
THE MAKING OF AN ATHLETE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOE WASHINGTON

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Joe Washington was an All-American running back at the University of Oklahoma, where he played on two national championship teams coached by Barry Switzer, in 1974 and 1975. He was the number one draft choice of the San Diego Chargers, the fourth player selected in the draft. He played ten years in the National Football League (NFL), with the Chargers, the Baltimore Colts, the Washington Redskins—on two Super Bowl teams—and the Atlanta Falcons. Bert Jones, his quarterback at Baltimore, described him as a “quick scat back,” who, although weighing only 175 pounds, could take a lot of pounding, “and delivered a lot of pounding.” Jones noted that he “ran sideways faster than [he] ran forward, which is really a talent.”[†] Washington was also an expert pass catcher and kickoff and punt returner. In 1979, as a running back, he led the NFL in pass receptions.

“Little Joe” Washington was born in Crockett, Texas in 1953, the son of Joe “Flash” Washington. The senior Washington was a legendary figure in Texas football. He was head football coach and a teacher at black high schools in Bay City, Texas, from 1951 to 1965, and then in Port Arthur, Texas, from 1965 until he retired in 1995. He was an outstanding running back for armed forces teams in Hawaii, and then at Prairie View A&M in Hempstead, Texas, a member of the segregated Southwestern Athletic Conference, from 1948 to 1951.

The interview focuses on the making of a professional football player, examining each stage of the life-course from childhood, through high school, college, and the NFL, to retirement. Washington talks not only of his early exposure to sports, as a six-year old standing on the sidelines with arms folded, in imitation of his father, watching him run high school football practices, but of his perceptions of the Jim Crow system, and of black

[†] Bert Jones, interview by Stephen H. Norwood (Aug. 9, 1995).



Courtesy Joe Washington

community life, in Bay City, and how he later experienced school desegregation in Port Arthur. He critiques H.G. Bissinger's recent depiction of Texas high school football, providing a very different perspective.[†] Washington describes the college recruiting process, playing in a big-time college football program at the University of Oklahoma under Chuck Fairbanks and Barry Switzer, whose coaching styles he compares, and the college athlete's academic experience. The son of two schoolteachers who emphasized the importance of education, Washington graduated from Oklahoma in four years with a degree in public relations. Washington also explains the technique of the running back, on natural and artificial turf, and in different weather conditions, and that of the kickoff and punt returner.

Washington's adjustment to the NFL was complicated by a serious knee injury he sustained during the exhibition season. He later suffered two detached retinas, as well as further knee damage. He provides considerable insight into how players cope with injury and pain, and the pressure to play when hurt.

[†] H.G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990.

Washington served as player representative for the Chargers, and participated in the 1982 NFL players' strike with the Redskins, and the interview examines pro football's labor situation in depth. Washington astutely analyzes not only strike issues and strategy, but contract negotiations, being traded, and relations between coaches and players. He also examines how athletes adjust to aging and retirement.+



Growing Up in Jim Crow Texas

Stephen Norwood: Why don't we begin by talking about your family background. When and where were you born, and who were your parents?

Joe Washington: I was born in a little town called Crockett, Texas in 1953. My parents are both educators. My dad coached me in high school. He's been coaching at least forty years. My mother was a schoolteacher. Her parents were schoolteachers in Lufkin, Texas. Her dad was the principal of the high school she attended. At that time, of course, there weren't many professions open to blacks. So if you were a teacher, you were considered in the upper echelon, the cream of the crop.

Normally, I would probably have been born in Lufkin, Texas, my mom's hometown. But we had relatives in Crockett, and I think my parents were up there visiting at the time, plus the doctor there was the one to see. Crockett is about thirty-five or forty miles from Lufkin. In Texas at that time, blacks were not able to use certain hospitals.

At the time I was born, my parents were living in Bay City, Texas, a town about seventy-five miles west of Houston. It had a population of about 12,000. My dad was coaching there at the black high school. My sister was born there in 1954, and my brother in 1956. We lived there until I was in the sixth grade.

My dad had been a fantastic athlete, and he was a big influence on me. He played everything. I've looked at his scrapbook. He was referred to as Joe "Flash" Washington in all the newspaper clippings. As a kid, I remember him having real good speed. He was also a running back and played defensive back, and he said he was probably a little quicker than I was. He started playing in the air force, in Hawaii, where he was stationed. He made a pretty good name for himself there. Then he went to Prairie View A&M, and played football there.

My dad was from a little city called Rosenberg, Texas, which is about thirty miles west of Houston. So we're all basically Texans. I know my mom's grandmother, my great-grandmother, was Indian, Comanche. So I guess I have a little Indian blood running through me.

During the summers in Bay City, my dad worked for the city, taking care of the swimming pool that was right across from the high school. So we learned to swim at an early age. I had no idea how much money he was making, or if he needed the second

[†] The interview is part of a book manuscript, *The Making of an Athlete: The Life-Course and Culture of the Professional Football Player*, which consists of lengthy interviews I conducted with eight men who each played at least ten years in the NFL, as well as Joe Washington's father.

job. As far as we were concerned, we never needed anything. I guess it was really due to the fact that my dad worked as hard as he did. We sort of took things for granted.

Everything was segregated at that time, and the city pool for whites was on the other side of town. They had their swimming pool, and we had our swimming pool. I do recall kids from surrounding towns—Sweeney, which was thirty miles away, and some other towns—would always come to our pool. Busloads would come in during the week from those towns to swim in our pool.

My first exposure to athletics came from pickup games in the neighborhood. We had football games, and I always played with much larger kids. I had pretty good athletic talent, and they didn't mind choosing me on their teams. I also started to play Little League baseball in the first grade.

Were there any adult games in Bay City that you watched, an industrial league, or anything like that?

No, I don't remember any of that.

So your first exposure to athletics came from pickup games with kids. Did your father say anything about his involvement with sports in the past?

I didn't think that much about it, until I was in fourth or fifth grade, where I was old enough where it could have some impact on me.

During the year I attended first grade, the black school in Bay City went from grades one through twelve, so every day after school, I went out to watch my dad coach the high school football practice. The next year, when I was in second grade, they built a black elementary school that went up to sixth grade, leaving the high school with grades seven through twelve. But my first grade year, I was at school with my dad. And that's the only place I wanted to be. After school was out, I made a beeline for the football field. I think he really enjoyed having me out there. He knew where I was.

As far as I was concerned, my dad was the greatest thing since sliced bread. Whatever he did, I tried to do. If he picked up a pencil a certain way, I picked it up the same. I would throw a football the exact same way. When he was showing those kids out there how to do certain things, I was out there watching. That's why I got run over on the field so many times, always in the way. I was following him, trying to be like him. Walking around with my arms folded.

I emulated what the players on the field were doing. I kicked the football, and threw the football every day. A couple of those players were heroes to me; I was really crazy about them. Later on, one of them coached on my dad's staff, and was one of my high school coaches. He also coached my little brother, not only in high school, but in college, at North Texas State.

