

# A PROFILE IN COURAGE

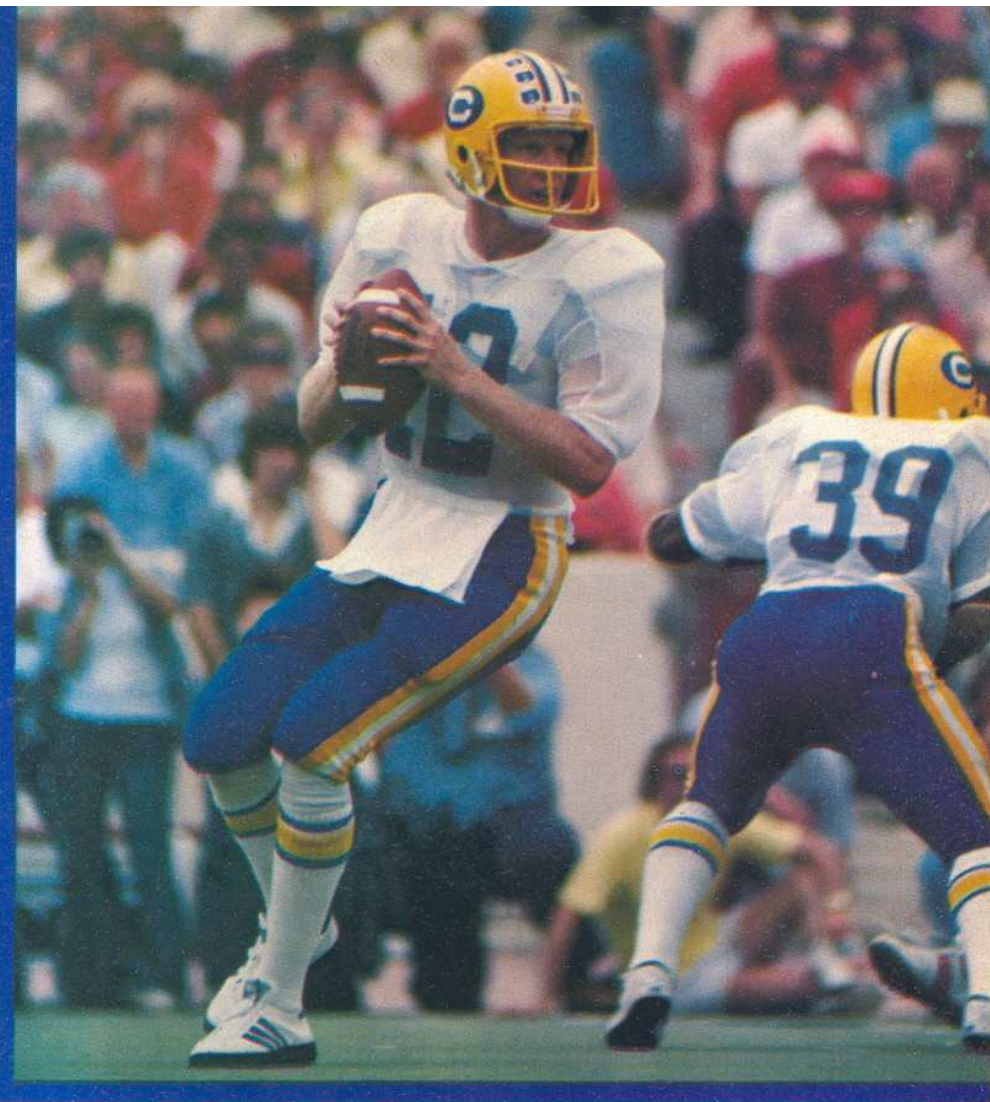
by Wells Twombly

*"Hobart Amory Hare Baker was the ideal of the pre-war age, golden and godlike, as brilliant at football as he was at hockey. There was gallantry and good grace in his world. Everyone who went to Princeton with him wanted to be his equal, or somewhere near. He was modest and generous with his manners. He had gone off to fly for the Lafayette Escadrille and had survived the fighting. When he died in a crash after the armistice, some of us were sure that all gods were untrue and all heroes dead. Slowly, we came to realize that Hobart Baker had known himself better than we knew him or we had known ourselves or could ever hope to know ourselves."*

*—F. Scott Fitzgerald*

**O**n the morning they said the final solemn words over this fine young golden football player, this fallen athlete with a quiet courage and a special grace, the San Francisco newspapers were jammed with stories about professional players who were demanding millions of dollars from their employers because nature had capriciously given them exceptional physiques. There was Joe Roth, perhaps the finest college quarterback in the nation, lying in his coffin, and Fitzgerald's eulogy for Hobey Baker of Princeton kept pouring through the mind. In death he seemed no larger or more appealing than he had in life. He was just the same.

