

Remembering Joe Roth

Cancer took dynamic QB 30 years ago

John Crumpacker, Chronicle Staff Writer

Monday, February 19, 2007



Locker No. 12 at Memorial Stadium contains a helmet, jersey, pants, cleats, three rolls of tape, a team roster, a photo and two books. Standard stuff for an athlete's dressing stall except this one is sealed in Plexiglass.

The player with the locker next to this one, cornerback Syd'Quan Thompson, will not have to worry about being crowded by his neighbor to the left.

That's Joe Roth's locker. Thirty years ago today, the archetypal All-American boy died at 21 when a particularly virulent form of melanoma swept through his body for a second time.

Many of the men who coached him are now retired and reflective. The guys who played with him are men in their early 50s, busy with careers and families. At an age when young people realize their lives are just starting, Joe Roth's was ending.

The 30th anniversary of Roth's death sneaked up on people who knew him when he was an All-America quarterback at California in the mid 1970s. Days turn into years turn into decades but Roth is forever 21, locked in the flush of youth with his wavy blond hair and blue eyes and potential never to be realized.

"It's been 30 years already?" said Roger Theder, offensive coordinator on Roth's teams at Cal under head coach Mike White. "He was one of those beautiful kids -- everything you want in a kid to coach. I have nothing but great memories. I can still see him today -- he was a good-looking kid."

With the passage of time comes word of a possible movie in the works about Roth's life, perhaps a less treacly version of "Brian's Song" or other schmaltzy efforts that summarize the foreshortened lives of star athletes.

"I think we all are beginning to realize the impact Joe had on a lot of different people," said White, Roth's coach in 1975 and '76. "The more people you talk to, the more you realize what an amazing guy he was, the way he lived out his life. Joe internally showed so much

courage and didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him. He had supreme mental and physical toughness."

Roth came to Cal from Grossmont Junior College in San Diego early in 1975, already having been through a cancer scare. That fall, he led the Bears to an 8-3 record as co-champions of what was then the Pac-8 Conference. Bolstered by running back Chuck Muncie and receivers Wesley Walker and Steve Rivera, Cal led the nation in total offense that year by averaging exactly the same yardage totals rushing and passing.

"People forget how good he was as a player because all we talk about is this young guy tragically dying," said Jack Clark, a football teammate of Roth's and now Cal's rugby coach. "Joe was really nimble. He could really move around the pocket. He had that quick, quick release. He threw darts all over the field. Calm, cool. It didn't seem like anything rattled him."

Joe Roth, it seems, might have been Joe Montana a few years before Joe Montana became Joe Montana.

"He was great in the huddle because you never saw a flaw in his leadership," said Ted Albrecht, an offensive tackle on those Cal teams. "He never got frazzled. He was such a quiet leader. You appreciated his very low-key attitude."

Sometime during the 1976 season, Roth found out his cancer had returned, but he kept it to himself. Only White knew what his 6-foot, 4-inch quarterback was really enduring as Cal posted a 5-6 record and Roth earned All-America honors. There was speculation he might go No. 1 in the NFL draft.

In a testament to the young man's fortitude, Roth managed to play in the Japan Bowl all-star game in January 1977, mere weeks before his death. White coached the West squad in that game.

"The whole mental and physical courage he displayed the last weeks and months of his life," White said. "Words are hard to express what he did and what he meant to Cal football specifically. After all these years, it's very obvious just how important Joe was to a lot of people and the university. There aren't many people who fit in that category."

Albrecht, who played six years with the Chicago Bears, was one of Roth's teammates who did not know that the cancer had returned sometime in '76.

"He went through the entire season knowing his cancer had returned," said Albrecht, now a Chicago businessman and radio analyst for Northwestern football games. "He had to wake up every morning knowing his days were numbered and didn't share it with anyone. That's a lot of pain."

Rather than canonize Roth for the strength and dignity he displayed in his dying days, Muncie preferred to remember his quarterback when the sky was clear and blue, before the dark clouds started massing.

"The thing I'd like to keep in perspective is he was a guy, a ballplayer, a kid who was really enjoying life," said Muncie, who now runs a football scouting service and a youth foundation. "He was still a young kid having fun, like all of us were. He liked to drink his beers and hang out with the guys. He was a team guy."

"I remember the first time he and I went out and had a few beers. It didn't take many, I tell you. He had two or three and he'd get a buzz and get all goofy. He had this smile on his face."

Muncie, who played for the New Orleans Saints and San Diego Chargers in his career, said of Roth as a player, "He would have been as good as any quarterback who played the game. His poise, his ability to pick up an offense, the guy had the skills."

After returning from the all-star game in Japan, Roth soon was hospitalized. Near the end and greatly weakened, he insisted on being brought back to his apartment on College Ave. to spend his final days. White, Theder and a number of teammates loaded him in an ambulance and took him home.

"I came first thing the next morning and he had passed away," Theder said.

"Everything happened in such a short period of time and he was gone," White said. "Why him?"

"He left us the same way he joined us: quiet and understated," Albrecht said.

Joe Roth died Feb. 19, 1977. The university honors his memory with the annual Joe Roth Game on the occasion of USC or UCLA playing at Memorial Stadium.

As the Daily Californian noted in its obituary, "He lived well and he died young."

E-mail John Crumpacker at jcrumpacker@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2007/02/19/SPG9MO76HQ1.DTL>