

California Eulogizes Roth: Symbol of Humility, Courage

BERKELEY, Calif. Feb. 20 (UPI)—“Really, just figure I’m a normal guy. What if some guy sitting down there on the street corner got cancer? Would everybody make a big fuss?”

But Joe Roth wasn’t just a normal guy. A handsome, rugged 21-year-old, he had blazed to the top of the college football world as a brilliant University of California quarterback who was a pro prospect.

But during the three years in which he achieved national sports recognition as a superb passer and team leader, he had been haunted by his own private torture—the knowledge that he had a rare form of cancer.

Only in recent months did the secret leak out. Nonetheless, he played in the Hula Bowl in Honolulu. But on Thursday, after a week of treatment at the University of California medical center in San Francisco, he knew it was all over.

He asked to go home “to be with his family”—his parents whom he had visited in Jerome, Idaho, during the Christmas holidays and who had come here to be with him in his final weeks.

And Saturday afternoon, in his Berkeley apartment, with his parents, friends, coach and teammates at his bedside, Joe Roth died.

The news spread quickly around the Berkeley campus, and there was a stunned reaction from student rooters when a formal announcement of his death was made before the start of Saturday night’s California-Washington basketball game at Harmon Gymnasium.

Cries of “Oh, no” swept through the gym, and a moment of silence in tribute to the much-admired 6-4, 205-pound star brought open weeping from those in the crowd.

A statement from UC Medical Center said Roth, a native of Twin Falls, Idaho, had been suffering from malignant melanoma. He first discovered he had cancer three years ago while at Grossmont Junior College in Southern California, where he starred before transferring to UC-Berkeley.

In December, several lumps in his chest were diagnosed as black mole cancer. He underwent chemotherapy treatment at the medical center.

Tributes to Mr. Roth’s quiet courage poured in throughout the weekend.

Reached in Washington where he was meeting with President Carter and educators, University of California President David Saxon said, “Joe Roth was a symbol of excellence I hope will always be the hallmark of the university. His great courage and determination to perform should be an inspiration to all of us.”

“His humility and quiet courage in triumph and now in tragedy showed him to be an extraordinary young man,” said school chancellor Albert H. Bowker.

University officials and friends had known Mr. Roth’s case was terminal. But his coach, Mike White, was shaken.

“On and off the field, Joe was the finest individual I have ever been associated with in athletics,” he said, “Joe had an impact on everyone he came into contact with.”

Mr. Roth, who maintained a 3.0 average as a physical education major, established himself quickly as a sensation in his two-year career at California. He became the starting quarterback in the third game of the 1975 season, and the Bears won eight of their next nine contests.

Under his direction, California tied for their first Pacific-Eight conference championship of any kind since 1958, and he personally led the NCAA in best average per pass completion, 8.4 yards, and fewest interceptions, seven.

He also led the Pac 8 in both passing and total offense, and entered the 1976 season, his senior year, as virtually everyone’s all-America signal-caller.

But after brilliant opening games against Georgia and Oklahoma, he began to lose his near-perfect touch. He then noticed the lumps in his chest—the recurrence of his illness.

Mr. Roth is survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Roth, and two brothers, Tom, of Seattle, and John, of La Jolla, Calif.

The family has requested contributions be made to the Joe Roth Melanoma Research Fund, care of the University of California-San Francisco Cancer Research Institute.