

JOE MONTANA

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2000

By Joe Horrigan

The San Francisco 49ers trailed the Dallas Cowboys 27-21 late in the fourth quarter in the 1981 NFC Championship Game. Any hope of a 49ers' win rested squarely on the shoulders of quarterback Joe Montana. Methodically, he directed the San Francisco offense 83 yards from their own 11-yard line to the Dallas six. With just 51 seconds remaining and under a fierce pass rush, the young quarterback fled the safety of the pocket and tossed a high, floating pass toward the end zone. Buried immediately under a mass of Cowboy defenders, Montana didn't see wide receiver Dwight Clark's game-winning grab, known today simply as "The Catch," but the roar of the crowd told him all he had to know. The 49ers were going to the Super Bowl.

A master of late-game comebacks, Joe Montana directed his teams to 31 fourth quarter come-from-behind wins during his illustrious career with the 49ers and the Kansas City Chiefs. His uncanny ability to bring a team back from apparent defeat was so common that it simply became referred to as "Montana Magic," a magic he performed for 15 remarkable seasons.

Born in New Eagle, Pennsylvania, Montana grew up in Monongahela, a coal-mining town about 25 miles south of Pittsburgh. He attended Ringgold High School, where he played football, baseball, and basketball. Although he didn't start at quarterback until his junior year, it was his brilliant play in a 34-34 tie against arch-rival Monessen High School that attracted the attention of Notre Dame recruiters who eventually offered the young quarterback an athletic scholarship.

Although his career statistics at Notre Dame aren't overwhelming, Montana's gutsy play is legendary. He got his first start at Notre Dame as a sophomore when the team's starting quarterback was felled by injury. Coach Dan Devine later said he wasn't sure what motivated him to give the starting nod to Montana. "He just impressed me as the kind of guy who you think is going to get the job done," he said. And "get the job done" he did. Twice that season he came off the bench to pull out games in the fourth quarter.

A separated shoulder kept him out the entire 1976 season, and when he returned in 1977, he found himself listed third on the quarterback depth chart. Although disappointed, he never lost faith or confidence in his ability. Finally, in week three of the season, he was inserted into the lineup. Down 24-14 to Purdue, with 11 minutes to go, the "Comeback Kid" threw for 154 yards and a touchdown, and the Irish won 31-24.

The following season, there were more heroics as Montana pulled his team from the depths of defeat to last minute victories over Pittsburgh and USC. The Irish went on to capture a national championship. Joe's final game for Notre Dame was the 1979 Cotton Bowl against the University of Houston. In a now famous performance, the slender sometime-starter, electrified a national audience as he directed the Fighting Irish back from a 34-12 deficit, midway through the fourth quarter, to a 35-34 win.

Pro scouts, however, were still skeptical. They questioned Montana's arm strength and his overall durability. As a result he wasn't selected until the third round of the 1979 National Football League draft. Three quarterbacks, Jack Thompson, Phil Simms, and Steve Fuller were selected before him.

"The minute I saw Joe move, there was no question in my mind that he was the best I'd seen," former 49ers head coach Bill Walsh said referring to Montana's pre-draft workout. "I knew with the offense I planned to run, Joe would be great."

Walsh's offense emphasized short or middle passes, multiple formations, and motions. It was a complicated system, one that required a disciplined disciple to implement. Walsh knew that his prize rookie was up to the task, but was careful not to ruin his confidence by subjecting the young quarterback

to untenable circumstances. When Montana did play in his rookie season and early in his second, it was in carefully selected situations. "We didn't want to throw him to the wolves," Walsh said. "We thought it was important to give him moments of success early, to build his confidence." Midway through his second season, Walsh made the move and designated Joe the regular starter. He played well; completing 176 passes for 1,795 yards and 15 touchdowns. But it was only a small prelude of the successes that were to follow.

Montana once credited "seventy percent" of his success in football to the Walsh-style offense. "The system gives quarterbacks a lot more options, a lot of places to put the ball," he explained. "And when there's a blitz, it's a lot easier to overcome, probably, than in any other system."

In Montana's third year, the 49ers shocked the pro football world by going 13-3, defeating the Cowboys in the NFC championship game and advancing to Super Bowl XVI.