Did your father at any point encourage you to take football seriously?

No. He never forced or pushed us into any athletics. Maybe he suggested that we play Little League ball. I don't know how that came about. But I can't ever remember him make us do anything like that.

What kind of athletic facilities did the high school in Bay City where your father was coaching have?

When you look back at them, Steve, oh man, they were terrible! He eventually got a fieldhouse built out away from the gymnasium. There was no whirlpool until my fourth grade. There was a heat lamp and a taping table, and my dad had a little office at the gymnasium. They had showers over there. There was no weight room. The only weights I ever saw at the time were on television. One of my dad's players would put cement into some little tin coffee cans, and he used those as weights. He made his own. So as far as facilities, all they had were the balls, the equipment, and dummies, the basics. And that was it.

The stadium was small, and in later years they ended up playing in the white high school stadium, when they allowed that. We had track meets at the white high school stadium. When I was in fifth grade, my dad let me run in one of the practice meets. I ran the hurdles. I came in last, but I finished.

My father always encouraged my brother and me to do different things, but he never forced us into athletics. But we were always in that particular atmosphere. When the track season came around, we ran track. The high hurdles were too large for me and my brother to really practice on correctly, so he would have the guy in the woodshop cut them down to fit us, so we could make sure we had the correct form. He always did whatever it took for us to be able to do things well. But he never pushed us.

What contacts did blacks in Bay City have with whites, and with white institutions during your childhood?

At that time, blacks were basically isolated from the white neighborhoods. You didn't really know what was happening. You were aware of a lot of things taking place around you, but you weren't aware of the reason. For instance, the whites in Bay City had a baseball league, and a team came to town that had a black guy on it. This black guy stayed with us. I had no idea why he was staying with us. I later learned that it was because they didn't allow blacks in the hotels in Bay City. All I knew at the time was that we had this baseball player, who was good, staying with us, and we were lucky enough to have him.+

There was a little cafe we used to go to, where my dad would always buy us burgers on Friday and Saturday nights, and I never knew why we had to go around to the side or the back to get served. I always thought we did that because we were special, and they

[†] I later asked Joe Washington, Sr. about this incident, and he recalled it vividly. He had been asked to take in the lone African-American player on a youth baseball team from farther down in south Texas, that had desegregated before any other town in the state, when it came to play in Bay City. It was a difficult decision for him, and he agonized over it.

I didn't want to be a part of that. But somebody had to take the kid, because they wouldn't let him stay with the white kids. Now that bothered me for a long time. My conscience really bothered me. I was contributing to that situation. At the time, I didn't want the kid to be exposed to too many bad things. In reality, though, I might have been adding salt to the wound. We talked about that a long, long time after it happened.

Joe Washington, Sr., interview by Stephen H. Norwood (Jul. 17, 1994),

were giving us a good deal—giving us a little extra, you know, and treating us right. Come to find out, one of my dad's players did work there. And he'd always give us an extra burger or two. But the reason we went around to the side or the back was because we were black. Blacks weren't allowed to come through the front.

Growing up, you had your black neighborhoods, your black cafes, your black restaurants. Everything was basically black. You went to black universities. And that's all I ever knew.

I did, however, come into contact with whites when we went to the white-owned sporting goods stores that supplied the equipment, Den Brothers and Oshman's, where the people were real friendly to us. They treated us like we weren't any different, maybe out of respect for my dad. My little brother and I had the run of the mill of the stores. We'd look through all the boxes to see what new equipment had come in, and we'd tell my dad what stuff he should get. They gave us football shoes. Later Den Brothers received a motorcycle franchise. Boy did I want one. That's probably the one thing I wanted as a kid and didn't get.

There was a lot of civil rights activity in the South during the early 1960s. How much news about it filtered into Bay City, and what impact did it have on you?

As elementary school kids, we didn't know much about it. I vaguely remember some talk about voting, in 1963 or 1964. I think they had some kind of poll tax that my folks were having to pay in order to vote.

Did your parents vote in that period?

I want to say yes. I think I recall them voting.[†]

Did you hear them talking about politics, or any civil rights issues?

I think my folks basically shielded us from anything like that. For instance, in Houston there was this place where they had pony rides where blacks couldn't go, but I didn't know that until ten years ago. We'd go by this place, and we kids would always want to stop there. And for some reason, our folks never would stop. Maybe we did stop, but I know we never rode those horses. That place is still there to this day, and I have since gone there—not to ride, but to just stop and walk freely on the grounds. That was weird to me then, because for the most part, my parents would always try to give us what we wanted, no matter what it was. But in this particular case, for some reason, they never entertained the thought of stopping there. Never did. I didn't find out until a few years ago that blacks weren't allowed there.

So in order to protect us from rejection, and to make sure we had good feelings about ourselves, my parents didn't make that big a deal about riding the scraggly little ponies. They wanted us to feel that we were as good as anybody, and could do anything we wanted.

[†] Joe Washington, Sr., stated that "Black voting in Bay City was almost nonexistent until the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965," and that blacks had no representation in city government while he lived in Bay City. He struggled to acquire more funding for his school, and to improve its athletic facilities, in a city where all the school board members and all the city council members were white, and the mayor was white. Joe Washington, Sr., interview.

How did your schoolteachers handle civil rights issues?

The subject may have been brought up, but I can't ever recall being told that "You can't do this, you can't do that." The books were for blacks, maybe by blacks. The curriculum was mapped out for blacks.

Just to interject one observation I've had in teaching. I taught at Memphis State University for three years before I taught at the University of Oklahoma. And the black students there who remembered the Jim Crow era were aware of the fact that the textbooks they had used in the black schools were the ones that had been discarded by the white system, after being used for six or seven years.

Yeah, but you don't realize anything like that until you're actually in a system where you're getting new books. As long as you've been getting those books year after year, you just figure, "Gee, they had them a couple years, the class before you."

At Bay City, we participated in a segregated Punt, Pass, and Kick competition sponsored by Ford. The whites held their competition one place, and we held ours another place, and eventually the results came in. And we always felt that because the competition was held separately, we were getting shafted. Your results were taken elsewhere, and the whites made the ultimate decision. So you never knew what was happening. I was beginning, even at that age, to see that things between black and white weren't equal, but it just wasn't that big of a deal to us. One year, I got beat by two inches, and I was thinking that something wasn't right.

They must pick someone in the region to represent it. This all ends up at some NFL stadium.

Exactly. I never went. One year I got beat by two inches. And I'm thinking, "Something isn't right here."

The whites took the figures from everybody, and made the ultimate decision about who won?

Yeah. Your figures were taken elsewhere. So you didn't really know what's what. One year I finished first in the competition, one year I was second, and one year I was third.

What happened when you were first?

