, and felt.

"If this happened to some guy down the street," he said, "no one but the guy's friends and family would care. Just because I play football doesn't make me all that special."

People did care about the smiling kid from San Diego, and it had been known that a few years before, doctors cut dark pigmented cancerous moles from behind his ear. Roth did not let the disease over-occupy his thoughts, but he did know that melanoma is tricky. A victim could live to be 90, or the



Joe Roth of California in 1976.

cancer could return and kill quickly.

If Roth had lived, would he have been the number-one draft choice? It must be assumed Tampa Bay and coach John McKay would have held to their USC connection, and still would have picked Ricky Bell. But some experts question that.

"I don't see how they could have passed Joe up," says Dick Steinberg, director of college scouting for the Rams. "They need a quarterback and a guy with Joe's ability comes along only every three years or so. Roth was big, smart, disciplined, everything needed for a pro. He was a leader, too. Not the stern, lieutenant-to-his-men type, but popular. You could build around him."

John Thompson, general manager of the Seattle Seahawks, also thinks Roth would have gone to Tampa Bay. "But for argument's sake, let's just say he'd be available

to us," said Thompson, who originally had the second pick in the draft and made a trade for draft choices that allowed Dallas to choose Pittsburgh running back Tony Dorsett.

"Forget all the speculation," says Thompson. "We had only six offers for the pick, and three were worth considering. Dallas's was far and away the best. If Roth had been available, you can bet we'd have had a lot more serious and substantial overtures."

A graduate of Granite High in San Diego, Roth went to Grossmont Junior College, and was an All-America and most valuable player in his conference. At Cal, he took over in the third game of his junior season and led the Golden Bears to eight victories in their next nine games. He passed for 3,669 yards, 21 touchdowns, with a 53.7 completion percentage in two years.

"He was one of the best prospects in the last five years," says Jack White, San Francisco's director of player personnel. "He was in the mold of Jim Plunkett, Bert Jones, and Steve Bartkowski. Most of the top quarterbacks coming out now are back-up types. Roth was a sure front-liner. And since he'd probably have gone to a poor club, he would have to have stood up to a couple years of punishment. But he was the type who could take it."

"Roth's only negative was his speed," says Steinberg. "He would not be a good runner or scrambler, but that is no real problem in the pros."

"Joe was something special. I felt this way from the first time I saw him. He was a great human being with courage and character that would go off the board in any rating system."

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