

Joe Montana

Quarterback Joe Montana is straight out of a middle-American legend, cleft chin, dimples, throwing arm, rows of even teeth and all.

He came to the San Francisco 49ers three seasons ago by way of Notre Dame and a small Pennsylvania town that's hard to pronounce, bringing with him an anglicized Italian name and a laconically even temperament it's hard to believe aren't a put-on.

Known also as Joey (to his mother and Howard Cosell) and Big Sky (to followers of a 1981 newspaper nickname contest that drew 10,000 suggestions), Montana has in the course of the 49ers unexpectedly victorious season become the Bay Area's newest sweetheart. He has become at least vaguely familiar even to people who think that with a last name like that he must be a rodeo champ or an American Indian raised on a reservation.

Joe Montana displays, depending upon the situation, the confidence of a bull or the sweetness of a candystriper. On a football field he displays an intelligence that has helped him achieve one of the best passing records in the National Conference of

the National Football League this season. As a result, at the age of 25, he has found himself engaged in a sudden and serious flirtation with fame.

Joe is sitting slouched in a chair at the dining table of his house, tossing a plastic hamburger toy across the room for one of his two miniature dachshunds to retrieve. He throws effortlessly, precisely, from the tips of his fingers, with a controlled flick of the wrist. His hands are big, his fingers long and strong, the nails well-groomed.

It is Wednesday afternoon and he has just left practice, two hours later than scheduled.

He is dressed in a blue warm-up suit, with his wispy blond hair, still damp, curling around the edges of his cap.

Set in his unexpectedly boyish face are eyes the color of the "sky blue" crayons out of a Crayola box. Except for his height and weight (6-foot-2, 200 pounds), the size of his feet (he wears a size 11 boot), and the breadth of his chest (measurement unknown but it appears as solid as a heavy-sand punching bag), Montana probably looks today about the way he did at the age of eight when he started playing midget football in Monongahela, a small farming and mining town just south of Pittsburgh.

An only child, Montana developed with the encouragement of his father, the manager of a branch of a small finance company.

His success, he says, "has been my dad's dream as much as it's been mine."

His father never forced him to play, but, by

paternal decree, once he started a season he had to finish it.

There are plenty of pleasantly ordinary things about Montana: He drives a Chevy truck and a Volkswagen Scirocco, prefers murder mysteries when he reads, has a fetish for electronic games, doesn't care much for country music and takes his rock music hard but not too hard. He calls himself a lapsed—"a real lapsed"—Catholic.

What is success doing to this seemingly unprepossessing fellow? He smiles at the question.

"Nothin'. Really nothin'," he answers with a shrug, stroking his two dogs, Broadway and Bozley, as they clamber over his chest.

It's certainly not making him any chattier.

More people want a piece of Joe Montana's time, that's the biggest change. The stack of fan mail in his locker at the Redwood City training camp had mounted so high by the middle of the season that he gave in and asked the 49ers' public relations department to help him out by addressing and stuffing envelopes.

The fan mail, he maintains, comes mostly from little boys seeking his advice, his autograph or his picture.

"Surprisingly," says his wife, Cass, from the kitchen where she is preparing a pot roast, "there are not very many women who write him." She sounds honestly surprised, and amused.

Joe isn't quite the sex symbol that teammate Dwight Clark is, but he arouses his share of female

clamor. That used to bother Cass some but doesn't particularly now that they're married.

Women in the locker room, on the other hand, do bother her, regardless of their intent.

"It's a moral issue to me," she says. "Think of an executive going into his office and taking a shower and having the secretary bringing in a cup of coffee. Wouldn't that be a little weird?"

Before this fall, reporters paid Montana only perfunctory heed. Now they pursue him.

He doesn't mind the attention, it's even flattering. "It's just," he says, "that it's so much so all of a sudden."

Other than the demands on his time, he says, the only difference between Joe Montana, star quarterback, and Joe Montana, rookie, is that his phone rings more often with people asking for tickets. As proof of the negligible effects of success, he notes, "I still have to shovel out the barn."

Actually, Cass Montana shovels out the barn more often than Joe does, at least during football season.

"This six months, all I require of Joe is to play football and I'll take care of the rest," she says, having returned to the den after carting several wheelbarrows full of hay and manure out of the home of their two Arabian horses. Joe has not yet come home from practice and she is left to tend the horses alone.

Cass is 29, four years older than Joe. She is pretty, agile and articulate, unquestionably the

more gregarious of the two. She is wearing faded jeans, a plaid cowboy-style shirt, a yellow down vest, a diamond ring and dark red polish on her long fingernails.