Nothing happened. I never went anywhere. You were supposed to move up to a higher level, from the city to the region, and so on. All I know is that when I finished first, that was it. I went to the Ford place and got a jacket, and that was it. There was nothing more. No fanfare. But I loved that jacket.

So you were first in the black competition, and you didn't advance to a higher level of competition.

Yeah. It should have been first in the city. You were supposed to be competing together. It's just that you were doing it over here, and they were doing it over there. And they'd come in and take the results. So you never knew what was happening. That was

the thinking in the black neighborhood, that something wasn't right. That was my first inkling of thoughts of any type of racial strife or differences about how one felt about the other, or about how one doesn't trust the other. I remembered that.

Was football at the high school where your father coached a major focus of black community life?

Oh, yes. Friday and Saturday nights. This was big, yessirree. Really big. Everybody turned out to see the Hilliard High Panthers. We had great rivalries. A lot of the towns were within seventy-five miles of each other, so you had a whole convoy of people coming in to root for the visiting team. I knew Mosely, my backfield coach at Oklahoma, while I was in first grade. His high school team in Wharton, Texas, twenty miles away, played my dad's. Everything shut down those nights when there was a football game.

This would be the number one focus of interest in the town?

That was it. Yessirree.

Did the white press in Bay City ever cover the black high school games?

Yes, they did, because they were always winning. How much they covered them, I can't recall, because I was real small then. But I do recall us winning the state championship in 1959, and listening to it on the radio. Several of the games were broadcast over the radio.

Did your father ever have any aspirations for his own athletes to go into big-time college football? Were the black high school football players being channeled to the black colleges, many of which were outstanding in football, like Grambling? What was the outlook for a particularly talented black athlete that your father coached?

Oh, to go to a black college, definitely. The particularly talented players that my father coached would be recruited by the black colleges.

Did any of the big-time white college football programs show interest recruiting his players?

The white colleges didn't show any interest until the late 1960s.

White colleges were not sending any recruiters down until the late 1960s?

Right. Just from the black schools. The black high school coaches had real strong ties with each other, and with the black colleges in the region. So players would go on to schools like Prairie View and Texas Southern.

Did your father ever talk about so-and-so, a player he had coached, that it's really a shame, he could have been as good as some of the All-Americans that you read about?

Yeah, we've talked about kids he had who could have made it either way. He definitely had some. One was a guy named Sam Clark—good kid, excellent running back. He probably could have played anywhere. And Carl Jackson, the guy who later coached for my dad. A great athlete—he was long-jumping 24 feet in the 1960s.

What happened to Sam Clark?

I don't know. I think he went to one of the black colleges. That was basically it.

Experiencing Desegregation

You moved from Bay City to Port Arthur, Texas. Was this because of the desegregation process, where they were closing down the black schools?

Yes, they were starting to close down a lot of the black schools. In 1965 or 1966 we moved to Port Arthur because they were closing down the black high school in Bay City, making it a junior high, as a result of desegregation. There had been two high schools in Bay City, Hilliard, which was black, and Bay City High School, which was white. Their team was called the Black Cats, which is ironic. I think Hilliard stayed open two years after we left, before they consolidated the two schools. So with desegregation, my dad, being the football coach and athletic director, would lose his job, and be dispersed to another job within the system, at a desegregated high school, where he probably wouldn't be the head football coach. As a result, he moved to a larger, all-black high school in Port Arthur, to become their head football coach. That school played in the 4A division, whereas the one in Bay City was 2A. My dad had had an offer to go to this same school in Port Arthur earlier, and had turned it down. They'd been trying to get him there.

We came to Port Arthur when I was in sixth grade, and most everything was segregated there too. My dad was coaching at a black high school, and my mom was teaching at a predominantly black elementary school. She was teaching fourth grade, and my future wife was attending sixth grade there. I hadn't met her yet. Her father coached the football team at the black junior high school, that supplied my dad's high school with players. I played Little League baseball, and that was still segregated.

We lived out a way, rather than in the inner city, and so I attended a desegregated school in the sixth grade. This was my first encounter with white kids on a regular basis. My old neighborhood in Bay City consisted of blacks and Mexicans. Out of a class of thirty, we had about eight blacks. I hadn't wanted to leave Bay City, where I'd left all my friends. All I knew was that I was in a new school. Whether the kids were white, black, green, or polka dot, I was going into a new situation with a little anxiety.

But one thing I noticed right off the bat was that being a good athlete, you have a tendency to assimilate and fit in. They have a tendency to look at you differently, and accept you more. That was evident right away. When it came to sports, I was going to compete. I didn't care who was out there, because I played with larger kids when I was little. And these were kids my own age. So no big deal. I was ready to get in, and participate, and knock heads, and show my wares.

My sixth grade teacher, Miss Henry, didn't seem to care too much whether you were black or white; she treated everybody creepy. I just thought she was a mean SOB period. Which was good, because a lot of kids probably went into a situation like that and did get treated differently. Plus, I was always treated pretty well anyway, whether because my dad was a coach, or I was a good athlete, or because my mother was a schoolteacher.

The next year, I went to the white junior high, Stephen F. Austin, which was connected to one of the white high schools.

Had the black community in Port Arthur been agitating for desegregation in the Port Arthur area?

I don't remember Port Arthur. I do remember Bay City. You know, we want to be able to go here and there. And the one discussion I remember is why would we want to go do this, when we can have what we have, separate but equal. We can still keep our schools—especially when they started closing them down and consolidating them. They started thinking, “Hmmm, we're losing a lot of jobs, so let's keep ours. Just make sure we have all the facilities the white school has.”

So there was some division in the black community in Bay City.

Oh yeah. You're hearing “Desegregate! We want to be able to go here.” And I think later, you started to hear more about separate [but] equal.

Did your parents have any views on that?

If they did, I never heard it. I wasn't really aware. But I know when I arrived in Port Arthur, I got my first glimpse of racial disturbances. Fights after school. Fights in school. Oh, man, it was unreal! There were no problems in the elementary school. You had certain blacks, they didn't want to be there; they didn't like whites. And they were carrying a chip on their shoulders. And vice versa. But again, I was an athlete, and I didn't have any problem.

Did they have a football team in junior high?

Yeah, they had organized football. I played seventh and eighth grade basketball, football, and ran track. I did real well at all of them. I was a top athlete. So I never really had any problems with anything.

Were you aware of professional sports on the national scene at this time at all?

As a kid, I followed professional sports pretty closely. In baseball, I watched Roger Maris, Willie Mays, Juan Marichal, Sandy Koufax, Don Drysdale. Those were my heroes. They were the guys I grew up with. In football, it was Lenny Moore and Johnny Unitas. Oh, man, I loved Lenny Moore and Johnny Unitas. Living in Bay City, Texas, I was close to Houston. That was the old American Football League. So I was a little bit closer to the AFL, the George Blandas, the Billy Cannons, Abner Haynes, Dickie Post, Paul Lowe, Ernie Ladd, Lance Alworth, Charlie Tolar—the human bowling ball.

