

QB Roth's toughest foe? It was cancer

By STEVE BISHEFF

Somehow, none of it seems too difficult anymore. Not the complicated zone defenses, the blitzing linebackers or the third and 18s.

The fear factor? There is none for Joe Roth. Not compared to what the Grossmont College quarterback has just been through.

Not to a 19-year-old kid who's just finished beating cancer.

It seemed like nothing to worry about at the time. Just a little mole that had always been there under his left sideburn.

Joe Roth was too busy to think much about it. An honor student at Granite Hills High and then at Grossmont, an all-star quarterback, a good-looking kid with curly blond hair and blue eyes, he had it all going for him.

But every once in awhile he'd cut the mole shaving. It would bleed and never really heal. He finally went to a doctor who told him it was nothing to worry about, that it was normal. But Roth had this problem with his football helmet. The earpad rested directly on the mole and bothered him.

He decided to have the growth burned off. He did. Then it started to grow again. This time bigger than before. That's when Joe Roth began to get concerned.

A dermatologist looked at it and told him it seemed to be no problem. More than likely, it was some sort of birthmark or an overgrowth of blood vessel tissue.

Just to make sure, though, he sent it to the lab.

That was on a Wednesday in May. The following Monday, the doctor called and told Roth he wanted to speak with his parents. Something about an insurance problem.

Roth explained his parents were in Idaho on vacation. The doctor said he had to call them, anyway. So Joe gave him the number.

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Mrs. Lena Roth has no problem recalling that terrifying phone call.

She and her husband, a supervisor at Convoir, were relaxing in the Northwest when they were summoned to the phone.

"The doctor told us that Joe had cancer," she said. "We were shocked. He said he wanted to tell us before Joe. He told me not to tell him, either. He already had made all the arrangements for exploratory surgery.

"That was back when there was that gas shortage. But we didn't let it stop us. In 30 minutes we were on our way to San Diego. We drove straight through without a stop. All we wanted to do was get back and be with Joe."

Young Joe still hadn't thought too much about it. Then one day at school one of the coaches called him in and told him his parents, who he thought were still in Idaho, were picking him up.

"That's when I started suspecting something was wrong," he said.

Sometime in the next hour, at still another doctor's office, a specialist broke it to him.

"He told me I had cancer," recalled Joe. "He said it was a very rare case and they had no idea what my chances were. There was a tumor right below my sideburn and they didn't know how big it was or what."

The rest depended on the exploratory surgery.

"If the cancer had grown into the lymph nodes in my neck, it would have required extensive neck dissection," said Roth. "The doctor told me if that was the case, I probably would have no movement in my neck."

None of the blows Roth has absorbed on the football field ever compared to this one. This one left him dazed and bewildered.

"It was certainly traumatic," he admitted. "It didn't have any physical effect. I felt good the whole time. That's what made it so odd, though. To know that something is happening in your body, maybe threatening your life, while, as far as you can tell, you're subsisting so well."

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JOE ROTH, QUARTERBACK EXTRAORDINAIRE

Roth's toughest foe was cancer

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The news about Roth spread quickly.

Dave Jordan, a nice, spot soft-spoken man who reminds you of somebody's favorite uncle, is the football coach at Grossmont College. Must be a good coach, too. His team is undefeated after five games, unbeaten in its last ten and already has knocked off Fullerton, a club ranked No. 2 in the state at the time.

Jordan looks like nothing would bother him. But something did.

"When we heard about Joe," he said, "we all suddenly felt a little shaky. It was just so hard to believe.

"This is just a great kid. A gifted athlete, handsome, and so very much a gentleman. It's just the kind of kid you want to see go through life.

"But we heard the thing was very serious. There was a lot of talk that he might not make it."

John Featherstone heard the talk, too.

A former receiver at San Diego State, Featherstone is now an assistant at Grossmont, handling the quarterbacks and pass catchers.

"I was sick when I heard it," he said. "The whole team was sick.

"Besides the fact he's such a great kid, his potential is unlimited. He's a definite major college prospect, maybe the best jaycee quarterback in the state.

"He's got the super football intelligence of a Jesse Freitas and the leadership ability of a Dennis Shaw. Besides that, he's got an unbelievable release.

"How bad do the big colleges want him? All I can tell you is our phones were ringing off the wall. That's what made this the news even harder to take. Joe had so much to live for."

The medical term for Roth's condition or growth is melanoma. And the surgery required him to be in the hospital four days.

Four long days. "I don't think Joe slept any at all," said his mother. "He went in on Wednesday and they told us they wouldn't know anything until Friday.

"They took out part of my salivary gland and all my lymph nodes on that side, too," said Joe. "I couldn't

move my neck for awhile and it pulled the skin over and made it numb and puffy."

But Friday night he felt better. Friday night he felt as good as he ever has in his young life.

Friday night they told Joe Roth he was going to be okay.

"The pathologist came in and told us everything was negative," said his mom. "All the cancerous growth, as far as they could tell, was in the tumor they had removed. None of it had gotten into his system. They can't be positive. But they're 99 percent sure."

Now Roth is back living his normal, happy life. The only after effect occurs occasionally when one side of his face and his eye swell up.

"The lymphatic system drains excess fluids," explained Roth. "So with part of mine removed, the fluid builds up and one side of my face puffs up like that."

Joe doesn't mind, though. He doesn't mind many things anymore.

"The experience really changed me," he said. "It made me realize how lucky I am to be physically capable. I see kids who are sick and mentally retarded now and I get very sad. I realize how close I was to being like they are."

Roth's friends responded warmly. They swarmed into the hospital to see him so often, he had to greet his guests in the lounge instead of his room.

"They made it a lot easier for me," he said. "It was really something to see kids and adults, as well, respond like that," said his mother. "Now I know how President Ford's

wife felt after surgery. Having people care that much about you makes a big difference."

Roth's next step was to find out if he could still play football, if the surgery and the mental anguish hadn't left any scars he didn't know about.

"He didn't pass too well for the first month or so when he came back," said Featherstone. "He was making mistakes, maybe pressing too much to show everyone he was still the same, old Joe."

That didn't last long, though.

Soon Roth was playing as well as ever. Maybe better.

"He's just an excellent quarterback," said Jordan. "The best thing he does is pick his spots. He knows when to throw and when not to throw. He's smart and he has a fine release.

"Besides that, he's a 3.8 student, so grades are no problem."

The latest count had 20 or 21 schools after him, including Stanford, Cal, Oregon and yes, San Diego State.

And week by week, the interested parties may increase. Already this season, the 6-3, 180-pound sophomore has thrown 84 completions in 155 attempts for unbeaten Grossmont, gaining 882 yards and collecting eight touchdowns. He ranked second in the state in passing in the latest statistics.

"You know," said Joe, looking back on it all one day before practice, "I used to be one of those guys who thought this kind of thing will never happen to me. You read it in the paper but you never think it will hit you.

"Then I think, if I hadn't had it taken care of, it probably would have killed me. That's why I don't take things for granted anymore. I used to take football that way. But not now. It's more fun this way.

"I feel fortunate just to be out there playing a game."

"He plays the game pretty well, too," said Featherstone, joking as he walked by on the way to the field. "Now he'll be okay as long as he doesn't let any of this go to his head."

Joe Roth just smiled. He smiles a lot these days.