The mourners kept pouring across the



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University of California campus, some dressed in denim, others in three-piece suits and ties, a few in sandals and cutoffs. They came from the whole spectrum of society. Old men who had bought season tickets before Pappy Waldorf's Rose Bowl teams were born sobbed right next to small children who had only seen Joe Roth in television films, while post-hippie types wept at the side of middle-aged, football-worshipping ex-fraternity men.

The young man who evoked this range of emotion was an All-America, All-Pac-Eight quarterback and a brilliant, record-setting passer. Pro scouts had come to Berkeley and watched him studiously. They called him the best pure passer to come out of college football since Joe Namath a decade earlier. They said he was even better than Steve Bartkowski, which is high praise indeed. The latter had preceded him at Cal and was selected first in the annual pro football draft.

Joe Roth was an exceptional athlete, but the thing that made him stand out in the hearts of those close to him was that he was an extraordinary human being. He died of cancer late last winter, just a few months after the football season, but the

way he dealt with the cancer while he was still alive will be remembered a long time.

He had had a malignant tumor removed when he was still in junior college, and felt sure he had been cured. By his second season at Cal, his senior year there, he was being touted for the Heisman Trophy, college football's highest honor. But midway through the season he discovered a recurrence of the melanoma, a particularly lethal form of the disease. Undergoing treatment with no public announcement of the problem, Joe completed the football season, passing for 1,789 yards (fifth best nationally), and continued to lead a normal campus life. Instead of dropping out or moving back home, he remained active in his classes, played on an intramural basketball team, and helped his coaches with recruiting.

Even late, when it became obvious that the situation was deteriorating, his positive outlook and acceptance of the situation made it so much easier for his friends and family. His approach to life in those final weeks and months served as an inspiration, eliciting such comments as "a phenomenal guy," "great courage and a desire to live," "so positive and hopeful,"

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**—Deeply moved by Joe Roth's courageous battle for life, Wells Twombly eagerly volunteered to write this article. And while applying the finishing touches, Twombly himself was waging a fight for his life, a fight he would lose on Memorial Day, 1977, at age 41. A 1957 University of Connecticut graduate, Wells was a sports columnist for the San Francisco Examiner since 1970. He was named California Sportswriter of the Year four times and selected one of the nation's six top sportswriters by Esquire Magazine in 1974. He authored four books, the last published earlier this year, 200 Years of Sport in America.

and "never complaining."

This was a genuine hero in the classic American sense. He was a profile in courage and decency, dead long before his time. He had deep faith and honest modesty. In a cynical age, with people losing the ancient belief that college athletics builds character, Joe Roth had escalated everyone's values. Despite the cancer, he was more fretful about upsetting other people who might have worried about him than sitting around contemplating his own impending doom. He touched so many people in so many ways that, as Hemingway said, he could not help but die cleanly and well. He was a young man who had softened the hearts of "the most cynical and far-out campus in the country," said one observer.

Before Christmas, a writer asking for a story said, "Joe, I'd like to see you and do a magazine piece on you now that the college season is over. They think you may be drafted first by the pros and I just want to do something light and pleasant on how it feels. I did a story like that on Steve (Bartowski) a few years back. When can I meet with you?"

Well, he said, the timing was a little off. Cancer had flared up again and he preferred not to have it made public. He had these two desires. Joe Roth wanted to graduate from Cal and he wanted to be drafted in the first round by the National Football League. And, by heaven, he was going to accomplish both if he could just be given time enough. He had a 3.2 grade average in the school of physical education and there were so many teams after him that it was almost ludicrous.

This was not the sort of athlete who would insult a newsman with arrogant indifference. Joe Roth would talk to anyone as long as they wanted to talk to him. He considered it a singular compliment that somebody would consider him that important, even though he was the best quarterback around. What's more, he didn't want to hire an agent, preferring to trust his own good instincts. There was a period when the University of California at Berkeley was considered to have an aura of anti-American spirit, but Roth was not afraid to challenge that myth. He was his own man and wanted people to enjoy football again, but he didn't want to be made out a pathetic character.

"I'd really appreciate it if you didn't mention the fact that the thing has come back," he said. "I've licked it once before and I'm going to try to do it again. Don't tell anybody else about it. I don't want to be thought of as a freak. So I'm Joe Roth, the quarterback from Cal; that doesn't make



**Joe Roth never wanted to be thought of as anything but plain old Joe.**

me special at all. If the guy who sold papers at the corner had the same thing, nobody would care. They took that black mole out from behind my ear a couple of years ago. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

Joe Roth was a young man of great character and decency, his courage deeply grounded in religious faith. He was a special kind of human being, the kind who would lead a 41-year-old newspaper columnist to remark (after his first meeting and interview) that he wished his daughter could find someone like that when she was old enough to get married.