I guess I emulated all of them. I thought I'd be another Billy Cannon. I didn't realize at the time that Billy Cannon was 6'3", 230 pounds. I had no earthly idea he was that big. I just liked Billy Cannon. I never had anything close to the same kind of running style, but I just liked Billy Cannon.

Now that you're aware of all this out there on the national scene, this is a shift from your father's generation. He wasn't able to really conceive of playing on

the national scene or big-time college football. Billy Cannon was from LSU, and a big-time college program like that would be closed off to blacks. But now already, you're telling me that in junior high you can start seeing this . . .

I didn't think of any of that. Never really thought about college. I thought about the Olympics. I'm thinking, I can do all these sports, I figured I'd be able to participate in the Olympics, and participate in track and field. And then of course professionally, I'd be able to play baseball, football—not so much basketball. I had certain heroes that I liked, and whether they were black or white didn't make any difference to me. I was brought up that people were people, and my folks never did differentiate.

So I was in junior high now, just waiting until the ninth grade so I can go to my dad's school. I was just biding my time. I wanted to go with my dad, and I wanted to play football for my dad. That was one of the dreams I always had. As a kid I had two: play football for my dad, and my little brother and I to be on the same team. I was two years ahead of him in school.

While I was playing junior high football, my little brother, in the fifth grade, started playing in a program called "Police Football." They played on Saturday mornings with helmets and pads, and some of the teams were integrated. I don't know why they called it Police Football. Maybe the police force sponsored it, or came up with the idea, or commissioned it.

This is outside of the school system.

Yes.

Playing for the Father

Had your father taught you anything specifically about football? Had you learned what you knew up to this point by watching the games? Had your father coached you in any way?

No, he had never really coached me. But he was always throwing the football to me and my brother together. He had good technique. And when he was showing his players out there how to do certain things, I was out there watching.

For ninth grade, I enrolled at my dad's high school, Lincoln, and was going to play freshman football. During the second scrimmage though, my dad called me over and asked if I thought I could run against these guys. We were scrimmaging against Aldine Carver High School. All the black coaches were close-knit, so I'd known all these coaches since being a little kid. So our teams began scrimmaging each other. My dad's backs weren't running well, so he asked me if I could run against these guys. I said, "Sure, no big deal." I always felt that I was good enough to do anything. Even though I was a little freshman, 140 pounds, I was not in awe. I ran well. And everybody was saying, "Who is that? Who is that guy?" "That's the coach's son. That's Little Joe."

Your father's name is Joe too. So that's why you were known as "Little Joe"? He's "Big Joe"?

Yes. All those black coaches had seen me grow through the ranks, running around. I was always the little water boy for my dad's teams, carrying the towels out on the field. They couldn't believe it was actually me out there.

There had to have been some pressure on my dad in considering to have his son play varsity, so I ended up playing freshman ball the first game of the season. I was a little upset about it, because I thought I'd shown that I could run against these big guys. I never really confronted my dad about it. But he knew that I was itching to play. Eventually he called me up from the freshman team.

Were you a running back in high school?

In high school, I played running back and wide receiver, but very little defense. I liked to hit, but guys were getting a little larger than I was. After my sophomore year, my dad moved me to quarterback. I hated that. I didn't want to play quarterback.

Why not?

I knew I wasn't a quarterback. My little brother was a quarterback, and I didn't want to play his position. I wasn't a passer. I could throw. I had all the components and all the skills to do that. But I wanted to be a running back. My dad eventually moved me back to the running back position.

You had also participated in track. Did that contribute to developing some running back skills?

That's the one thing my father insisted on, that I run track, to help my speed. He made me a hurdler. He wanted all his football players to run track. So it really wasn't just me.

Playing for my dad, at a time when our school had begun to play white schools, I got a chance to see the racial bias in officiating. Things being called back. Whistles being blown. I saw officials throwing flags, and how we couldn't get a break. Even when they had mixed officiating staffs, the black officials would make sure they weren't showing any favoritism to us by going the opposite way.

My senior year, my brother and I played in the same backfield; he was the quarterback, and I was the running back. There was always John Q. Public saying, "They're playing just because they're the coach's sons." But my dad was the kind of guy who would play a gorilla, if he were eligible and could play.

My dad was tougher on us than on other players. He expected the little things out of us, and he expected us to do them automatically. He worked us hard. And I think we expected a great deal out of ourselves too.

What kind of pressure was there at this level to win, for the sake of winning? There was a book, *Friday Night Lights*, that raised the issue of the people in that Texas community being obsessed with winning, to the exclusion of anything else . . .

I read that.

It just struck me that there are different requirements at different levels. What works in the NFL isn't necessarily the kind of approach to use in high school.

I think basically coaching is really coaching. I think at all levels, there is a certain part that should be consistent on every level. As far as the emphasis on winning in Texas high school football, hey, it's big. Coaches are fired for losing, everywhere.

Was there pressure on your father? Did he feel insecure in any way, if he didn't have the record in any particular year, that he might lose his job?

My dad's been under pressure in Port Arthur for the last twenty years, by the mere fact that he's been a newcomer, plus the fact that he played his sons. And with the notoriety he's gotten, and the notoriety we've gotten, they've expected him to win all the time, until this day. Every year, they're asking for his job if he doesn't have a winning season.

The obsession with winning at the high school level may work against the long-term interests of the players, if they're just seen as material to be used for the won-lost record the fans want to see, without them realizing that some of the methods used to achieve that might be detrimental to the players.

The only time that the fans ever take that under consideration, is if you're losing. If you're losing, then they are concerned about the methods, and what is detrimental to a kids well-being. That is really the only time. Every now and then, you get a small percentage who are really concerned about the methods when you're winning, but he is the hard core true fan. He's probably the guy who's just enjoying the participation and effort of the kids. He doesn't care himself whether you win or lose.

What about the stereotyping of black youth as athletes, and once they get injured, they can be just cast on the scrap heap, and nobody's interested in them, and there goes their future?

That wasn't the case when you had your black coach with his black athletes. Integration set up a totally different environment. Before that, the coach was really more involved in the community. He lived in that area. He knew the players' moms and dads on a first-name basis. These kids baby-sat for the coach. And it was the same in the white community. It wasn't as distant as it is now. It was more of a community-type situation. Now that is gone. The relationship is gone. Everything now is based on winning and losing, and what can be achieved at the next level. Can this guy get a scholarship? After he gets a scholarship, will he be able to play pro? And you've lost your relationship that you once had when everything was segregated.

You raised some interesting questions earlier when you said your father, a coach, was also a teacher. And teachers were the educated elite of the community. Then there was a meshing of the two identities of high educational level and coach. Whereas today . . .

