

Mighty Joe

By

Timothy Braun

Published by the *AustinChronicle.com*

7/3/07

Most of my bad decisions have included booze, bottlerockets, the improper use of a Merriam Webster Thesaurus, or a dirty blonde at the end of a bar offering to buy me a drink or something more exotic. But, possibly the greatest mistake I have committed was storming off to my bedroom on January 22nd, 1989 with a grump and huff. Down 16-13 to the Cincinnati Bengals, the San Francisco 49ers acquired the football on their own eight-yard line with 3:10 on the clock for Super Bowl XXIII. The Bengals were playing fine football and the distance was far too great for the 49ers pull a rabbit out of a pigskin hat. The team I had routed for, the team I had spent all night cheering on, the team that I had boasted to the other dudes in boy scout troupe 103 would hammer Cincinnati was about to lose the biggest game of the year. I knew the kids at school would roast me alive on Monday morning. I was the only kid in my class that said Joe Montana (and his 49er gang) couldn't be beaten. I gave up, walked away from the television and my family, slipped into bed, turned out the lights and started to cry.

Then, my mother opened my door. She didn't bother knocking, she just opened the door. The light from the hallway splashed in from the door frame dusting my mothers face and eyes. "Montana to Taylor. Touchdown. They're gonna win." Cool. Calm. Staccato. My mother then slammed my bedroom door closed, like an explanation point on her fractured sentence. I had blown it. I missed the greatest moment in Super Bowl history, in football history, and, maybe, my defining movement in adolescence. For God sakes, I missed the famous "Hey, isn't that John Candy?" drive. Montana pointed into the stands and said this to teammate Harris Barton right before the drive started, just to calm him.

That next day I watched the evening news a total of three times, switching from channel to channel, attempting to grab a glimpse and a glance of what I had missed the night before. In every highlight I saw the same things over and over again. I saw the Joe Montana with his cowboy cool, with the guts of a riverboat gambler, with the calm of my mother's voice, meticulously orchestrating the comeback for the ages with the precision and patient of a heart surgeon. Composed in the face of threat and menace, Montana took what the Bengals gave him and exploited everything to his advantage. The drive wasn't perfection in motion, but nothing ever is. The drive was grace and understanding of a game plan, of studying the Bengals, of knowing what you could do, and what you should do. And, more importantly, to be patient for the score. And, Montana knew just what to say in every post game interview. He was a gentleman.

From Montana's drive I constructed a philosophy of life revolving around the West coast offense and sprinkles of Buddhism, Taoism, punk rock, and a few Clint Eastwood flicks. Always have multiple options. Be patient. Take what life gives you. And, when the time is right, throw the ball to John Taylor for the winning score.

On Thursday June 28th, I drove through thunderstorms and rain-bombs and a flooded highway to meet Joe Montana and his new partner in crime, Dr. James Rippe a guru of preventative cardiology and author of *The Healthy Heart For Dummies*, at the Hotel Valencia in the heart of historic downtown San Antonio. These two have been skipping across the country, jumping from town-to-town publicizing the *BP Success Zone*: a system sponsored by the Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation in the education and negotiation of high blood pressure-- an issue for an estimated 72 million Americans. I got to the Valencia an hour early to get comfortable and absorb my surroundings. The soft and quiet room I was lead to featured crystal pitchers of ice water with floating hunks and slices of various fruits, bad art, and a window that looked out onto a brick wall. For a moment, it looked like my childhood room.

The two men entered the room laughing, with a young assistant, they said hello and slumped into their chairs. They didn't want to talk to me, but they knew that was the gig. Rippe's body posture groaned at the notion of another interview. Montana placed a blackberry to his left side and looked at me as if I was linebacker. How many questions can I actually ask these guys about high blood pressure? Eat right. Exercise. Get a wife to nag you to hit the doctor's office. Don't put too much salt on your barbeque (the joint is called Salt Lick for a reason.) And, of course there are medications and beta-blockers to aid in these efforts, just look who's sponsoring the talking tour. But I stayed calm, and I loaded for bear. I had three pages of questions dealing from health insurance, to Notre Dame football, to the hypothetical swatting of golf balls from goal-line to goal-line at Candlestick Park.

I went to Rippe first, knowing I had to loosen him up, asking about his blood pressure. He stood up, adjusted his grey slacks, and sat down. "I've done a hundred of these things and I think you are the second person to ask me that." Rippe might be the brains, but he knows people aren't driving in the rain to meet him. Now I could've slung a question at Montana, but I saw an opening with Rippe and decided to continue throwing at his side of the room with a questioning of Shaquille O'Neal's hypocrisy for creating a TV show devoted to children losing weight, when he is sponsored by Pepsi and Burger King. Rippe and I shot back and forth on the ideas of health, the ethics of celebrity, and responsibility. I asked a few more questions. They weren't questions I wanted to ask, but this was part of the game. I took what I could get. I asked Montana about the state of the NFLPA and that organizations treatment of former players, the health risks of linemen being over 350 pounds with prejudice towards high blood pressure, and even the hit Montana sustained from NY Giant Leonard Marshall in the 1991 NFC Championship game, a sack that bruised his sternum and fractured a rib. They replied with words like "complicated." But the two gentlemen answered with unruffled character, as one would expect, as the afternoon faded.

And then I saw my opportunity. I saw my pass to John Taylor. As the clock ran down, I could ask one last question. "Today is John Elway's 47th birthday. Joe, as a 49er you crushed Elway in Super Bowl XXIV. As a Chief, you had what some feel was the greatest come-from-behind victory on Monday Night Football to beat Elway again. When you see Elway in those Coors Beer adds do you think, "I own that guy?"

Montana laughed. He then replied with the calm of my mothers voice “You know, those Bronco teams were good teams.” He smiled. Montana always knows what to say in post-game interviews. We took a picture, and Montana signed a rusty red 49ers cap I went to seven different stores to find for my brother-in-law to be. They don’t call him “Cool Joe” for nothing. Damn. I wish John Candy could’ve been there.