[Namath: A Biography, Mark Kriegel, Viking, 447 pages]

Super Bowl Superhero

By Robert Stacy McCain

WHEN SUPER BOWL XXXIX kicks off Feb. 6 in Jacksonville, Florida, more than 140 million television viewers will tune in to watch the spectacle. The halftime show is not likely to be as sensational as last year's MTV-produced extravaganza, complete with a breast-baring "wardrobe malfunction" by Janet Jackson. Millions, however, will watch the show simply to see the commercials. The ten most-watched TV events in history are all Super Bowls, and advertisers use the opportunity to debut their most imaginative ads. At about $2 million per 30-second spot—Anheuser-Busch alone will buy some $25 million worth of commercial time—the Super Bowl XXXIX broadcast will generate more than $100 million for the Fox network.

Oh, and there will also be a football game.

The commercial glitz and tawdry showbiz aspects of the Super Bowl have long since eclipsed whatever athletic significance the event once had. Much the same is true for Joe Namath, perhaps the man most responsible for making the elaborate hoopla of Super Bowl Sunday an annual ritual of American life.

Namath was one of the most gifted athletes ever to lace on a pair of cleats—the first pro quarterback to pass for more than 4,000 yards in a season—but his celebrity status, his notorious booze-and-broads lifestyle, and his identity as a symbol of the'60s sexual revolution have obscured his tremendous athletic accomplishments.

His abilities carried Namath from the small steel-mill town of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania to international fame in the 1960s. He was the brightest star of the game at a time when televised sports were transformed from an occasional weekend amusement shown in black and white into the full-color prime-time spectacle of Super Bowl Sunday.

Few of the millions of viewers who tune in Feb. 6 will know that the Super Bowl wasn't "Super"—neither officially nor in fact—until the third such game was played in 1969. The game originated with the 1966 deal that merged the National Football League with the upstart American Football League. Namath had something to do with that merger. In December 1964, when it was reported that the University of Alabama's senior quarterback was prepared to sign with the AFL's New York Jets for an unheard-of $400,000, the headline-making offer signaled that the new league meant to compete seriously with the NFL. The bidding war for football talent eventually prompted a merger, and as part of the deal, the NFL-AFL championship game was first played in January 1967.

More than 30,000 seats were empty for that 1967 game, a mere afterthought to the NFL championship game. As Mark Kriegel writes in his Namath biography, "Those foolish enough to pay $12 a ticket—an outrageous sum in those days—were rewarded with the Green Bay Packers' less-than-exciting win over the Kansas City Chiefs, 35-10, a score that seemed to vindicate the notion of the AFL as a Mickey Mouse league." The second NFL-AFL title match in 1968 was hardly more impressive: the Packers stomped the Oakland Raiders 33-14.

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When the AFL's Jets took the field at the Orange Bowl in Miami on Jan. 12, 1969, they were 18-point underdogs to the NFL's Baltimore Colts. The game that followed, Kriegel aptly notes, was "sloppy, full of folly, frustration, and squandered opportunity." But it was also "the stuff of legend," as Kriegel says, and the reason was Joe Namath.

With his shaggy hair and sideburns, his dark Hungarian looks, and his slouchy posture, Namath defied the crew-cut all-American QB image typified by Bart Starr of the Packers and Johnny Unitas of the Colts. Shortly after he'd signed with the New York Jets, a *Sports Illustrated* cover photo featured Namath against a backdrop of Broadway lights, and the nickname "Broadway Joe" stuck, caricaturing him (not altogether unfairly) as a cocky, high-living showoff.

The brash young quarterback from the brash young league upped the ante for the 1969 Super Bowl when, at a dinner the Thursday night before the game, he declared, "The Jets will win Sunday. I guarantee it."

The Guarantee: With that one gesture, made in response to a heckler at a Miami Touchdown Club banquet, Namath ensured that the Jets' 16-7 win over the Colts in Super Bowl III would establish a legend that another 35 Super Bowls (most of them boring, lopsided blowouts) could do nothing to diminish.

Like the championship game he made famous, the memory of Joe Namath today is more about showbiz spectacle than about football—and that's a shame because Namath was easily one of the most talented players the game had ever known. No less a judge of football prowess than legendary Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant pronounced Namath the greatest athlete he'd ever seen. In 12 pro seasons, Namath completed 1,886 passes for 27,663 yards and 173 touchdowns, despite repeated injuries to his famously damaged knees.

Whatever his feats on the field, however, Namath was more than a football player. He was a symbol, an icon of an era of sudden cultural change. Namath's star ascended at a time when several forces, including rising affluence and advances in communications, converged to help create a huge audience for televised football, the advertising revenue to pay for it, and the technology to produce it.

