

Cal hasn't forgotten Joe Roth

By Jay Heater

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BERKELEY - Along with his spikes and uniform, the memory of Joe Roth is sealed inside a seven-foot locker at Memorial Stadium.

Every day Cal's football players dress alongside the locker, striving to become football stars in their own right, each trying to make a difference. They hardly notice the blue No. 12 jersey, the tattered yellow pants, the helmet with the "C."

"People make a lot of movies that aren't as powerful as this story," said former Cal coach Mike White, who was the coach in 1975-76 when Roth exploded on the scene as the Golden Bears' quarterback. "This story would teach people something."

Thirty years later, Roth's story is a compelling study of courage under the most dire of circumstances.

Projected to be a high NFL draft pick after his senior season at Cal, Roth instead was subjected to the horrors of melanoma. Succumbing to the disease only three months after playing in the 1976 Big Game -- the final game of his senior season at Cal -- Roth left an impact on those around him that still burns bright 30 years later.

"Words can hardly express the type of young man he was ... the courage he had," White said. "I was just in the moment supporting him, being next to him. I was following his inspiration. I've talked with my family about Joe many times since."

Throughout his travels in college football and the NFL -- which included head coaching stops at the University of Illinois and with the Raiders -- White said that no person has made a similar impact on him. Many others who experienced Roth, who died at age 21, felt the same way.

"First off, he was a tremendous quarterback with a really quick release," said Cal rugby coach Jack Clark, who was an offensive tackle for the Bears in 1976. "He was a preseason All-American with great decision-making ability. He had all the tools to be the top quarterback in the draft.

"Additionally, he had this cool about him. Every time Joe Montana is described as having this cool sense of control, I think of Joe (Roth). I've never been in a huddle with Joe Montana, but I was in the huddle with Joe Roth, and that was him."

Roth was 6-foot-4, had blonde hair, a ready smile and a great sense of humor. People just wanted to get close to him.

"Everybody wanted to be Joe Roth," Clark said.

John Matlock found out why.

"Joe and I met at Memorial Stadium on the football field in the spring of 1975," Matlock said. "I went out for place-kicker, and Mike White gave me a chance. It turned out my competition was Jim Breech, so I turned in my uniform the next day.

"I guess Mike (White) and Joe saw me sitting up in the stands feeling bad, and they told me that Joe was looking for a roommate. So we went to Top Dog and began to get to know each other. He moved in with me in August of 1975."

That began a heart-wrenching journey of incredible highs and lows.

"I cherish the fact that I got to know him," Matlock said. "I have thought of him every day since he died. He was kind of on the shy side, and I think that's why we clicked.

"He wanted to get away from football at the end of the day, and he wanted to talk about subjects other than football. He drank Coors, and I taught him about wine. He made a mean meat loaf, and he sang off-key in the shower."

Roth's first season at Cal in 1975 almost ended at the Rose Bowl. With other premier players such as running back Chuck Muncie and wide receivers Steve Rivera and Wesley Walker, the Bears (8-3) tied UCLA for the Pac-8 title but lost the head-to-head match against the Bruins, who got the Rose Bowl berth.

Fred Besana, who eventually played for the Bills and the Giants in the NFL, was Cal's starting quarterback for the first two games of the 1975 season. Roth took over in the third game.

It didn't stop the two quarterbacks from becoming close friends.

"It was a little bit different situation, but it was pretty hard not to root for Joe," Besana said. "He was a great guy, and he never had a bad word for anyone. We did compete, but at the same time, only one guy could play."

Roth put up great numbers for the period -- 1,880 passing yards, 14 touchdowns and seven interceptions. There was talk that he would be a favorite for the Heisman the next season.

Cal's media relations department distributed quotes from Jack White, the 49ers vice president of personnel.

"We have him rated as the top quarterback in the country," White said. "We expect him to be a first-round pick."

While his stock was soaring, Roth became close friends with Matlock. Roth told his roommate that he had a bout with melanoma in May of 1974 while he attended Grossmont Community College in El Cajon.

"He had a bothersome mole on the side of his face," Matlock said. "They did a biopsy on it, and it turned out to be malignant. They took five ounces off the lymph node on the side of his face. It looked like he would lose his sophomore year at Grossmont, but he came back and got his starting position back."

By the time Roth arrived at Cal, everyone thought he had beaten the cancer. He was the hottest quarterback on the West Coast, and after the 1975 season, he was invited to a dinner where sportswriters were set to honor him. Instead, Roth went elsewhere.

"My stepfather passed away from leukemia on Dec. 5, 1975," Matlock said. "Joe blew off his dinner and came to the funeral. He thought it was more important to support me."

It was Matlock's turn to support Roth in 1976. After playing brilliantly in losses to Georgia and Oklahoma to start the season, Roth was told by team doctors that they thought X-rays had shown spots on his lung. Roth had been told that if his cancer were to return, it would show up in his lungs.

Upon closer examination, Roth's doctors told him that a flaw in the X-rays made it look like there were spots, but that he was clear.

"They decided it was a flaw, that there was nothing to it," said Roth's mom, Lena, 87. "I don't think Joe ever bought that."

In the third game of the season, the Bears beat Arizona State, but Roth played poorly.