Montana played brilliantly in the Super Bowl. The first time the 49er offense got the ball they scored, going 68 yards. Montana threw on five of the first six plays and capped off the drive with a quarterback sneak for the game's first score. A second quarter 92-yard march resulted in another San Francisco score and a 14-0 lead. Two more drives resulted in two field goals and a 20-0 halftime score. "Our drives in the first half of that Super Bowl were comparable to the drive against Dallas," said Walsh. "Joe was letter-perfect." Although the Bengals mounted a comeback of their own, the 49ers went on to win 26-21 and Joe Montana captured the first of his record three Super Bowl MVP honors.

From 1981, Montana's first full season as a starter, through 1990, his last with the team, the 49ers finished first in their division except in the 1982 strike-shortened season, when they finished 11th overall, and in 1985, when they finished in second place. San Francisco was the team of the decade and Joe Montana was the principal reason why.

In 1984, the 49ers fell a few points short of the greatest season in NFL history. That year, behind Montana's cool, methodical play, the 49ers posted a near perfect 15-1 regular-season record. Their sole deprivation came mid-season, a 20-17 loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers. After convincing wins over the New York Giants and the Chicago Bears in the playoffs, Montana and company faced the Dan Marino-led 14-2 Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl XIX.

Two Western Pennsylvania quarterbacks, Montana and Marino, were pitted against each other in a game in which the hype clearly favored Marino. But when the smoke from the game-ending gun cleared, it was Montana who was surrounded by the media. Named the game's MVP for a second time, Joe completed 24 of 35 passes for a then-Super Bowl record 331 yards and three touchdowns. He also added 59 yards on the ground as the Niners defeated Miami 38-16. An exuberant Walsh proclaimed, "Joe Montana is the greatest quarterback today, maybe the greatest quarterback of all time."

Each of the next three seasons, the 49ers advanced to postseason play only to lose in the first round of the playoffs. Montana, however, emerged as the absolute model of consistency. His unflappable poise in the clutch frustrated opposing players and coaches, while amazing his legions of fans.

A humorous example of his poise under pressure occurred in Super Bowl XXIII against the Cincinnati Bengals. Trailing 16-13 with 3:20 left in the game, the 49ers had the ball on their own eight-yard line.

"Some of the guys seemed more than normally tense," Montana recalled, "especially Harris Barton, a great offensive tackle who has a tendency to get nervous." As usual, Montana was just focusing on the situation, how far they had to go and how much time was left. Just then he happened to spot the late actor John Candy in the stands. "Look" he said, "isn't that John Candy." It was hardly what his teammates expected to hear in the huddle with the Super Bowl on the line. But it definitely broke the tension. "Everybody kind of smiled, and even Harris relaxed, and then we all concentrated on the job we had to do."

The result was a now famous 92-yard game-winning drive. The key play was a 27-yard pass to Jerry Rice that brought the ball to the Cincinnati 18-yard line. Joe hit John Taylor for the final 10 yards and the winning touchdown with just 34 seconds remaining in the game.

Although his teammates and the millions of fans watching were unaware at the time, at one point during the drive, Joe hyperventilated and nearly passed out. "I guess it was the excitement, maybe a little bit of

the weather (the heat in Miami). At that point you couldn't hear, so I was yelling at the top of my voice...I had to call everything about eight times and it took everything I had," he recalled. To the world, however, it was just another example of the "Montana Magic" performed by "Joe Cool."

Montana was as tough as he was even-tempered. Two weeks into the 1986 season he suffered a back injury that required surgery. Doctors suggested and even recommended that Joe not play again. He was back in the lineup 55 days later.

The 1989 and 1990 seasons were banner years for Montana. Voted the league's MVP in both, he led San Francisco to two consecutive 14-2 regular season finishes. His passer rating in 1989 was an incredible 112.4, a then-NFL best. That year the Niners cruised through the playoffs, defeating the Minnesota Vikings by 28 points and the Los Angeles Rams by 27, on the way to their fourth Super Bowl appearance.

His near perfect performance in Super Bowl XXIV – he completed 22 of 29 passes for 297 yards and a then-Super Bowl record five touchdowns – earned him Super Bowl MVP honors for a record third time. During the three-game playoff run leading to the Super Bowl, the sure-fire quarterback completed an amazing 78 percent of his passes for 800 yards, 11 touchdowns and no interceptions.