Kriegel notes that the 1965 Orange Bowl, Namath's final game for Alabama's Crimson Tide, was "the first major team sporting event to be [televised] at night"—advances in television technology had only recently made such a broadcast possible. Prime-time televised sports have now deeply ingrained themselves into American culture, and Joe starred in the first episode, completing an Orange Bowl record 18 passes in a losing effort against the national champion Texas Longhorns. The next day, the *New York Daily News* called Namath "the most exciting thing on television."

UNDER "**WOMEN**," THE READER IS REFERRED TO **31 SEPARATE PAGES**.

If he is now remembered less for his athletic ability than for his Broadway Joe persona, Namath himself is at least partly to blame. He was a world-class womanizer who never bothered to conceal his "love-'em-and-leave-'em" attitude.

Joe was in his prime at the very dawn of the sexual revolution, a revolution he helped to advance. In the index of Kriegel's book, the line for "Namath and women" tells the reader to "see women," and under "women," the reader is referred to 31 separate pages. Sports fans today are accustomed to reading about the sexual adventures of athletes—the rape accusation against NBA star Kobe Bryant, the use of strippers to recruit players at the University of Colorado, *ad infinitum*—but it was not always thus. Old-time NFLers like Starr and Unitas were known as squeaky-clean family men. If athletics was once closely associated with moral virtue in the American psyche, Namath forever shattered that connection.

According to Kriegel, Namath's amorous exploits were legendary even as an undergraduate at Alabama: "As his professors lectured in class, Joe would make mental lists of his conquests. 'Just to see how I was doing,' he said. Toward the end of his senior year, the list reached about 300. 'But that's a conservative estimate,' he acknowledged."

Were it anyone but Namath, such an estimate would be beyond belief. After all, this was Alabama—the Heart of Dixie, the very buckle of the Bible Belt—during the governorship of George Corley Wallace. But he was Namath, and who knows what wonders his green eyes, crooked grin, and dimpled chin might have worked with those Bama belles.

Namath's appetite for alcohol was equally prodigious. In his quickie 1969 autobiography (modestly titled *I Can't Wait Until Tomorrow … 'Cause I Get Better-Looking Every Day*), Namath included a chapter called, "I Like My Girls Blonde and My Johnnie Walker Red." He played with hangovers and sometimes had "a couple of Michelobs before practice." The morning of the 1968 AFL championship game, Namath was spotted leaving a hotel, blonde in tow, at 8 a.m.

Despite his image as an icon of the '60s counterculture, Namath was in many ways old-fashioned. Though he smoked some dope (it helped numb the pain of injuries), he was never part of the left-wing hippie scene. "I don't like to get involved in politics," Namath said after it became known he was on the Nixon administration's so-called "enemies list." He was patriotic. Of "The Star-Spangled Banner," he said during the height of anti-Vietnam War protests, "Every time I hear it before a game, it reminds me of where we are in the world, in life. I kind of thank God that we're in this country. When I hear it, I get chills."

There is irony in the Namath saga. His TV ads for shaving cream (with a then-unknown blonde named Farah Fawcett cooing, "take it all off") and pantyhose (if Hanes "can make my legs look good, imagine what they'll do for yours") were once viewed as vaguely scandalous. But by the dawn of the 21st century, his image had mellowed in such a way that a real-estate investment firm hired Namath as spokesman at $1 million a year, saying, "He's perfect for our demographic."

Perhaps more ironically, one of the world's most famous playboys ended up brokenhearted, a divorced father hopelessly devoted to his two young daughters. At 40, he married a young actress depicted by Kriegel as shallow and narcissistic. She eventually dumped Namath and took up with a Hollywood plastic surgeon. It was in a drunken stupor of self-pity after his divorce that Joe suffered his greatest embarrassment in 2003 when, during a sideline interview at a prime-time Jets game, he slurred at a female ESPN reporter, "I want to kiss you."

Given Joe's stardom, Kriegel observes that "the only place for him to hit rock bottom" was on national TV. Namath went into rehab and sobered up, and Kriegel concludes the unfinished saga of Broadway Joe with the star "tanned, energized, healthy," his "teeth … as white as his shirt." Still super after all these years. ■

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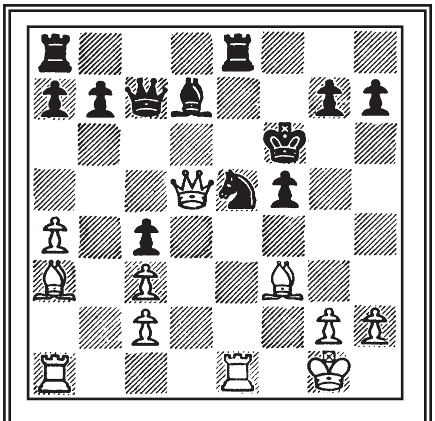

