

The Book on Joe Roth — A Mother's Lament

JOE ROTH was a campus hero at Cal, a quarterback with a slingshot arm. He was that rare human who could be described as beautiful on the outside and beautiful on the inside.

His naturally wavy, burnished hair covered a handsome, quick-to-smile face. Not even his mother, Lena, said he was goody-perfect, but his sensitivity for the well-being of others shone through to family, teammates, coaches, his priest and friends.

Scouts projected this marvelous athlete for fame and fortune in pro football, while his mentors at Berkeley saw in him a leader wherever his future took him.

Before the 1976 season, he was acclaimed as a Heisman Trophy candidate, prompting *Sports Illustrated* to take a cover picture of him and other hopefuls, to be published when the announcement was made.

It was a baffling season. Roth played well, but not with the fervor and brilliance expected after his junior year. Something was bothering him. He lost

weight, and no amount of food intake could maintain it. About the time of the Cal-Stanford game, ugly splotches appeared on his chest, and he knew then why he had not been feeling well.

He kept his secret, and with every last ounce of his sagging energy struggled to meet commitments in the Big Game, the January East-West Shrine game, where he had been elected captain, then the Hula Bowl and the Japan Bowl in Tokyo.

Joe Roth came home to die of cancer in February 1977. He was only 21.

THE FUNERAL was one of Berkeley's saddest gatherings. Only a few of the thousands who attended could fit inside the church. The kid's fight for life had reached out to all.

A surcharge of \$1 per ticket during two Joe Roth memorial games financed an annual scholarship fund in his name. Donations established a Joe Roth cancer fund at the UC San Francisco School of Medicine. A Joe Roth book was written for a major national publisher.



Joe Roth

Lena and Lawrence Roth, Joe's parents, didn't like the book. To them, it was high-gloss and too distant. The writer had met Joe only three times, so how could he know this young man?

That's how "Joe, His Fight for Life," came to be written by Lena Roth. It's now on the shelves of Berkeley bookstores around the campus. It is a mother's intimate narrative written with great restraint, but it becomes a tugging

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play-by-play, if you will, of her son's final, agonizing hours, when most of the Cal team and many friends stood at his bedside or waited outside.

Mrs. Roth is an inveterate letter writer. When she was 40, she went to college to take English literature and writing courses. After her son was gone, she felt she had to put her feelings on paper. From her home in Jerome, Idaho, she explained the difficulty of getting this book published.

"We went to several major editors," she said, "and they had different reasons for not taking it. They said the story had already been told and mothers would reject it. And, of course, all claimed it was too pure. . . too pure, meaning no deep romance, no overriding sex angle. It wouldn't sell, you see.

"Joe had girlfriends, but no particular one. We think he knew what might happen, after the first hint of cancer when he was in junior college, and he didn't want any one girl to share his pain.

"So we paid for this book ourselves, in a limited edition of finest design and stock. Whatever we make off the \$13.95 price will be given to charity. I don't agree with those editors. I think mothers will accept our story as life itself. I know this — when I reached the last page I felt cleansed within. Up to then I couldn't understand why our boy should be taken. Now I can deal with it."

THE FAMILY had lived in El Cajon. One brother, John, was 14 and another, Tom, was 11 when Joe was born. Naturally, Joe got a lot of

attention in sports from the males in the family. He liked baseball best, but in high school he swung over to football because of the excitement.

There was never a question of grades when it came to selecting a school. The main question was, where would he fit into a given school's football program? He decided on nearby Grossmont Junior College, where the coach needed a crackshot passer, and it paid off. Grossmont won its conference title.

Mike White recruited him to Cal, where Paul Hackett (now with the 49ers) was the quarterback coach. It was some combination — Chuck Muncie (Chargers) to run and receive, Wesley Walker (Jets) and Steve Rivera to catch, and Jim Breech (Bengals) to kick. Roth himself started as second string to Fred Besana (Invaders), and though he beat out Besana, they became close friends.

Cal was 8-3 in 1975 and won the Big Game, 48-15. The following year was to be a smash, even without Muncie. Roth had almost forgotten his fright in junior college, when a "mole" on his neck near the ear was burned off by a dermatologist but later, when it reappeared, was surgically removed and found to be malignant.

Assured that "everything had been taken out," he went on for the next two years, possibly wondering if there would be a recurrence. There was, and it explained, in retrospect, why his passes lacked zip and Besana often took over, and why Cal's season was a disappointing 5-6, including a 27-24 Big Game loss.

But none of that diminished, and his mother's work reminds us, what a special young man Joe Roth was.