

Pittsburgh Boomers

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Joe Montana Comes Home to the Burgh

By John Fries

What can you say about pro football legend Joe Montana when the numbers say so much?

For example: While leading the San Francisco 49ers, Montana became only one of two quarterbacks to earn four Super Bowls rings--and he never threw an interception in any of the games. He's the only player to win three Super Bowl MVP awards, and was the first player in NFL history to be named Associated Press MVP two years in a row. He won nine divisional championships. In addition, Sports Illustrated named him Sportsman of the Year in 1990 and, ten years later, he was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. And that's only the beginning.

Montana, a native of New Eagle, PA, excelled as a football, baseball and basketball player at Ringgold High School. He also turned down a basketball scholarship at North Carolina State so he could play football at Notre Dame. Today, he's involved in range of activities. And yes, he's a Steelers fan.

He recently visited western Pennsylvania, and again, talk focused on the numbers. This time, though, they weren't statistics from his legendary career, but his blood pressure. Montana is on a mission to educate the public about how to tackle high blood pressure, the silent killer. He's even contributed a wealth of information, including heart-healthy recipes, to a book on the subject with his wife Jennifer.

It all began when Montana was diagnosed with high blood pressure in 2002. "My mother's side of the family has it," he says, "but it was not something I'd previously encountered." Even during all those years as a professional athlete, you might think it would have been discovered, given the pre-season physical scrutiny football players must undergo. "No," he says, "We had annual physicals, but it wasn't a problem then."

"Sometimes, it just shows up, and you don't expect it," offers James Rippe, MD, a cardiologist and author of several books, whose medical insights fill in the details around Montana's personal story on this tour.

Montana, at 50, looks as fit and healthy as someone who is, if not half his age, then at least a good bit younger. He's tall and tanned, and still looks like the guy we remember from the Glory Years, the one whose nickname, aptly, was "Joe Cool."

"I went to the doctor for my annual physical," Montana says, speaking of the day that would become yet another a turning point in his life, "and was told that my blood pressure was 140 over 90. That's very high. That same day, I went to see a cardiologist. They discovered that I had a small blockage in one of my arteries." He was given a drug to lower his blood pressure, but it didn't work. Then, he was prescribed Lotrel, a combination of medicines that did work. He also started eating healthier and getting more exercise: "stationery bike, Stairmaster, things like that," he says.

Rippe provides more numbers. "Seventy-two million adult Americans--or nearly one in three--are affected by high blood pressure. Hypertension often has no symptoms and approximately one-third of people with high blood pressure are not aware they have it."

Rippe, a graduate of Harvard and the Harvard Medical School, is an expert on preventive care who started the fitness walking movement many years ago. In fact, he even coined the term "fitness walking" and played a major role in introducing Rockport walking shoes to the masses during the mid-1980's when he ran the exercise physiology lab at the University of Massachusetts. He now directs the Rippe Lifestyle Institute in Massachusetts and the Rippe Health Assessment in Florida and teaches at the Tufts University School of Medicine.

He and Montana want to motivate people to get their blood pressure taken regularly. They also want to help people with high blood pressure to manage it, and help people who don't have it to avoid it through proper diet and exercise. Their initiative, which is sponsored by Novartis, the pharmaceutical company that makes Lotrel, also has a Web site that's full of information at www.getbpdn.com.

Going back to football, I ask him when he first realized that he had extraordinary athletic talent, and he responds in a surprising way. "It was always in question," he says. "I wasn't a starter in high school, but I stayed in shape. I weighed 192 going into the draft. They didn't know if I could do it."

But he did do it, and in a big way. After winning his first Super Bowl, he says, "It felt a little strange, and it's elating. You enjoy it for the first night, then go back to reality." He also demonstrated excellent leadership skills, although he seems to downplay that. "The position gives you that to a certain degree," he says.

As you would expect, Montana is a longtime Steelers fan, one who grew up watching Terry Bradshaw lead his team to four Super Bowl wins, then becoming the only other quarterback to accomplish the same feat. When asked about the current Steelers team, he says, "They didn't have a bad year, just a funky year." He also says that he's seen changes in the game itself since his playing days. "The bigger guys are getting faster, and it's hard to do that."

He also speaks in glowing terms of the city itself. "Pittsburgh has changed much for the better," he says, "Being married with four kids, I don't get to visit often--although most of my family is still here. And everyone says great things about Pittsburgh."

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