

Joe Roth's Legacy

His quiet fight until the end leaves friends remembering his courage

BY SKIP BAYLESS

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BERKELEY—They came in blue jeans and three-piece suits, sandals and high heels. There were small children, senior citizens, parents and teammates. There were many who had seen him only from a distance.

They began filling the Roman Catholic Newman Hall, just across the street from his University of California apartment, an hour and a half before his funeral Mass of the Resurrection was celebrated Tuesday evening. Blacks, whites, yellows. Catholics, Protestants, Jews. Some who believed, some who didn't.

Some cried, some prayed. Not until it was over—not until his coffin had been carried out—did it seem to sink in for many: Joe Roth, who excelled as few have at living and playing football, had been struck down by cancer at age 21.

"This has been tough to deal with," Cal coach Mike White said, "tough to figure out. There just aren't words in our language to describe what an impact he's had on all of us . . ."

Seemingly, the only way to describe Joe Roth's life is with clichés. The phrases most often repeated over the last two years

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are: quiet confidence . . . quiet courage . . . deep faith . . . never complained . . . unbelievably modest . . . did unto others . . . something special.

At a small gathering following the service, friends and relatives said things like: "We were lucky we had him as long as we did . . . no matter how much he suffered, he was more concerned with not upsetting us . . . he fought till the very end."

The fact that Joe Roth may have been the first player—ahead of Tony Dorsett and Ricky Bell—selected in this year's National Football League draft brought his struggle national attention. But Tuesday night, no one seemed concerned about losing a gifted quarterback.

Most seemed more distressed about losing Joe Roth.

Those close to him fear that outsiders may dismiss their eulogies as just emotional gushing. They say they were saying the same things two years ago.

"You hear about this guy," said Paul Hackett, who coached Roth at Cal two seasons ago before moving to USC, "and you want to

'He just wanted to go back home—back to his apartment—and be in peace'

say, 'Is he for real?' He was so special that it's just very difficult for others to comprehend.

"This whole thing has hit a lot of people in the face, made them sit down and examine their own lives, what direction they're going . . ."

Joe Roth touched many people in many ways. Those he played with knew him as the quarterback who let his passing do his talking. Those he lived with knew him as "just one of the guys"—the kid with the billows of blond, curly hair and the laughter in his eyes. Those he worshipped with remember his deep conviction and strength.

Students—football fans or not—still talk about the "special vibrations" they got when they passed him on campus.

"It's amazing to me," said the Rev. Michael Hunt, a close friend of Roth's, "that he has broken the hearts of students on one of the most cynical, 'far-out' campuses in the country. Whether they were churchgoers or not, they knew inside that this guy really had it—that he represented the best of what the human spirit could be. He stood for goodness and decency—not in a stupid or sentimental way but in a profound way."

But, most important, no matter how he succeeded or how he suffered, Joe Roth always seemed to think of himself as "Joe Blow."

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It began while he was a freshman at Grossmont College near San Diego, a skinny 150-pound quarterback "too small" to play major college football. He nicked the mole on the left side of his face while shaving, then irritated it yanking his helmet on and off.

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The Spirit of Joe Roth Lives on

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That mole soon proved to be malignant melanoma, or black-mole cancer. Surgeons cut five ounces of lymph nodes and salivary glands out of his neck. Then Joe Roth spent three of the longest days of his life waiting to see whether half his face—or more—would have to be cut away to save him.

Roth said later, "It made me realize just how important it is to be alive. After you beat something as terrible as cancer, the pressures of football are meaningless by comparison."

Roth talked at length about the experience with Father Hunt.

"He was tested then," the priest said, "and he reordered his priorities. That was the strength of Joe Roth. He knew that from then on, all other setbacks were minor—that he would be more concerned about the bigger issue of facing God."

The next season, Roth returned and became a junior college All-American at Grossmont. His first year at Cal, he

"Can you imagine," one Cal student said as he waited for Tuesday night's service to begin, "living on the cutting edge of life with such a keen awareness of your mortality? For three years he lived every day with the reality that it might be his last. That would have a profound effect on anybody's psyche. It was amazing he maintained the generosity and competitive edge he did."

When Roth went home for Thanksgiving, he noticed a number of tiny lumps under the skin of his chest and shoulders. Those close to him say that Joe Roth knew his fate. But he refused to accept it lying down.

"I like the cliché about looking at the glass as either half full or half empty," Roth said during his preparation for the Hula Bowl the first week in January. "I see it as half full."

He underwent a series of nauseating chemotherapy treatments—sometimes taking quadruple doses. He lost his zest, his strength, some weight.

Still, Roth completed five of six passes for nearly 100 yards in his last game—the Japan Bowl. He returned to Berkeley and, like his buddies, enrolled for the winter quarter. He played on the Rejects, an intramural basketball team. He helped with recruiting.

He never asked for sympathy.

"Right now, I'm thinking positively," he said in Hawaii. "But if everyone starts coming up and feeling sorry for me, I'm afraid it will make me start feeling the same way. I mean, I fear I won't be the same Joe Roth anymore. Instead, I'll be Joe Roth the underdog, the guy everybody feels sorry for. I don't want that."

Feb. 8, he was out on the Cal practice field, throwing, hoping and saying, "Someday we'll laugh about all this." Feb. 10, he was hospitalized.

The disease spread quickly, eating away his vital organs. When blood clots developed in his legs, Dr. Michael Friedman said they would have to be amputated to prolong his life. Joe Roth just asked his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Roth of Twin Falls, Ida., to take him back to his apartment.

"Joe didn't fear dying," his father said. "He didn't complain about the suffering—most people would have given up 10 days earlier. But he didn't like the thought of being disabled. He just wanted to go home—back to his apartment—and be in peace."

