

Joe Roth Has Already Beaten Biggest Foe

SKIP BAYLESS

Los Angeles Times (1886-Current File); Oct 21, 1976; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Los Angeles Times (1881 - 1985)

pg. D1

Joe Roth Has Already Beaten Biggest Foe

Cal Passer's Most Important Victory Was Over Cancer, So 'Pressures of Football Are Meaningless by Comparison'

BY SKIP BAYLESS

Times Staff Writer

BERKELEY—You notice the billows of golden curls, the sky-blue eyes and the self-assured manner, and you wonder why the nickname "Telegraph Avenue Joe" never stuck.

But as soon as Joe Roth begins to talk—softly and politely—it's apparent: though the University of California quarterback may be the hottest passer to come along since Joe Namath, the only thing Gentleman Joe does like Broadway Joe is throw a football.

He's a can't-miss first-round draft choice, but seems unconcerned about Heisman trophies and seven-figure contracts. He's a big football star, but spends week nights alone at the library, dates only rarely during the season.

He drives a beige Volkswagen and faithfully attends Mass early Sunday mornings. He isn't a smoker, drinker, cussor or carouser. He actually seems to believe his teammates are 90% of his success.

"I have never," says Wesley Walker, Roth's favorite receiver, with a note of awe, "met anybody who isn't the cocky type who is such a good quarterback."

Joe Roth, whom USC must deal

with Oct. 30 in Los Angeles (a knee injury may keep him out of the UCLA game here this week), sees life from a little different angle than most 21-year-old quarterbacks.

Two and a half years ago, he wasn't sure he'd live to celebrate his 21st birthday.

It was May of 1974, and the pigeon-toed, bow-legged 6-3, 160-pound quarterback from San Diego had been ignored by major-college recruiters, who were afraid he might

*'I still view myself
as just . . . Joe Blow
walking down the street'*

get snapped in two playing with the big boys. He had gone to Grossmont, a junior college just outside his hometown, to play a little football and a little baseball and do a lot of studying.

His helmet had been rubbing a mole on the left side of his face raw, so Roth finally went to a dermatologist to have it burned off. When the growth persisted, the doctor ran some tests.

The mole was malignant.

Immediately, surgeons cut five ounces of lymph nodes and salivary

glands out of his neck. Then Joe Roth spent three of the longest days of his life in a San Diego hospital, waiting to see if half his face—or more—would have to be cut away to save him.

"My whole athletic career flashed before me those three days," Roth said in his emotionless nasal monotone. He lifted his hair to reveal a thin pink scar which hooks around his ear and onto his neck. The operation was a success, but it left part of his face with a rubbery texture and his values reordered.

"It made me realize just how important it is to be alive," Roth said. "After you beat something as terrible as cancer, the pressures of football are meaningless by comparison."

Roth built his body up to 185 pounds and was a JC All-American his second season at Grossmont.

From the landslide of major-college offers, he chose Cal—as much for its academic standing as the pass-oriented offense which produced quarterback graduates Steve Bartkowski of Atlanta and Craig Morton of the New York Giants.

Roth sauntered into the second half of the third game last season. With him doing the throwing, Cal



won that one and seven of its last eight to tie UCLA for the Pacific-8 championship. He led the league in passing and total offense. Now, his name is in the Heisman ring, along with Ricky Bell's and Tony Dorsett's.

Still, Joe Roth thinks of himself as "Joe Blow."

"It was amusing to think that after two seasons I had suddenly been transformed into a major-college quarterback," Roth said, maybe a touch sarcastically. "Now it's amusing to pass people on campus and hear them say, 'Hey, that's Joe Roth.' I know that if I weren't playing for a

Please Turn to Page 10, Col. 1

Roth 'One of Best Since Namath'

Continued from First Page

school with a passing offense like ours and so many great athletes, they wouldn't think much of me. All this publicity has surprised me, because if a receiver is open it's really not too difficult to hit him. And ours are open 50 to 75 per cent of the time.

"It's hard to picture myself through other people's eyes because I still view myself as just another Joe Blow walking down the street.

"It's . . . well, it's just amusing. I still think of myself as the kid who wasn't recruited out of high school."

There's considerable contrast between the way Roth sees himself and others see him. Some other views:

—Johnny Unitas: "He can be just as good as he wants to be."

—Bay area Ram scout: "Roth is the best pure passer I've seen since Bert Jones (now with Baltimore)."

—Jack White, San Francisco 49ers vice president of personnel: "We have him rated as the top college quarterback in the country. One of the most impressive things about him is his poise."

—A New Orleans scout: "He just understands how to play the game. He's certainly one of the best since Namath."

—Oklahoma coach Barry Switzer, after his Sooners had survived Roth's second-half passing exhibition, 28-17: "He's the best I've seen as a coach."

Probably the highest praise comes

from Paul Hackett, the new quarterback coach at USC who developed Roth over his first season at Cal. Hackett should have an eye for uncommon talent—he spoon-fed Steve Bartkowski, the first player picked in the pro draft two years ago, and Vince Ferragamo (now at Nebraska), who with Missouri's Steve Pisarkiewicz, should be snapped up just behind Roth in this season's selecting.

"When I went to look at him in junior college, I just had to see him throw one ball and I said, 'That's the guy,'" says Hackett, who figures Roth was one of those inexplicable late bloomers. "He's in a class by himself. Bartkowski had more strength and threw harder, but Joe makes up for velocity with that great ability to anticipate and release quickly. When he sees that open receiver, bang, the ball's out of his hand and that defensive back better be ready because it's going to be there."