It was an emotional thing to say, and in two years at California, Joe never did anything that would make him change his mind. He was always pleasant and always courteous. When another writer called him to ask why he hadn't been able to play in the East-West Game, he gave one of those "aw shucks" statements. There was an ache in his back, and he'd been losing weight, but he'd be willing to sit still for an interview in a week or two. He just wanted to be in the Hula Bowl and play a few downs.

By mid-January, many California sportswriters knew. But keeping faith with Joe Roth seemed awfully important, even at the risk of deceiving one's colleagues. Oh, Joe was fine, just fine. No, there was no recurrence of the cancer. Back in the office, a reporter called a doctor, and the medical-type said that it was hopeless. But Joe was one of those people whom you could lie about and not feel guilty. It seemed like an intelligent matter and nobody from the San Francisco Bay

Area wanted to let him down, because he was spending his last few weeks on the planet talking to groups of people who, like him, had terminal diseases.

He never kept the appointment for that interview. He was going to speak to a large gathering, as many as 450 people; afterwards, he was going to visit with a San Francisco columnist and talk about coping with cancer. His doctor told the writer that Joe Roth had maybe three months at the most because the disease was spreading; don't count on talking to him. The doctor was right. On the evening he was to speak, he was back in the hospital, having taken a sudden turn for the worse.

Ironically, he was going to talk on how he had overcome cancer. It was to have been his first public statement on actually being a cancer victim.

One teammate, tackle Ted Albrecht, was absolutely stunned by Joe Roth's courage. "I don't know how he can live with that thing, or how he can handle it so easily. He just calms everybody with his courage. A lot of writers are sitting on this story. They know about it and they won't use it because they like him. I think they are tired of athletes who think only of themselves. Nobody will ever say that about Joe."

In the East-West Game in Palo Alto it was reported that Roth had a bad back and couldn't play. People who watched him knew that he had lost weight. He was down around 175 pounds and he seemed almost unable to carry the weight of the shoulder pads he would have to wear. The cancer was getting much worse, affecting almost every part of his body. In the Hula Bowl in Hawaii he played a few downs and threw some passes and took a modest beating from some defensive linemen who were aware of his situation and tried to knock him down gently, but with respect. Then in the Japan Bowl, he completed five passes for 100 yards and walked away a happy man. A little more than a month later he was dead.

"Dying is not so tough," he said to a friend. "For the last three years I've lived with the realization that the next day might be my last. I'm lucky to be here as long as I was, so don't feel any pity. A lot of people younger than me and older than me have to face up to this sort of thing. I'm nothing special. I'm just Joe Roth, a student and a football player."

But what he did possess was the ability to soften the hearts of students and cynical sportswriters alike. When it became obvious to him that it was all over, he told the doctors that he was leaving the hospital to be with his family and friends, and

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on February 19, 1977, at 3:55 p.m. (PST) he died with his friends and family around him.

A close friend, John Matlock, gave the eulogy at the high requiem mass. He said that Joe Roth never wanted to be thought of as anything but plain old Joe, all that talk about All-America selections and Heisman Trophies notwithstanding. He went on to talk about Joe Roth singing off key in the shower, overcooking meatloaf, and drinking beer with the boys. He didn't date much, Matlock explained, because he was afraid that if he got involved, he'd want to get married and what kind of a life would it be for a wife to have to move from city to city while he played professional football? He figured after he established himself he'd have plenty of time to indulge in romance.

"I had to include some funny stuff," said Matlock, "because Joe wouldn't have it any other way. He didn't have too many close friends because he was afraid something might happen and he didn't know how many people could handle this sort of thing. He was afraid that if he got close to a girl and he died, it might mark her for life. I think he knew all along this was going to happen, so he kind of backed off." Other of Roth's friends added that he was basically shy.

When a man of courage dies, it doesn't mean he's forgotten. They talked about naming Cal's Stadium after him, which would have made Joe Roth deeply uncomfortable had they discussed it with him while he was alive. But the president of the student government, with the full support of vice-chancellor Robert Kerley, sent a letter to the head of the physical education department asking that he be granted a posthumous degree since he obviously would have earned one. The UC athletic department established a scholarship fund in his name, and scheduled a Joe Roth Memorial Game for this fall. There is also a melanoma cancer fund in his memory.

"It may be a long time before I really come to understand what Joe gave to us... what his legacy was," said head coach Mike White. "He had this most amazing courage. He never feared dying. Other people would have given up long before he did, but he never ceased fighting. They tell me people in his position usually get bitter. But he was still making jokes and laughing and all that. So when I think of him, I laugh. If I don't do that, I know I'll be letting him down. So I laugh and... if I didn't... I know damn well I'd cry. To say that he was an inspiration just isn't enough." ●