

# ROTH NOT JUST AN ORDINARY JOE

**By Tim Haran**

AT SAN DIEGO'S GRANITE HILLS High School, quarterback Joe Roth chose to wear No. 12 because it was the number worn by New York Jets star "Broadway Joe" Namath.

Fans at Cal tried, but the moniker "Telegraph Joe" Roth never caught on even though Roth probably meant as much to the city of Berkeley as Namath did to New York.

The 6-foot-4 Roth, with his wavy blonde hair, charismatic smile and pleasant demeanor, knew nicknames weren't important. At Cal he wanted to be known simply as Joe, just as he always had been. Unlike Namath, whose flamboyance was legendary, Roth wasn't a flashy player and off the field he avoided drawing attention to himself.

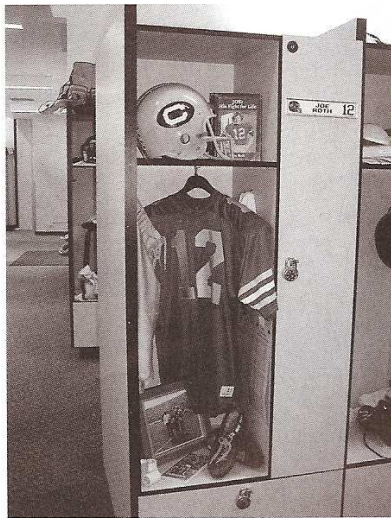
"If you didn't know he was the quarterback, you wouldn't guess it," said former teammate Jack Clark. "He had a lot of humility to him and was very quiet and unassuming."

As a quarterback, Roth was masterful at maintaining a level head and proper perspective. He also understood that football played only a small part in a world filled with enormous obstacles. Roth's desire to win was obvious, but his appreciation for life was unmatched.

Roth, an All-American transfer student from Grossmont Junior College in El Cajon, Calif., arrived in Berkeley in 1975. After losing quarterback Steve Bartkowski to graduation the previous season, the Bears were looking for someone with a strong arm and proven leadership ability to run the offense.

Fred Besana, Bartkowski's backup in 1974, and Roth competed for starting quarterback duties. The more experienced Besana got the nod. Roth waited patiently, continued to learn the complex offensive scheme and, after a solid backup performance against Washington State in which he completed 13 of 23 passes for 182 yards, got his first start as a Golden Bear the following week.

Roth led Cal to victory in seven of the



**Joe Roth's No. 12 is the only number retired in the 119-year history of Cal football.**

eight games he started. The Bears finished the season with an 8-3 mark and captured a share of the Pac-8 Championship.

Roth averaged a conference-leading 184 yards passing per game, including a record-setting 380-yard performance against Washington. As a team Cal averaged 458 yards per game and was the epitome of a balanced offense, gaining 2,522 yards passing and 2,522 yards rushing.

"From a pure football standpoint, Joe was one of the most outstanding quarterbacks I was ever involved with," said former Cal coach Mike White, who also coached such quarterbacks as Jim Plunkett, Tony Eason and Jeff George. "He had all the key ingredients you look for - tremendous accuracy and anticipation, a quick release and an unbelievable temperament."

Entering his senior season in 1976, Roth was one of three Heisman candidates and had been named to several pre-season All-American teams.

"There's no doubt in my mind that he would have been the first player picked in the NFL draft and would have had a tremendous pro career," White said.

Roth started the season strong, compiling 372 yards against Georgia. But prior to

the Arizona State game doctors informed Roth that an X-ray showed a spot on his lung. Later they said it was simply a flaw on the X-ray film. At any rate, Roth was worried.

Dr. Jerry Patmont, Cal's former team physician, knew that Roth had a malignant melanoma removed from his cheek when he was 19 years old. As a precaution, Dr. Patmont took X-rays of the quarterback's chest every six months. Still, Roth kept his condition quiet, and it wasn't until December 1976 that Roth showed the doctor several lumps on his chest.

"He took off his T-shirt and was covered with moles," Patmont said. "I almost fainted."

Two months later, on Feb. 19, 1977, Roth died at his apartment in Berkeley surrounded by family, friends and teammates.

"He was great to everybody," said former Bear Greg Peters. "He was one of the best quarterbacks in the country, yet he was still just Joe. His notoriety and position on the team never affected him."

"He was an All-American quarterback," Besana said. "But he was a much better person than he was a player."

In 1977 Roth's No. 12 jersey was retired. He was inducted into the Cal Hall of Fame in 2000 and each year the football team selects a player who's demonstrated courage and sportsmanship to receive the Joe Roth Award.

Throughout his life and even up until his death, Roth never felt sorry for himself, placed blame or asked why cancer struck him, someone with such a bright future.

"Even in the final days of his life, you talk about a tough kid," said former Cal coach Roger Theder. "He never complained, was always in good spirits. It was unbelievable."

And through it all he never lost perspective of what mattered most.

"I feel all right," Roth told reporter Byron Rosen six weeks before his death. "I never expected to get this far. I'm just happy to be alive and be here. I can feel this scar under my ear and realize what's really most important in life."