

Joe Roth: 1955-1977

By JOHN CRUMPACKER
and JON ROCHMIS

There were the usual pre-game frivolities, 10 minutes before the Cal-Washington basketball game. The two teams were out on the court, dribbling, shooting, talking idly. Cal's alumni band was there, firing light-hearted insults at the Straw Hat Band.

The Straw Hat Band yelled something back, and then began singing "Happy Birthday" to Cal assistant coach Bill Berry. The collective mood of the crowd was a happy one — the Bears were going for their fourth straight conference win.

Five minutes later, athletic director Dave Maggard boomed his voice over the public address system. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I ask you to stand, please. This afternoon, after a brief

Saturday's game has been named the Joe Roth Memorial Game. This tribute to Roth was written shortly after his death by Daily Californian sports editors Crumpacker and Rochmis. Rochmis now writes sports for the Berkeley Gazette; Crumpacker is currently unemployed.

illness, a great California athlete, Joe Roth, passed away . . ."

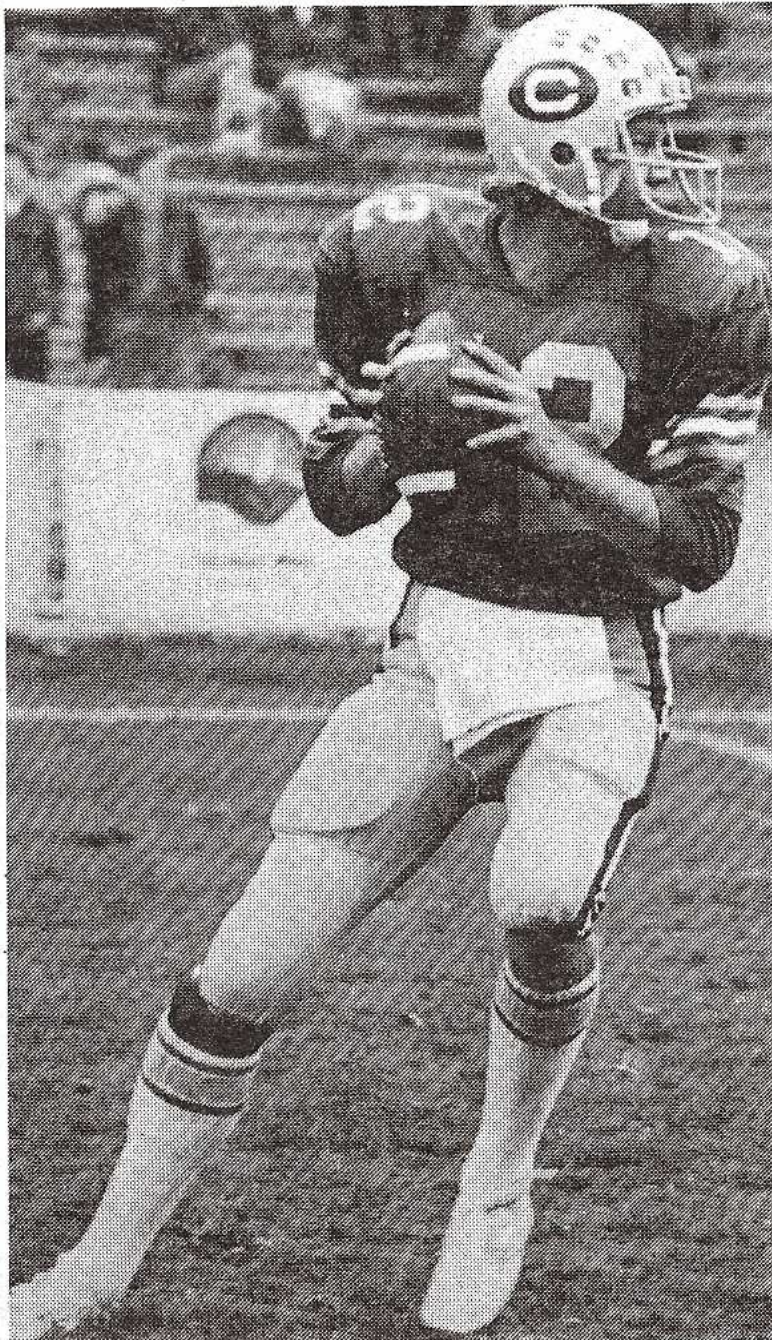
James Edwards, Washington's seven-foot center, stood at centercourt. He winced when he heard the news, then his knees gave slightly. Two of Cal's cheerleaders buried their faces in their hands. The crowd moaned.