"He was horrible," Besana said. "(Quarterbacks coach) Al Saunders came up to me on the sideline and said, 'What's wrong with Joe?' I said, 'I don't know.'"

"We all knew there were some issues, but nobody knew they were as dire as they turned out to be. Looking back on it, there is no question that it weighed heavy on his mind. But he never said anything."

Bob Orr, Cal's head trainer for 29 years through 1994, said he had no clue Roth had something other than the normal football injuries.

"He never came to me with any of that," Orr said. "I didn't know he was sick. He was an amazing young man."

Cal running backs coach Roger Theder could see Roth's play slipping that season, but he also knew that Cal lost Muncie and Rivera from the 1975 team, so problems were expected. Even so, he had come to expect more on the field from Roth.

"Imagine playing and knowing that the cancer had returned," said Theder, who knew of Roth's bout with cancer at Grossmont. "But Joe hid it so well. We didn't know for sure what was wrong, but he wasn't the same kid."

At home, Matlock knew something was wrong.

"Midway through the season, he would eat dinner and then he would throw up in the bushes," Matlock said. "At first we thought he had the flu. But it started to happen more frequently. To me, it didn't bode well. I told him he needed to see a doctor."

Instead, Roth fought his way through the rest of the season, until Cal finished with a 27-24 loss to Stanford that left it at 5-6. By then, Roth had small lumps all over his body.

He told White, who immediately got medical help for Roth. Unfortunately, there was nothing doctors could do.

"It was Dec. 5, 1976," Matlock recalled. "Myself, Mike White and Joe's brother, Tom, took him to the UCSF hospital. They had gotten the confirmation of all the tests and scans. I didn't have an inkling to the severity.

"Joe came out of that meeting. His wish was that he did not want the public to know. He didn't want the sporting community to know. We drove back to Berkeley and not a word was spoken. Joe had been given a death sentence.

"At our apartment, I remember he received three letters. One was from the Hula Bowl congratulating him for being selected. The other was from the Japan Bowl, congratulating him for being selected. The third letter was from his mom, who said she was looking forward to seeing him over Christmas. It was the only time I saw him break down and cry.

"He always was thinking of others. He wanted to make people as comfortable as possible."

White was about to embark on one of the toughest periods of his life. He was the coach of all three all-star games that had selected Roth. White kept Roth's secret, plus drove him to chemotherapy appointments.

"I was coaching the East-West Shrine Game, and we were able to say he couldn't play because of a bad back," White said. "His thought was, 'I'm not going to complain.'"

"We got on an airplane to the Hula Bowl without anyone having a clue."

Los Angeles Times sportswriter Skip Bayless had a clue and followed Roth to Hawaii, calling his room until he finally agreed to an interview. Bayless broke the story.

"I was with some teammates in the locker room when I heard," Clark said. "It hit me like a ton of bricks. I had no idea."

Roth played briefly in the Hula Bowl but couldn't perform very well. The word was out and he knew the end was near.

But White and Roth had one more football trip to make. They flew to the Japan Bowl.

"The Japanese had no idea," White said. "Here was this All-American boy and they loved him. He sat there, it seemed like a couple of hours, signing autographs. He ended up having a heck of a game.

"That was January 18. He passed away on February 19."

The last month was a series of doctors visits and goodbyes. White tried to be there as much as possible.

"We just dropped everything," White said. "That person, that family was more important than any football game."

If White couldn't be around, his wife, Marilyn, would check on Roth as much as possible.

"Mike and Marilyn White went way beyond the line of duty to help us," said Lena Roth, who now lives with Joe's father, Larry, in Wenatchee, Wash. "When Joe had his first chemo, Coach White, John Matlock and his priest went with him and sat with him the whole night. Coach White told him if he got really sick, he should come to his house, which he did.

"And Coach White kept in real close contact with us, telling us his condition. Finally, he called and said it was time for us to come."

Roth was relegated to the hospital, but he told doctors he wanted to go home to his apartment in Berkeley.

"In the end, Joe took charge of his life," White said.

Hundreds of people attended Roth's funeral at the Newman Center in Berkeley on Feb. 22, 1977. Hundreds more crammed close to the doors of the building because they couldn't get inside.

"I couldn't even comprehend it," Clark said. "As you get older, you have more perspective on life. I was 21. I had never had a friend die. I never had anyone in my life die. It just didn't seem possible and it seemed amazingly unfair. I remember being angry."

White spoke to the overflow crowd.

"I feel I am on his team, for he was playing a much grander game -- the game of life," White said at the time.

A few days after the funeral, White talked with his players about honoring Roth.

"Our (Cal) kids made a patch ... Humility and Courage, Number 12. I don't know if the team wore it in 1977 or not. The point is, these words were an example ... a lesson to everyone."

Roth's No. 12 is the only retired jersey in the history of Cal football.

"It has been 30 years, and people are still talking about Joe," Lena Roth said. "Most people pass away, and they are forgotten about in such a short time. Thirty years is a long time."

"Thirty years?" Besana said, choking up as he thought of Roth. "It doesn't seem like that long ago. I only notice it when I look in the mirror.

"But I do think of him. And I smile."

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