She and Joe married this summer after a three-year courtship that started on an airplane. She was the flight attendant when he and the Notre Dame team flew home from a game with the University of Southern California. Notre Dame had lost, but Joe, during the last season game of his college career, had been a hero.

“I got on the plane thinking. ‘Oh wow, a bunch of college kids’ ” she said. “And it *was* a bunch of college kids. I saw this little boy in the back and we struck up a conversation. I had no idea who he was and what had just happened. He didn’t bother to tell me and I didn’t bother to ask.”

They lived together in Los Angeles for a while and moved into a house in the Peninsula hills this summer. Except for its view of undeveloped land that stretches several miles down to the ocean, their three-bedroom home looks like the house of any modestly prosperous young couple. It is filled with contemporary furniture made of light wood or wicker, with lots of plants and macrame and color photographs in metal frames.

What tributes to Joe the house contains are concentrated in this room. On one wall there are two large frames containing pictures of him in uniform and over by the fireplace are a stuffed bear in a red 49ers T-shirt and a painted “game ball” that commemorates the team’s surprising 45-14 victory over the Dallas Cowboys in October.

There is one memento in the kitchen, an inverted 49er's helmet turned into a chips-and-dip bowl, a standard team possession. "We use it to collect pennies," Cass says. "I can't see using it for chips. Let's face it, enough's enough."

Enough for Cass might be more than enough for anyone less devoted. She refers to the 49ers as "we," extending the team to include herself and the wives and girlfriends of all the players. She plays on a bowling team with some of the other women and sees a lot of them socially. They are, she says, "the backbones of these fellows."

The tumult and glory of this football season seem not to have thrown the Montana marriage off balance.

"It really hasn't changed our personal lives," Cass says, "He's extremely unassuming. It almost shocks me. I'm thinking come on, you can't be for real sometimes."

But on the field, "quiet, modest" Joe is transformed.

"If he walked out on the field the way he is in real life," she says, "he wouldn't be a leader, he probably wouldn't be playing football. He's got to be cocky out on the field to survive. I don't mean cocky verbally, but confident."

A few minutes later, still waiting for Joe to come home, she pulls out a cigarette, grimacing as she lights it. "He hates this," she says holding up the cigarette and shaking her head in mock disgust. "He's so easy to live with it's sickening. He doesn't drink much, he doesn't smoke. He's neat. Can you imagine a man being neat?"

Every now and then, though, in the middle of some green turf, this virtuous nice guy yells.

"Sometimes I overreact on the field when mistakes are made," he says sitting calmly at the dining table. "Not mistakes really, but somebody does something different from what I read."

For minutes he has been shredding a matchbook, his hands moving all the time. This isn't a sign of nervousness, it seems, but of energy, and except for his hands he is still.

"I get upset at myself," he continues. "Sometimes I yell—not very often—but sometimes I yell at somebody else. I don't like to do that. They get yelled at by the coaches. They don't need another player yelling at them.

"Sometimes I yell when they can't hear me, when they're way down the field." He smiles.

"That's better. Sometimes the linemen hear me and they laugh."

Joe admits he hates to be anything less than the best, and he skis, rides horses, plays golf and basketball and competes at electronic games with an intensity that would make you think his livelihood depended upon it.

Before Steve DeBerg—his close friend, former teammate and quarterback rival—was traded this year to the Denver Broncos, the two of them competed in every way they could find. On flights to and from games, he, DeBerg and a couple of other players would spend hours playing cards or backgammon, and the minute they stepped off the plane would go in search of a game room.

Competitive as he is, he is not fearless. He has considered learning to parachute but has yet to get over the worry that his chute wouldn't open.

What about setbacks, he's asked. Surely he's had some.

"A couple," he says. "At Notre Dame."

Now he is drumming his fingers lightly on the table.

One of them was during his senior year. After sitting out part of his junior year with a separated shoulder, he returned to the team as a senior expecting to be the No. 1 quarterback. He found himself No. 3. "It took me three games to get my position back," he says.

Joe Montana doesn't think a lot about what he will do when the inevitable, if distant, end comes to his football playing career. Something in advertising maybe.

He was a marketing major in college and loves design. The proof, he says, is that he will stand in a grocery store check-out line mesmerized by the colors and lines of cigarette packages. He doubts he has the talent to be a designer himself.

If he says it, he's probably right. He seems to be a man with a keen sense of just what he can learn and just what he has to learn.

"I didn't think I'd develop this fast," he says simply of his success as a professional quarterback. "There are still a lot of things I have to do. I wasn't surprised I'm playing this well, just that it happened this early in my career."