Roth had been getting pain-killing morphine shots every hour and half. He was so excited about being home that he didn't ask for one for five hours.

Members of the football team took three-hour shifts to watch over Roth and keep him company. He didn't sleep much over those last two days. But, those who cared for him said he remained alert and congenial.

"At first, they (the football players) weren't sure how to act around him," said his sister-in-law, Kim Roth, who with Cal football secretary Bonnie Miller administered the shots. "But after a while it was amazing to see how gentle they got, propping him up and wiping his forehead."

Saturday afternoon, Roth's breathing slowed. He talked for about 20 minutes by phone to Dr. Friedman, saying he was "feeling fine." He apologized to everyone for "imposing" on them. He draped his arms around Kim Roth and Bonnie Miller, and hung his aching legs off the bed.

He tried to smile and asked Bonnie if she wanted to dance.

"Then," she said, "he coughed up some of the stuff in his lungs, took one more breath, and that was it. We laid him down, and somehow he looked so peaceful."

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It was toughest, the players said, to watch his gifted body steadily wasting away. Excess fluid puffed his stomach out to where, as his mother said, "he looked pregnant."

"You just didn't know what to say, what to talk about," said quarterback Fred Besana, one of his closest friends on the team. "You could only say, 'How are you feeling?' so many times. You didn't want to talk about 'later.' And you

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Joe Roth Shielded Others From Pain

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didn't want to act like Mr. Jolly. He understood what was going on. If it wasn't Joe, it could really have been tough on us."

Each of the 10 people who were with him when he died has his own Joe Roth anecdote. To the end, he was cracking one-liners.

To Al Saunders, his quarterback coach, Roth said, "Who are you recruiting in the hospital?" When they returned to the apartment, Paul Hackett said Roth had him "rolling on the floor" with jokes about throwing interceptions.

"He still cracked jokes," his mother said. "But he couldn't smile like he used to. That's what I missed most. They warned us that many people in his condition get bitter and say things they don't mean. Not Joe."

There was no history of cancer in the Roth family. Why the disease singled out Joe Roth in the prime of his life no one is sure.

"I certainly wish I knew the answer," said Dr. Friedman, who does cancer research at the UC Medical Center.

So do many who jammed Newman Hall.

"This has made a lot of people on this campus face their mortality," said one student. "You ask yourself, why Joe, with all the rapists and murderers running around? But obviously he mastered the ability of living each day to the fullest—a lesson many of us never learn."

Paul Hackett, who helped bring out Roth's talent during his first year at Cal, remembers the quarterback's blend of calm and competitiveness. But the last couple of weeks, he's done some thinking about Roth's faith in God.

"I guess not many people really realized the magnitude of his faith," Hackett said. "We've had to deal with whatever happens after life. There just has to be some message here, and it isn't on the surface. There's something deeper . . ."

"But it hurts me to think about what an example Joe could have been for years to come. We need Joe Roths—athletes who understand that they were *blessed* with all this ability and what an effect they can have on other people. Too many today are in athletics for the dollars and cents.

"Joe taught all of us gratitude and how to have strength from within. Eric Anderson (who may take Roth's place at quarterback next year) said it best. He said he was so fortunate to have been the friend of the person who was his idol."

Joe Roth was a mixture of ordinary and extraordinary . . . When he spoke—which wasn't often in public—his voice was a nasal drone. He exasperated his coaches with his almost lackadaisical approach to football. He "bitched

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and moaned." about everyday hassles just like the rest of the players, Bonnie Miller said. Roth the perfectionist once refused to run a play in practice until a different football was substituted.

Asked whether Roth ever broke down in private, roommate John Matlock said, "Well, I'd rather not talk about that."

Father Hunt doesn't want anyone to remember Roth as anything but human.

"Joe certainly wouldn't want himself elevated to some kind of a god," he said. "Sure, I want to ask myself why Joe didn't get a fair shake, but Jesus didn't get a fair shake either.

"When people ask me why Joe died so young, I tell them that if he had lived 47 years, played pro ball and coached, his death wouldn't have had the impact it did."

The morning after Roth's funeral Mass, a freshman student stopped Father Hunt on the street and said, "I sure wish I could have met Joe Roth."

"And I answered, 'You will.' Whatever is Joe Roth will live forever."

For John Matlock, Roth's best friend, it has been a time of grief and enlightenment. Matlock, just an "ordinary" guy who didn't play on the football team, never really thought of Roth as anything other than "normal."

"It's just beginning to sink in how privileged I was to know him as well as I did," Matlock said. "From the first time we met (two years ago) when he was just another football player struggling to make the squad, he never changed. I guess that's why it's tough for me to think of him as anything but plain old Joe."

In the eulogy he read before the Mass, Matlock referred to Roth's singing off-key in the shower, overcooked meat-loaf and love for lying in the sun and looking at photo albums or drinking a couple of beers with the boys.

"I had to use some humor," Matlock said. "Joe wouldn't have liked it if I didn't."

A few weeks before he died, Roth agreed with Matlock that maybe he should leave something behind in the form of notes or even some of the lyrics he loved to write, and he put some things on paper. Matlock plans to use some of the more intimate details of Roth's struggle in a book he may collaborate on. He said there's been talk of a TV movie—as long as it wouldn't get as mushy as "Brian's Song" did.

Besides his parents, the only two who really saw Roth's personal side were Matlock and Bonnie Miller, who is married. Roth cherished his privacy. He didn't date much, explaining to Matlock that "I don't know which city I'll be playing pro ball in next year. It wouldn't be right to establish a relationship."

Paul Hackett believes Roth had another motive.

"He didn't have many close friends," Hackett said. "Only a few people he thought could handle all this. Hey, I think he knew all along something was going to happen to him. He didn't want to get too close and hurt too many people.

"And that says it all about Joe Roth—and about life."