Montana's best year statistically, however, may have been 1990. Working his magic, Montana, in the season opener against the New Orleans Saints completed four passes for 60 yards on the game's final drive to set up a game-winning field goal. In each of the next four games he threw for more than 300 yards, which ranks second all-time to the five consecutive 300-plus games he threw in 1982. Again the 49ers advanced to the NFC championship game. Unfortunately, a fourth quarter hit sent Montana to the sidelines with a concussion, bruised sternum, and broken finger. The Giants mounted a come-from-behind drive of their own and defeated San Francisco, 15-13.

In training camp the next year, Montana suffered an elbow injury that ultimately sidelined the future Hall of Fame quarterback for 31 consecutive games. Then, in the second half of the 1992 season finale against the Detroit Lions, Montana came off the bench and once again demonstrated why so many referred to him as the "best ever." To the delight and wonderment of a national television audience, Montana, showing no signs of the almost two-year layoff, completed 15 of 21 passes for 126 yards and two touchdowns, as the 49ers defeated the Lions 24-6.

Although Montana felt he could still be a starter, the 49ers in 1993 felt it was time to turn the reins over to Joe's long-time understudy Steve Young. Hoping for yet another shot at a Super Bowl, Montana signed with the Kansas City Chiefs.

Although the team never reached the Super Bowl, for two seasons Joe continued to deliver his patented magic. In 1993, he orchestrated fourth quarter come-from-behind rallies in both the AFC Wild Card Game and the AFC Divisional Playoff Game. Three times during the regular season he was voted the AFC Offensive Player of the Week. That year he also hit a career milestone becoming just the fourth quarterback to record 3,000 pass completions.

By the time he retired following the 1994 season, Montana ranked fourth all-time in career passing yards, attempts, and passing touchdowns. His 3,409 completions ranked third all-time, and his career passer rating of 92.3 still ranks second in the NFL's record book. Thirty-nine times he passed for more than 300 yards in a game, including seven times in which he surpassed the 400-yard mark. His six 300-yard passing performances in the post-season remain an NFL record. Eleven times he led his team to the playoffs. Eight times he was selected to play in the Pro Bowl.

"We say, 'He's the greatest quarterback I ever saw,' or 'He's the greatest quarterback this and that,' said former Oakland Raiders coach John Madden. "I say with no disclaimers, 'This guy is the greatest quarterback who ever played.'"

Whether or not Joe Montana was the "greatest ever," will be the subject of debate for the game's pundits and historians for years to come. However, his election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in just his first year of eligibility is testimony to the irrefutable fact that Joe Montana absolutely ranks among the very best to ever play the game.

MONTANA'S PASSING RECORD

YEAR	TEAM	G	ATT	COM	CMP%	YARD	YPA	TD	INT	RATING
1979	San Francisco	16	23	13	56.5	96	4.17	1	0	81.1
1980	San Francisco	15	273	176	64.5	1795	6.58	15	9	87.8
1981	San Francisco	16	488	311	63.7	3565	7.31	19	12	88.4
1982	San Francisco	9	346	213	61.6	2613	7.55	17	11	88.0
1983	San Francisco	16	515	332	64.5	3910	7.59	26	12	94.6
1984	San Francisco	16	432	279	64.6	3630	8.40	28	10	102.9
1985	San Francisco	15	494	303	61.3	3653	7.39	27	13	91.3
1986	San Francisco	8	307	191	62.2	2236	7.28	8	9	80.7
1987	San Francisco	13	398	266	66.8	3054	7.67	31	13	102.1
1988	San Francisco	14	397	238	59.9	2981	7.51	18	10	87.9
1989	San Francisco	13	386	271	70.2	3521	9.12	26	8	112.4
1990	San Francisco	15	520	321	61.7	3944	7.58	26	16	89.0
1991	---	Injured. Did not play.								
1992	San Francisco	1	21	15	71.4	126	6.00	2	0	118.4
1993	Kansas City	11	298	181	60.7	2144	7.19	13	7	87.4
1984	Kansas City	14	493	299	60.6	3283	6.66	16	9	83.6
15 Years		192	5391	3409	63.2	40551	7.52	273	139	92.3

Source: Total Football II