Today, coach and teacher shall never meet. Now it's so specialized. My dad taught some classes at Hilliard High School in Bay City, and he taught some classes when he

got to Lincoln High School in Port Arthur. But he doesn't teach any classes now. Now it's strictly up to him, as athletic director, to oversee the athletic program, and to win football games.[†]

Your father was the coach, and I assume he was not going to make you play when you were hurt. But you do hear of some coaches getting so obsessed with winning, that they would put a young player's future at risk just for the short-term goal of winning a game.

First of all, I don't think a coach really has to put direct pressure on a kid, for him to try to play in a situation where he probably shouldn't play. I don't think a coach has to come up to you and say, "You gotta play. We need you. You oughta do this. I think you can go." Prime example. This happened to me in the pros. My first year with the Washington Redskins, I got injured the second game, the second play. And I was out the next three and a half weeks. I started practicing that week for the game against the 49ers. Right before I went to practice on a Wednesday, my wife asked me how I felt. And I said, "I know I'm not going to be able to go. My ankle is killing me. It really hurts." I told her I'd more than likely suit up, but I didn't think I'd be able to play.

Well, there was pressure on me to play, because we were losing backs, and we had started off the season 0-5. I was taped up on the sidelines, hobbling around, not going to play. The backfield coach asked me, "Joe, what do you think? How do you feel?" I replied, "Coach, I'd love to go, but shoot, I know I can't do it. I don't want to be a detriment to the team." Well, before I knew it, it was getting close to the half. I had my helmet close to me, because I was standing up there close, getting into the action. I wanted to have my helmet with me, so that when the whistle blew for halftime, I didn't have to go looking for it. Well, now I had my helmet on. We were driving. And the coach said to me, "Joe, what do you think?" I said, "Oh, I don't know." He told me, "OK—go ahead!" And before I knew it, I was out on the field, and playing like a banshee.

It isn't so much the direct pressure from the coach, then. It's the pressure of being in a situation and competing. I don't care what level you're on. You're in a situation where everybody is involved, and as a player you really want to play no matter what. If you feel that there is the slightest way you can participate, all he has to say is "What do you think?"

What I'm saying is a more mature coach, a more responsible coach, might understand, as you understand, what the disposition of the player is going to be, in the overall environment of excitement and wanting to contribute, and might caution the player, whereas, say, a coach who is interested only in his own record, rather than the player's future, might give some indication—even saying it's up to you might not be the way a coach should handle it with a sixteen-year old player.

I'm sure they do that. I think every coach is going to say, "It's tough, and we really need you, but it's up to you. If you feel you can go, you can go." And hey, that's pressure, no matter how you look at it.

[†] This interview occurred before Joe Washington, Sr.'s retirement.

I would think the coach would have a lot of responsibility. Football is a rough game. People are going to get hurt, and you have to be aware of the implications of exacerbating an injury.

Just to give you an example. My dad's attitude about playing kids definitely changed after he had a player get paralyzed. It was late in the game. The kid wanted to play, so he sent him in. My dad believes every kid should have a chance to play, so he really won't cut anybody. He might put them off the team for disciplinary reasons. But there are certain instances where he knows that if he plays certain kids, because of the kids' lack of skill, he could get hurt.

I think at sixteen years old, you should be able to leave it up to a kid, whether he can play or not. Because in most instances, he can without further injury to himself I've seen that on numerous occasions, at different levels. I think it is a coach's responsibility to himself, his team, and the kid, to present this to a kid in a passive way, and say, "You make the decision. You know whether you can go or not." Because, in most cases, if you don't, players will take the easy way out.

Did you ever get hurt playing high school football?

Yep. My senior year in high school I broke my leg—my ankle, and a bone above it. I missed the rest of the season, and possibly cost us the chance to win the state championship. Depressing, man. My little brother, our quarterback, had broken his left wrist the week before. They put a plaster cast on, and he continued to play. We still ended up winning the district. We lost the second or third playoff game. If I'd have played, we probably would have won the state. Just to show the kind of respect they had for us, even though we didn't play in the state finals, or in the game before that, they still rated us the number two team in the state.

That was probably our last true chance to win the state championship, because we had everything that year. Nonetheless, two years after that, they won the district because of my brother. He really made the difference in our football team. For three years, my dad didn't have to worry about a quarterback. He had a coach on the field. My brother was a great athlete, a guy with the right type of temperament. He ended up going to North Texas State, and he started there as a freshman. As a matter of fact, we were national college co-backs of the week, the only time that had ever happened. I really enjoyed playing in the same backfield with him in high school, because as kids, playing in the neighborhood, we were very seldom on the same team. Kids felt we had an advantage being the coach's sons, and good athletes. So we'd always end up going against each other.

You were playing what sounds like top-flight high school football.

Oh yeah! This was big league stuff.

What were the facilities like by this point? You commented that earlier they had struck you as very poor. Had they improved?

The facilities had improved considerably. When I got to ninth grade, they actually had free weights. By my senior year, we had a Universal machine. They were just coming out.

The uniforms were great. My little brother and I designed them. We could wear what we wanted.

What accounts for this change? Was more money being contributed?

Yeah. Football is a big budget item in all institutions, whether it's college or high school or junior high. And in Texas there's more emphasis on it than in other places. You don't buy your own equipment. They supply it for you. So you have two pairs of shoes . . .

In *Friday Night Lights*, the author talks about this high school team flying across the state in a chartered plane.

We didn't do that. You're talking there about a school in the oil patches, when the boom was big. That was an area where there was nothing much to do but play and watch football. I think that made the community a little closer. They were a tight-knit community because of that. What was wrong with them having the type of interest in football, and their kids and community, that they do? I would think that the crime rate in that community is less than most other places, especially during football season.

What ticks me off about *Friday Night Lights* is the fact that the author came into that town and presented himself as an ally to them, and a member of the community, and then wrote about them in the manner he did. Granted, a lot of the things he said were exactly true. But he focused on football being an obsession, out of which nothing good could possibly come. I really resented that, especially with my dad being a coach.

But the author displays some sympathy for the coach. I remember one part where he said these people would put "For Sale" signs on the coach's lawn if he was losing.

Oh yeah. Well, I know they did that once to Barry [Switzer]. They sent a moving van up to Barry's when we [Oklahoma] lost to Kansas.

You raise a point that's quite valid. There's nothing else to do in that town anyway. The concern I would have is that it seemed like they were trying to impose an NFL model in a high school. Very few people are ever going to make the NFL. You have to prepare them to do something else in life.

You can talk about them putting a professional emphasis on high school football, but it's hard for me to relate to not having that emphasis put on it. This is something special. A lot of these kids, after they take off their pads after that last game, will never play again. This is a unique experience. It's something most people would love to do for life. So when you talk about putting a professional emphasis at the high school level, that's really what it is anyway.

I don't think a kid should go to high school today, and not participate in some extra-curricular activity. You've got to do that. With all the single parents you have now, a kid should be at school as much as possible. You think back to the days when you were in school, and you walked to your neighborhood school, and you knew everybody. Kids weren't on the street as much because, first of all, they were in school. They were in the band, in the glee club, participating in some sport. So when they went home, all they had time to do was eat, and do their homework, and then go to sleep, because they were

tired. The fact that they are de-emphasizing extra-curricular activities, especially the arts, is killing institutions of learning.