"I'd like to have a moment of silence for Joe . . ."

A few days before last year's Big Game, Joe Roth talked about his life and his career at Cal.

"I think a lot of people would give their right arm to be in my shoes," Joe said.

Disregarding the irony of that statement in light of Joe Roth's tragic death Saturday, what he said then sums up his short but intensely rich life. The way he lived his life was an example of the power



of the human spirit.

Joe Roth first contracted cancer while a freshman at Grossmont Junior College in San Diego. Three years later, the cancer — melanoma — cropped up again after Cal's second football game against Oklahoma.

Joe did not want attention brought to this development, and, along with Cal's coaching staff, he kept it secret. Then the melanoma flared up violently after the Big Game and again, on Roth's request, his sickness remained under wraps until shortly after the January 2nd East-West Shrine football game, when the story became public.

Joe Roth played nearly all of the 1976 football season with the knowledge that he had cancer and could die at any time. All of his football exploits and records became meaningless in comparison with the extraordinary amount of courage and class Joe displayed.

Joe could have easily let the knowledge of his cancer become public, and he could have garnered an overwhelming amount of sympathy. But it is a tribute to Joe Roth that he chose to live his life as he did, by being Joe Roth, human being, and not Joe Roth, tragic cancer victim.

Although weakened by chemotherapy treatments and a subsequent loss of weight, Joe refused to let his life degenerate into a soap opera. He played in the Hula and Japan Bowl games, returned to Cal for the winter academic quarter, and played on an intramural basketball team.

As late as February 15, Joe was scheduled to speak at a medical symposium at the Claremont Hotel on life-threatening illnesses. By this time he had been hospitalized, but his desire to help others was as strong as his desire to live life to the fullest.

When he was in the hospital last week, Roth's doctors told him that he wouldn't make it through the weekend. At first they wanted to amputate his legs. But Roth didn't want to die with part of him missing.

Joe had said on several occasions that he would always be grateful for the opportunity he had at Cal, the opportunity not only to play football but to have made the friends he did.

see page 14

A tribute to Joe Roth

from page 8

The converse is also true. Joe Roth was a genuinely modest, self-effacing, and sincere person, and virtually everyone who knew him came away impressed with Joe as a refreshingly honest person.

Joe Roth was the kind of person it would be hard to imagine as having an enemy. He never dwelt on himself or his accomplishments, preferring instead to talk about his teammates. Typically, after he passed for a school record 380 yards

against Washington two years ago, Joe praised his receivers for getting open and his offensive line for giving him great protection.

At first, this seemed like false modesty on Roth's part, but it soon became apparent that this was just Joe Roth. He was an extremely equanimous person; he neither basked in deserved glory nor offered hollow excuses in defeat.

In this respect, Joe Roth's life was not tragic. He lived as long and as well as his life would permit, and when the time came, he was prepared to meet his fate.

Joe Roth died Saturday at 3:55 p.m. in his Berkeley apartment, sitting up in bed, surrounded by his parents, two brothers, several teammates, and Cal coach Mike White.

Just a few weeks earlier, Roth received a letter from a sportswriter saying that he free-lanced for Sport magazine. It was not unusual for writers to request interviews with Roth; after all, every writer would have loved to show his editor an exclusive interview with a dying man.