Hackett, whose Trojans host Cal a week from Saturday, says Roth is the kind of guy he'd want his daughter to marry. But he just laughs when scouts ask him if Roth is too meek and unassertive to run a pro team.

"I know, it's almost scary how opposite he is from the typical quarterback mold Bart came out of," says Hackett, referring to Bartkowski's eat-drink-and-be-merry reputation.

"But listen, Joe Roth is the best

there is at playing that position and he knows it. You may not think he has the verbal ability to lead a football team, but when you're around him he has that deliberate confidence. He reeks of knowing where he's going and what he wants to do."

Roth appears to have the classic quarterbacking traits: he takes the snap from center and whisks back 10 yards with three long-legged strides, avoids the pass rush with a tap-dancer's niftiness and has a hair-trigger release on his picture-perfect over-the-top delivery.

He can hit Wesley Walker with a 60-yard rainbow, shoot a bullet through a crack between linebackers to tight end George Freitas or float a powder-puff pass over a defensive end to running back Larry Newton.

Through six games, he has hit 105 of 195 throws (53.8%) for 1,323 yards and six touchdowns. And all this against the likes of Georgia, Oklahoma and Arizona State using stop-Roth defenses featuring three down linemen and eight pass defenders. The Golden Bears might not be 3-3 if they had a more consistent running game to complement their air commander.

Pro scouts believe the only thing that could hold Roth back next season is his lack of heft (he may have to beef up another 20 pounds to survive in the big league). Cal coach Mike White says all that's holding

back Roth this season is a desire to be perfect.

"The reason that I think, for him, he's had some bad games (San Jose State, Oregon and last Saturday's unexpected 10-9 loss at Oregon State) is that he wants to do it all himself," says White, obviously disturbed that a quarterback who threw only seven interceptions last year already has 12 this season.

"Joe has tremendous ability to concentrate under a pass rush, which

leads to his accuracy. Our system here is very complicated with a lot of audibilizing and reading (of defenses), and Joe feels that if he stays in there long enough, he can make the perfect throw. We feel he's waiting too damn long.

"But Joe's coming out of it. He's just put so much pressure on himself. But his style always has been to play his best in the critical games."

Indeed, after Roth threw for 379 yards in the 36-24 loss at Georgia and

for 284 at Oklahoma, new quarterback coach Al Saunders was beginning to wonder who was the pupil and who the master.

"Oh, I certainly don't ever have any reason to yell at him," Saunders says. "We just have an intelligent exchange of ideas."

★

Joe Roth listens to all the praise, reads an occasional article and

Please Turn to Page 11, Col. 1

ROTH HAS BEATEN BIGGEST FOE

Continued from 10th Page

shakes his head. He said he plays football because he believes God gave him some ability and because he enjoys the mental—not the physical—challenge of the game.

Winning is a goal, not an obsession.

"I think I'm the best—to a certain extent," Roth said with a detached gaze. "I just try to do my best on every play, just like I try to do each day in life. Like coach White says, there isn't much difference between winning and losing. I just figure winning is a whole lot more fun."

On the bulletin board in an athletic department secretary's office there is a picture of Roth. Though it is surrounded by those of lesser-known athletes, it is signed, "Just another picture . . . Joe Roth."

Around Berkeley, Roth seems to be an enigma. Those who know him say they really don't.

"I guess he talks to me as much as anybody," says Bonnie Coverley, the football secretary who tries to split Roth's time between talking to the media, pro scouts, prospective agents, and answering fan mail. "But sometimes I don't think I really know him—I don't think anybody does. Bart always seemed to be in a hurry. Joe never is."

The only thing Roth watches on TV is football. He likes to relax to soul-soothing music—Jefferson Starship, Loggins and Messina, Seals and Crofts. But most of his free time is spent with nose in playbook or textbook.

Roth has a 3.0 grade-point average in physical education. He wants to get a master's degree and possibly teach or coach.

He doesn't like to date on Saturday nights during the season because he would hate to have to break the date if he were too physically or mentally drained. And he believes it would be unfair to date anyone seriously, for he has no idea where he'll be playing next season. So he seems content to mostly hang around with the guys.

When asked if he has any hobbies, Roth thought for a moment and answered, "Well, I'd like to take up ceramics again when I have time."

"One thing you have to understand about Joe," says his father, Lawrence, who has retired to Twin Falls, Idaho, "is that he was never a little kid. His next oldest brother is 11 years older (Tom quarterbacked Washington State's 1965 team to one of the school's best seasons in recent years). So you see, he had to act like one of the big boys right from the start."

Roth has an idea all the hours he spent by himself throwing a rubber ball against a backyard wall contributed to his shyness. Yet he seems at ease no matter how old or young, liberal or conservative the company.

"I like it at Berkeley because people are interested in so many things besides football," Roth said. "That's why I didn't want to go to some other schools which are known virtually as 'football factories.' You're transformed into some kind of cosmic person."

"Sooner or later, I'll quit playing football. Then how long will the publicity last? Then what will I do?"

How about the Heisman? Wouldn't it mean a lot to you to win it?

"I'm not a symbolist. The Heisman to me is an elusive type trophy. Some players get so totally involved in competing for that that they forget about team success. In our offense, we just take what the defense gives us."

"OK, but doesn't the prospect of making a lot of money next year excite you?"

"Really, it will be something new and strange to me.

I've just earned six or seven hundred dollars working the last two summers. I just come from a middle-class family. I tell the agents to get in touch with my brother Tom. He's handling all that for me."

The reporter finally asked if it would mean just a little something to be able to start for a National Football League team next year.

"There are so many great quarterbacks in the pros," Joe Roth answered, seemingly from the heart, "and the mental process will be so different that I wouldn't mind playing behind somebody and learning for a year or two."