Heavily Recruited

Why don't we move on to the college level now. First, let's look at how you experienced the recruiting process. You had already established yourself as a high school player, and had been in the all-star games . . .

At that time, I hadn't thought that much about college. I wanted to play pro, it seemed fun and all that, but no big deal. Being a Texan, I wanted to go to the University of Texas. I used to watch the Darrell Royal show on television, and when they played "The Eyes of Texas," I stood up at attention, and put my hand over my chest. At that time, that was the gospel. I wasn't thinking white as opposed to black. I wasn't thinking in terms of color at this time. This was Texas, and I lived in Texas. They're playing "The Eyes of Texas all upon you."

I followed the Texas games closely, and was familiar with the players, yessirree. Gene Stallings coached at A&M. A guy named Jim Bertleson, whom I thought was the greatest thing since sliced bread, wore number 35. I loved him. I loved their uniforms, until I got to high school. Then I hated the all-white. I needed something with color.

I was heavily recruited. In high school, I was All-Conference my sophomore year, and All-American my junior year. I started receiving letters from colleges my sophomore year in high school. They came from Big Ten schools, Big Eight schools, from all over the country. I guess I got a recruiting letter from every major college in the country.

Your father was very experienced with the recruiting process. Could you describe his role in this?

I was lucky that the recruiters had to go through my dad. I didn't have any direct contact with them until my senior year. My dad made sure that they were OK, and that there weren't any illegal offers. If I were to pick a school, I was going strictly on the merit of the university, not because I was induced. He made sure that if I got a car, he was going to buy a car for me. So I never had any illegal offers made to me by any university. None whatsoever.

My father had had players who had gone on to colleges, including white universities. But this was probably a first for him, to have this kind of onslaught. But he felt he knew what was best for his son.

At that time, you could take as many visits as you wanted to, which I think is a good way to do it. I think you're limited to a certain number now. I took probably thirty-four or thirty-five visits. All weekends were gone, because I was gone all the time. Oklahoma was probably my thirtieth visit. If I had been limited to six choices, Oklahoma wouldn't have been one.

I had no idea where I wanted to go. I felt that I could compete no matter where I went. We always call[ed] it athletic arrogance. As a kid, I loved the University of Texas. But as I grew older, I understood the reality of things. Not many blacks had gone there.

Well, Switzer talks about you in his book, *Bootlegger's Boy*, as choosing the University of Oklahoma in great part because it had recruited black players.

That had a lot to do with it.

The University of Texas had not been doing that.

Right, but that really didn't bother me. I felt I could compete there.

But just from the social standpoint, I would think that would be a factor.

Not that directly. That became more evident to me after I had chosen the University of Oklahoma. Then it became clear that it was totally different from the University of Texas.

So Texas tried to recruit you?

Oh yes. They didn't want to lose me to out of state.

Who would come down to talk to you? Did the head coach?

Texas had a guy named Fred Akers assigned to scout my area, southern Texas. At the time, he didn't know that I loved Texas. Of course, I was concerned that they didn't have a real good history of black players.

But as a seventeen-year old kid, thinking he's the greatest thing since sliced bread, I don't think I left with the impression that they thought that.

I take it you went to the University of Texas campus?

Yeah, I did. Texas did have me come out to the campus, but I just didn't get the right vibes from them.

How did they try to sell the Texas program to you?

When you go on these visits, they show you the facilities, where the players stay, the dining hall, and so on. At most of the places I visited, the facilities were pretty good. TCU's facilities weren't that great, when I visited there. But Texas, my God! But at Texas, it was more of a feeling that you were lucky to be there, rather than that they were lucky to have you. I did have a meeting with Darrell Royal. He's been one of my biggest supporters ever since I attended the University of Oklahoma. But I just didn't get real good vibes from him that day. He was cordial.

What else do they do on a recruiting visit?

They introduce you to the players, and the players take you around. They usually try to set you up with a date for a movie or dinner. I already had a girlfriend. I was real shy anyway. So I really didn't want to have too much of that. Plus, you always hear these rumors about what happens on them. I wouldn't tell anybody, but I was always afraid of these rumors about what might happen. To be put in a situation to have to make a decision.

I went to Texas on a weekday, and went back home for a track meet that evening. So I really didn't get the weekend flavor of the University of Texas.

Did they mention anything about academics?

All of the universities stressed the academic part of things on the recruiting visits, which I think you've got to do. They let you know what type of academic programs they had, and the tutoring chat you could get. At that time, I wanted to be a dentist. But I truly believe, for a kid to really choose where he's going to school, he's definitely got to put the athletics first when he's choosing. If you're satisfied with that, the academics will come a lot easier.

What were the top five places on your list of colleges you were considering?

I didn't have a top five. The way it was, I visited a school, and I liked it until I visited another school. The first school I visited was Texas Tech. The one thing I remember about being up there in the Panhandle, was that it was extremely cold. I went to a movie, and had a real good time. But I just wasn't interested in Texas Tech—maybe because they weren't as rich in tradition, as what I was looking for. Even though I wasn't fully aware of this as a high school kid.

I knew I didn't want to go anywhere where the weather was cold. I visited Michigan State, and they had twenty-three inches of snow on the ground. I didn't want a place like that. So I cancelled all my other trips at cold-weather schools, with Notre Dame and other schools in the Northeast.

When I visited LSU, I really thought I'd like to go there. First of all, they played on grass, and I kind of wanted to play on grass. Their colors were purple and gold, which were my high school colors. They played at night. Excellent, unbelievable facilities. Their facilities were awesome. The guy who ran the local sporting goods store, who had strong ties, was really interested in my attending LSU.

I was really impressed with LSU until that night, when I attended the LSU-Notre Dame game. Notre Dame was also recruiting me. When the game ended, I was going to try to walk across the field and meet Ara Parseeghian, Notre Dame's coach. LSU won the game, and the stadium went wild. Everybody was on the field. The guy who was showing me around was from my high school; he was at LSU on a track scholarship. There were too many people out there, and we couldn't make it across the field. So we decided to turn around and head back to the dressing room. All of a sudden, I heard this shot, "Pow!" I immediately felt this sharp pain in my shoulder. I was scared to look and see the blood. I was telling this guy, "Rob, I'm shot! I'm shot!" He stuttered, "Uh, uh, uh, uh." I told him, "Go get somebody, I'm shot!" He went to get a stretcher, but I was too proud to get on one. They eventually got me on it. But I wasn't shot. What had happened was, the people had torn down the goal posts, and in swinging them across the field, they had hit me in the shoulder. I was the only one among all those people who had gotten hit.

I decided then not to go to LSU. The reason I didn't go to LSU was because I got hit by a goal post. I figured that was an omen.