But this letter was different. The man said he was a medical specialist and therefore could be more compassionate in the story. But then the writer showed his real class: he said he wanted to be with Roth on the day of the pro football draft. As if Roth had nothing better to think of while fighting for his life.

Football was not Joe Roth's life. Living was.

The tragedy is that Joe died in the prime of his life, but the triumph is that he continued to live in the best way he knew how, knowing he did all he could, and was fully prepared to die. His courage in the shadow of death is a lesson to us all.

One day several weeks ago, after the January bowl games, Joe Roth was back on campus, attending school. On this particular day, he was walking through Sather Gate, laughing softly and talking with Cal water polo player Dave Post. His face belied no concern for his grave condition.

That isolated moment told more about Joe Roth than any number of words can ever hope to. Many millions of words have been written about death and dying, but none are so appropriate as these four that someone once said:

"The good die young."

Joe Roth died at 21 years of age. They were 21 good years. He lived well and he died young.

.....The moment of silence in memory of Joe Roth was too short. But almost as if on cue, Cal's Straw Hat Band flowed gently into a moving rendition of Cal's alma mater. Everyone who knew the song sang it.

It was then that knees weakened, lumps quickly lodged in people's throats, and eyes watered. Those who were there will never forget that moment.

Like Lou Gehrig, Joe Roth considered himself the luckiest man alive. Unfortunately, we will never be able to honor him the way that Yankee fans honored Gehrig a few weeks before his death.

But it would be a fitting tribute to Roth if his eulogy replaced that of Andy Smith's, which is given every year at the Big Game rally.

During the eulogy last year, some people in the audience ruined the mood by yelling, screaming and laughing, ostensibly because the Andy Smith eulogy is "corny." But Roth's story is not corny — it is real, and a much more inspiring one for 1977.

And then, after the eulogy, "Hail to California" should be sung. It is certain that people would show proper respect.

Joe Roth was a symbol not just of the university, but of life itself.

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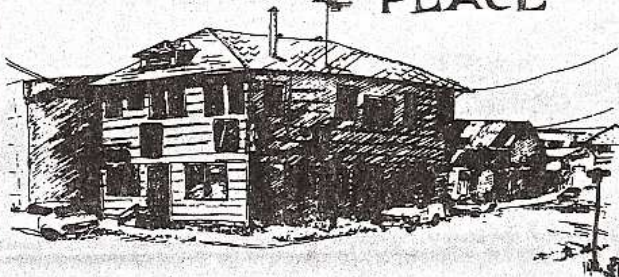
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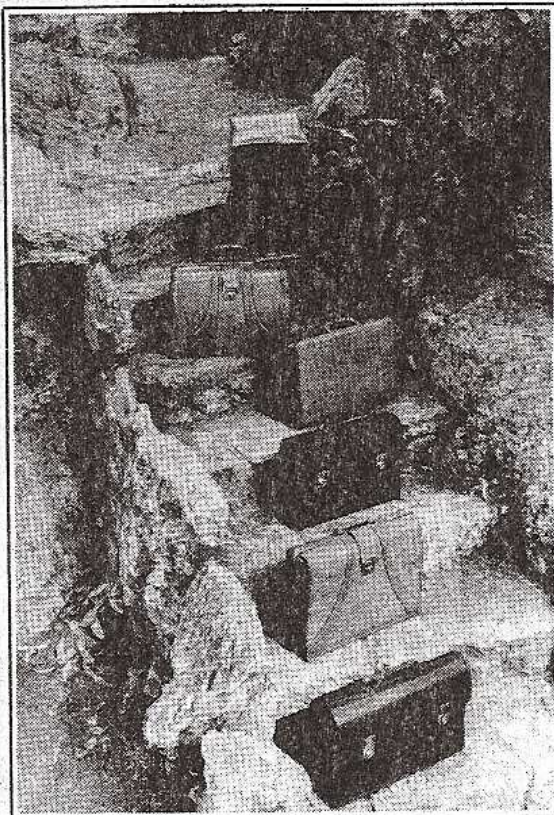
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