

The Iceman Delivereth

Super cool Joe Roth has taken over Cal's starting quarterback job because of clutch performance under extreme pressure.

By STEVE FIELDS
Sports Editor

Many things can be written about Joe Roth and many things will.

Authors can describe how he won a battle with cancer and then went on in the same year to guide his team to the state junior college championship and earn himself All-American honors.

Or they can write about how a perennial winner of the San Diego punt-pass-and-kick contest grew up to lead one of the nation's leading offensive teams.

Or how after a successful high school career in three sports, the hard throwing quarterback was overlooked by major colleges and was forced to attend a local junior college.

But they all might overlook the reason for all his success. That trait which has enabled him to conquer cancer and also earn the starting job on Cal's football team is cool confidence. He has the ability and the poise to stand unperturbed in the pocket in the face of onrushing mammoth lineman and deliver clutch passes.

He also was able to calmly handle the situation when doctors found a malignant cyst by his left ear. He had it removed in May of last year and still has a scar several inches long extending by his ear and down his neck.

"It was kind of scary," he said. "Now it seems like it never happened. At the time there was some fear and anxiety. It makes me thankful to be alive and playing football."

Just a few months after his surgery, Roth was back guiding Grossmont Junior College's football team. In his first game back, Roth keyed a late scoring drive with several crucial third down

completions to give his team the victory.

It was the same type of performance that led Grossmont to a 10-0-2 record for the year, the state championship and earned him the Bears' starting berth this year.

Joe ended up last season with an incredible 2663 yards passing and 28 touchdowns in route to being named first team JC All-American and Most Valuable Player in the Division II State Playoffs.

His performance brought him offers from all over the West but he decided to go to Cal because he thought he could fit right into the offensive style. "I thought I would have a fairly good chance to play here with Bart leaving," he said, "and the structure of the offense is comparable to what I had been used to."

So far this season Joe has started just one game but his performance in that game and his other brief appearances reveal that he has all the tools necessary to become one of the long line of great Cal quarterbacks. Coach Mike White said after Roth led the Bears to a comeback victory over San Jose State two weeks ago, "The fact that he came up with the big play makes him a great quarterback prospect."

Besides having the knack for coming up with the clutch plays, Roth has all the physical and mental tools necessary to succeed in the pressure-packed position. The 6-4, 205 pound junior has a strong arm and an incredibly quick release. Quarterback coach Paul Hackett said that while Joe doesn't throw the ball as hard as Steve Bartkowski, his release is quicker so the ball gets to the receiver just as fast.

Roth has faced some very crucial situations in his short career and so far has met the challenge. "I try to just take each play one at a time,"

he said. "I guess I have been pretty successful so far. I try not to think about the pressure."

For the first four games White alternated his quarterbacks so that he could evaluate their play and give them both game experience. By last week, it was clear that Roth had won the starting job. The coaches, though, decided not to start him against Oregon because they feared he would aggravate his shoulder injury. But with the game still close at halftime, the coaches decided they had to risk further injury in order to insure the conference victory.

Joe's statistical performance (29 completions out of 59 attempts) hasn't been spectacular. "I've played just average so far," he said. "I've made some good plays but I've made my share of mistakes."

Some of those errors occurred when he turned the wrong direction at the start of the play or called the wrong audible at the line. He said, though, that each week he learns more about Cal's complex offense and soon those mistakes should be corrected.

The pressure should be on the gangly quarterback when the Bears play their crucial games against UCLA and USC. "I'm going to have to play a real excellent game," he said, but added that he doesn't feel any extra pressure.

Joe has gotten a lot of publicity so far in his brief career, but he said it won't get to his head. "It's really good to get publicity and I feel fortunate to get it. But I try not to let my head swell. My success depends on the ten other guys on the field with me." But it seems so far this season Cal's success depends on one guy — Joe Roth.



JOLTIN' JOE ... Cal quarterback Joe Roth looks downfield for an open receiver. Roth won the battle for starting quarterback, but he won a bigger battle by coming back from an operation on a cancerous cyst.

Photo by Russell Kwok

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