One of the schools I had wanted to go to was the University of Houston, because Bill Yeoman, the backfield coach, had coached at my mom's high school in Lufkin, Texas, where my grandfather had been the principal. I had known him since I was a kid.

I loved Bill Yeoman: he was a fine gentleman. But when I visited the University of Houston, everything was scattered out. You lived here, and the practice field was a mile away. It just wasn't the type of environment I wanted. But it broke my heart to tell Bill Yeoman I was going to Oklahoma. He told me he understood.

As far as my reasons for going to Oklahoma, when I visited there, it was a beautiful day. The campus was beautiful in the spring. There was a nice breeze blowing. The guy who was recruiting me for Oklahoma was Wendell Mosley, who had been Greg Pruitt's coach at B. C. Elmore High School in Houston. Before that, he had coached at Wharton, against my dad's team. I'd known him since I was a kid. We still scrimmaged. My folks flew up there after I did. They showed me all the athletic facilities, and the university dental facility in Oklahoma City. They introduced me to a Dr. Cox, who was a black dentist. I spent a little time with his family.

Another thing I liked about Oklahoma was that they were fancy. They wore white shoes before everybody else.

And believe me, the uniforms had a lot to do with where I was going to school. I really liked Ole Miss, just because of Archie Manning and the uniforms.

But was it the uniform itself, or what the uniform suggests about individualism?

No, it was just the uniform itself. I liked Ole Miss because of the different colors—the gray, the red, the white, and the blue—even though it was the gray and red of the Confederate flag. I didn't care. I just liked the color and the color design.

All these things were involved in my decision: what kind of helmet I would wear, the shoes they wore, and whether I would get to wear my high school number of 24. I knew the guy at Oklahoma who wore 24 would be graduating. So everything clicked with the University of Oklahoma.

When did you start wearing silver shoes?

I didn't wear silver shoes until after my senior year in high school. I did it for the first time in the Texas High School All-Star game, where the North played the South, and I was with the South. It was August 1972, and I had already signed to go to Oklahoma. I liked the fact that they wore white shoes. If you wore white shoes, you were real flashy. Here was this white school, and they had their whole team, including linemen, wearing white shoes. I said, "Hmmm. I've got to do something to be a little different." My little brother suggested that I wear silver shoes with red shoe strings. That goes well with the red and white of Oklahoma. So I decided to do it in the All-Star game. I wore them, and I kept slipping down. But I refused to change those shoes, because they looked great. After I'd fallen down so many times when I had chances to make a touch-down, I finally changed them. But I decided to wear the silver shoes again when I came to Oklahoma.

What I'm getting from this is a certain desire to be recognized as an individual, and a kind of standing out. At some colleges, it's going to be very regimented. Everyone has a crew cut, like Vince Lombardi's style of coaching. It sounds like you wanted to play football, but not be repressed.

Exactly. Well, my running style basically summed up what I really was.

When did the Oklahoma coaches first see you play?

They had never really seen me play until the All-Star game, where I was the Most Valuable Player. They got a glimpse of me there, and they thought, “O.K., he’s all right.”

Oklahoma had been recruiting pretty heavily in Texas.

Oh yeah. Before that they had Mike Thomas, who later went to the Washington Redskins, and Greg Pruitt. You had backs coming out of everywhere—Kerry Jackson out of Galveston.

I know Wendell Mosley liked me. He told me, “Joe, you’ll start as a freshman. All-Conference, All-American, you’ll win the Heisman Trophy, and you’ll be on a national champion and go to a bowl game.” It did come true too. National championship teams in 1974 and 1975. I went to a bowl game my senior year and freshman year, and I probably would have gone the other years if we hadn’t been on probation. We were on television my first and second years, and should have been on those other years. And I probably would have won the Heisman if people had had a chance to see us play those years.

Everybody’s All-American: Sport and Student Life at the University of Oklahoma

You started as a freshman at Oklahoma. Where were you on the depth chart when you came in?

I was about number thirteen on the depth chart when I came in. But it didn’t bother me, because we hadn’t had any scrimmages.

Barry Switzer always talks about how when I came in, I had my silver shoes on, but I didn’t have any silver shoes. But that makes good copy. The first time I carried the ball, it was a play I love to run. I remember cutting and dodging and dodging and everything. After that I knew I had made an impression. I knew I was going to move up on the depth chart. I didn’t think too many people could do some of the things I could do.

I knew I wouldn’t get Greg Pruitt’s position, though. He was a senior when I was a freshman. We roomed together on the road. And he’d tell me, “Joe, don’t you ever say or think anybody is any better than you are.” Greg had that certain type of confidence that rubbed off on me.

In the Wishbone, running backs had to block for each other. One thing I noticed about Greg, at 178 pounds—that sucker blocked. I mean, he attacked people with a vengeance. He had a certain attitude about him. He wanted to block. And I blocked aggressively.

How much did you weigh as a freshman?

I only weighed 162 or 163 pounds as a freshman.

They didn't try to get you to gain weight? That's a little light.

It was light. I cheated when it came time to get weighed. I used to have little ankle weights that had little bars that you slide in. And I'd always take the bars out and put them in my hands, so I'd always weigh a little bit more. The Oklahoma coaching staff always thought I weighed 174. But I was never more than 163 in college.

When my first head coach at Oklahoma, Chuck Fairbanks, would come back to visit after he became head coach of the New England Patriots, he'd always tell me to put on a little weight, and that'd really tic me off. I didn't want to put on weight. I figured if I put on weight, I'd have to start running over people. Then I'd have to put on another fifty pounds.

You didn't feel it was any disadvantage in terms of going up against 280 pound defensive tackles?

No. They always used to tell Greg Pruitt that he was too short to play. He used to say, "Hey, they don't make holes vertically. I don't need to be 6'5". They make them horizontally."

You see a lot of guys built that way in the NFL today.

Well, there are a lot of guys in the NFL today who are 5'7", 5'8", but these rascals weigh 195, 205. Barry Sanders is 205. Emmitt Smith is 207.

I remember back in the 1950s, the quarterback Eddie LeBaron was 5'7", 165 pounds.

But there were not many like that, and not many running backs at 170 pounds.

Your weight was never a problem for you, in any type of collision?

I always tried to avoid most of them.

Two guys can crash into you simultaneously, no matter how elusive you are.

Most of the time, running backs get hurt when they are being tackled. With running backs, you're going to get fractures, broken legs, torn up knees. I never worried about that. You figured if you played a game, you were going to get beat up anyway. It was just one of the badges of the profession. And you didn't mind showing your war wounds.

And it wasn't a problem with blocking?

With blocking, I had to make certain compensations. I couldn't take all these guys head on all the time.

So you were moving up the depth chart pretty fast freshman year?

Yes, to the point that by the fifth game of the season my freshman year, I was starting. We played Kansas State, with Greg Pruitt at right halfback and me at left halfback.

From that point on, you were in the starting lineup?

