

## Joe Montana

It's the name that strikes you first. Joe Montana - everyman as state of the union. Straight out of the Jack London book of backwoods mythmakers. An Indiana Jones for the 90s.

As ail-American Joes go, Montana is the kind who makes the manufacturers contemplate throwing away the mould. As first-choice quarterback with the San Francisco 49ers, the pre-eminent American football team of the past decade, he is the man every Caucasian American schoolboy wants to grow up to be. In a game

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that passes itself off as physical chess yet whose pawns exemplify sport as war-substitute, he is Queen.

In keeping with the American dream, it is a crown for which Montana has paid a high price in bruises. The quarterback's job is to throw an oval ball into the hands of colleagues as they bob and weave or simply bulldoze their way up-field. As he calculates the geometric options before taking aim, a horde of hungry hulks hurtle towards him with cannibalism in their coke-fired eyes. Dancing lessons are mandatory.

Another clue to the demands of his profession can be found among the macho club names that litter the National Football League (NFL). While fans of that other, more poetic American national pastime of baseball deify Padres, Cardinals and even Reds, grid-iron buffs get their rocks off on Rams, Bears, Cowboys and Vikings.

It may therefore not come as a complete shock to discover that only two black quarterbacks were considered worthy of a regular

shift in the NFL this season. As in baseball, which isn't exactly big on black pitchers either, it pays to be a Wasp if you want to drive the train.

Not that that seems to have bothered the millions of Europeans who acquired a taste for sacks and safeties during the 80s. Not only is a big-buck European League about to embrace us, but there is now little to choose between the FA Cup Final and the Superbowl as the world's leading annual sporting event, both being transmitted live to more than 60 countries. With no decent wars in the offing, the Wembley show-piece will doubtless be lagging far behind before long.

So where does an articulate, vaguely-handsome, if gnarled, chap like Montana fit in among the scheme of this pre-Armageddon Rollerball? Well, for one thing, like a spin bowler or a golfer, he has shown that it is possible for a sportsman to build up to a middle-age crescendo. His most celebrated performances to date have come since the local Bay Area scribes decided to anoint an heir and consign Montana to the 'Where are they now?' files.

Just two months later came the 1989 Superbowl, a hyperbolic happening that encapsulate the childlike American psyche. Thirty-four seconds remained (which admittedly translates to three minutes in real time after pep talks, drinks and ad breaks; my, how those Yanks sustain drama!) when Montana speared in the winning touch-down pass. The good guy had finished first.

That was the easy bit. Before that final thrust, he had driven the 49ers virtually the length of the pitch with an immaculate sequence of pinpoint projections. Showier quarterbacks delight in the 'Hail Mary', the long-distance, razzle-dazzle, chuck-and-pray missile that courts disaster as it homes in on its target. Never one for excess, Montana prefers the short, sharp shock.



Joe Montana: Passing into politic

More recently, and perhaps more breathtaking still, was the part Montana played in steering the 49ers to the Superbowl again this year. Of the 30 passes he attempted in the National Football Conference final against the Los Angeles Rams, 26 found their target, an 87% success rate in a sport that canonises those who make 60%.

But it was in the dressing-room afterwards that our Joe really emphasised his suitability for higher corridors. After politely deflecting some brown-nose beavering with self-effacing talk of team support and technical ploys, he was asked, 'as someone who's seen a lot of them', for his opinions on the 49ers' Superbowl opponents, Denver.

Pausing long enough to absorb the depth of his interviewer's ignorance, Montana smiled.

'Well actually,' he began in the most benign, believable tone imaginable, 'I don't see

Denver much because we don't play in the same league, they're not on tv much in San Francisco, and when they are, we're usually playing at the same time. But I'm sure they're a fine team.' Tact, diplomacy, and even honesty in one neat bundle.

There are precedents for the vision many have for this Notre Dame graduate (attending one of the right colleges doesn't hurt either). The former Rams quarterback, Jack Kemp, is a New York congressman; Bill Bradley, one-time Rhodes scholar and New York Knicks basketball alumnus, is a New Jersey senator. Anything is possible in a country where an ability to memorise lines or orbit the earth is considered essential political training.

In any case, how can you go wrong with a name like Joe Montana? President Joe has such a wholesome, earthy ring to it, don't you think? O  
*Rob Steen*