Fischer-Larsen
Candidates Semifinal Game One
Denver, 1971
Position after 21 … Ne5

Totalitarian Chic

During the early ’70s, male sartorial fashion had turned to the east. Communist China to be exact. The rage among men who thought they were with it was the Mao, a rather ugly ensemble inspired by the bloodstained Chinese strongman Mao Tse-Tung. Old-fashioned types were not best pleased. I remember an incident at Brooks’s Club in London, when an old duffer almost choked on his cigar when the writer (and later MP) Alan Clark jauntily breezed in wearing one. A kind member of the staff reminded Alan that a coat and tie were mandatory, to which Clark cheekily replied that in China they dress alike because they all look alike, whereas in England he needed to stand out. (He was, naturally, told to go home and change, which he promptly did.)

Personally, when this Hollywood-inspired fashion became *de rigueur* among the jet set, I was outraged. Mao had murdered tens of millions, far more than his mentor Joe Stalin and Adolf Hitler combined, plus he was at the time trying out a new experiment in groupthink. It was euphemistically named re-education. This entailed putting people in concentration camps, brainwashing them for five years or more, and then letting them out to become coolies for Communist bigwigs living high on the hog.

That winter in Gstaad I had a brilliant idea. Not so smart, as it turned out. I entered an Eagle Club giant slalom race wearing a Wehrmacht helmet. Actually it was a Hasso von Manteuffel 5th Panzer Army relic, a “clean” outfit known for its bravery and adherence to the military honor code. Once I began racing down the Wasserngrat, I thought I heard someone shouting the word “Nazi,” but wasn’t sure. Going back up on the chairlift, I heard yet again the word “Nazi” shouted at me. I gave a middle-finger salute in return. My explanation to friends, who laughingly asked me whether I had gone mad, was—and still is—as follows: if one can wear a Mao, or a hammer-and-sickle pin, one can wear a Wehrmacht helmet. We cannot be selective in our mass murderers.

Which of course brings me to Prince Harry. If one reads the British press, it is springtime for Hitler and Germany. Actually it is twilight for a 20-year-old who obviously has not read up on World War II history. Apart from everything else, Prince Harry got the crucial detail wrong. The Afrika Korps did not wear swastika armbands. They prided themselves on being honorable and ordinary soldiers. Starting with Field Marshal Rommel, not a single Afrika Korps officer or soldier ever wore the damn things. Prominent swastikas were later worn by SS Panzer troops—not the tankers but the infantry supporters—and SS elite storm troopers. The swastika was worn by Brownshirt thugs and the Gestapo. (Allied troops killed many surrendering Panzer troopers after mistaking their black tanker uniforms for Gestapo outfits.)

Harry, needless to say, represents the British royal family and is third in line to the throne. Someone should have caught him in time. It was a harmless prank, which I have seen tens of times in various British parties. Dressing up as a Gestapo officer seems to make the English laugh. But the hypocritical British press has had a field day. The loudest grievances have come from the usual suspects, the anti-monarchists.

It’s all been blown out of proportion. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been photographed wearing a German helmet and holding up two fingers to his nose to make a moustache. (He is a decorated veteran.) Humor is many-faceted. Dressing up as a German does not indicate a serious belief or view. The demands for the prince to make a groveling public apology say more about the outraged ones than the rather thick 20-year-old. How could he have foreseen that the kitsch Nazi imagery that has made “The Producers” such a smash hit these last 30 years could cause such ructions when he playfully adopted it himself? In Britain, “Dad’s Army,” “’Allo, ’Allo,” and “Fawlty Towers” are shows full of people dressed up as Nazis and making fools of themselves. Even during the war, humor was used as a weapon with which to belittle monsters. The Sex Pistols, an unspeakable but very popular rock band of the ’70s, wore ripped swastika t-shirts.

Last December, I sat down to dinner with Barry Humphries at Sardi’s, following the opening of his hit show “Dame Edna on Broadway.” Next to me was Joan Juliet Buck, an old friend and former editor of French *Vogue*. She wore a hammer-and-sickle pin on her hat. “How would you like it,” I asked her, “if I wore a tiny swastika on my lapel?” Joan did not like it. “It’s not the same,” she said. But I’m afraid it is. We are free to wear a pin that commemorates Communism, ignoring the enormity of Communist crimes. If anyone should be aggrieved, it is the few remaining Afrika Korps veterans who would have rather died than wear a swastika. ■