Right. Freshman year, I ended up being the second leading rusher on the team.

Your first year was 1972. What was Oklahoma's record that year?

We only lost one game that year, finishing 10–1. 11–1, since we won the Sugar Bowl, against Penn State.

Do you remember that Sugar Bowl game?

I didn't play much in that game. They played the senior, Joe Wylie. I was a little upset about that. They figured that I was a freshman, and had three more years to play. But then we were placed on probation, and I wouldn't be back to a bowl game for another two years.

How about adjustment to college life generally? Any difficulties?

No, not really. I had a chance to go home on holidays. My folks came up for most of the games. So it all worked out pretty well. You did get a little homesick. But my roommate was a high school teammate of mine. And the telephone was the next best thing to being there. That helped a great deal.

Was there anything going on in the larger community that the players got involved in—in social work, for example? Did they have any contacts in the black community? Did the black athletes have any contact with other black students on campus, or were the athletes kind of a separate world?

There weren't many black students at Oklahoma at that time, and the ones we athletes came into contact with were mostly in the black fraternities—the Omegas, the Kappas, and the Alphas. A lot of the black players were in those fraternities, so they meshed pretty well with the other black students. You knew them, you saw them, and you played pickup basketball with a lot of them. I ran into a lot of the other black students in classes, but you didn't really hang out with them. There were a lot of parties, but that was about it. But I didn't go to very many parties. I didn't just hang out much anyway. I didn't go to a lot of places. There were a few places I'd go by myself. But on weekends I'd go to Denton, Texas to see my girlfriend.

What kind of physical training was there in the football program besides the practice sessions? Was there much weight lifting?

Of course, I spent a lot of time at football practice. Oklahoma emphasized running and physical conditioning. We did have a small weight room, and I'd lift, but it wasn't something that I concentrated on in the same vein as my agility. I had real good natural strength, and I lifted just to tone and keep it. But I spent more time running than anything else, to keep my quickness and maneuverability. I stretched a great deal. Oklahoma had a great stretching program. They believed in that. They gave us a book, to make sure that we followed certain stretching rules. We also had something called Fourth Quarter in the spring, that was a monster. It consisted mostly of a lot of running and agility drills. I must say I really liked it and never missed a day.

Under Chuck Fairbanks, the scrimmages would involve some contact, and there was one time when he made a player run a drill continuously because he didn't like the way the player was performing, and it cost us the player. The incident involved a black running

back, Mike Thomas. Chuck didn't like the way he was blocking on one play in a goal line drill. So he said, "Run it again for Mike Thomas!" We ran it again, and he still didn't like the way Mike blocked. "Run it again for Mike Thomas!" So we ran it again, and he still wasn't satisfied, and had us do it still again. By this time, Mike Thomas was on the ground, with his shoulder hurt. And Mike was never the same after that. It was always a question of whether his shoulder was well. He eventually ended up leaving Oklahoma and going to the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. There was a lot of grumbling among the players about what had happened to Mike. But I never saw anything racial in it. That's just how Chuck was.

The Oklahoma football program when I was there made sure that the players paid attention to their academic work. Port Robertson was in charge of that, and he made sure that you followed the right academic line. We had study hall for two hours a day. I think that should be mandatory. Two hours at least.

What kind of student had you been in high school?

Good student.

Did you think you were pretty well prepared for college?

Oh yeah. At that age, the mold is pretty well set.

How were your study habits?

My study habits could have been better. My mom and dad were always on me if I had a few "C's, because they knew I could do better.

Because of the structure football provided, I had my better grades during the football season. The times I made the dean's list were during the football season. Maybe once I made it in the spring semester. The reason for that was that I was on a schedule during football season: classes, practice, dinner, study hall, go to your room, retire. And when you have two hours of mandatory study hall, you're going to get something done. During the spring, my grades were not as good, because I wasn't on a schedule. If I studied, fine. If not, I'd just go on whatever brain juices I could get going.

I think that the only reason that I did as well as I did academically, was that I wanted to make sure that people understood that just because you were an athlete, it didn't mean that you were a dumb jock. I would just go ahead and make the dean's list, just to show them that I could do it.

How about the next season, your sophomore year? You were a starter from the beginning. Joe Wylie and Greg Pruitt had graduated, and you were the number one running back.

We got put on probation that year.

What kind of impact did that have?

That meant our games didn't get televised, and we couldn't go to a bowl game. That was about the only impact of the probation. We still drew crowds. It was something, coming down that ramp and seeing all those people. So it was pretty much the same as the year before.

Do any games stick out in your memory from that year?

The Southern Cal game.

That you tied 7-7?

Yes. We had a great year, finishing 10–0–1. Only Southern California, ranked number one in the nation at the time, managed to tie us. They had some great players, like Tony Davis and Lynn Swann, but they were lucky to tie us that game. They were *lucky* to get a 7–7 tie. They tied *us*. Remember that.

How would you compare the coaching styles of Barry Switzer, who took over as Oklahoma's head coach your sophomore year, and Chuck Fairbanks, who had been head coach your freshman year?

Chuck didn't interact with players very well. He was more aloof. Barry was a people person. He interacted readily, easily, without hesitation. Chuck would sit up in the tower, pretty stoic, unless something was going wrong. Barry would sit up in the tower, and get excited and come down. If things were going real well, Barry was exuberant and excited about it. Barry loved it when we'd be practicing the option, and the runner would be slashing up there, and running forty, fifty, sixty yards down the field. That got him excited. Chuck thought it was good, but he wouldn't really get that excited about it.

Would Switzer be more willing to give an individual credit for a good performance?

Oh yeah! That had a positive effect on you as a player. One thing that you want to know, is if the coach is pleased with what you're doing. And if Barry saw something on the film that he liked, hey, you knew it right then.

In Jerry Kramer's book *Instant Replay*,[†] he talks about Vince Lombardi almost never giving individual credit, downgrading, telling players they "need improvement." I would think at the college level particularly, when you're coaching people eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old, it might be more effective to give credit where it's deserved.

I don't know if I could have played for him. With young kids, you need to know you're doing something positive. Barry was the kind of guy that did that.

I could see from reading Barry Switzer's book[‡] that he was fairly tolerant, fairly relaxed, due in part to his own background.

Barry honored a certain type of individualism, but there were a lot of things that he was a stickler about. Practice. He believed in practice. Practice and go to class. If you practiced and went to class, he could be relaxed about some other things.

That's the problem he had with Marcus Dupree. See, Marcus came out of high school as this great hot shot athlete. When you're a hot shot athlete in high school, everybody will cater to you. Coaches will cater to you. It was different in my case, with my old man. He

[†] Jerry Kramer (Dick Schaap, ed.). *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Diary of Jerry Kramer*. New York: New American Library, 1968.

[‡] Barry Switzer. *Bootlegger's Boy*. New York: William Morrow, 1990.

didn't cater to anyone. Much less his son, who thinks he's some hot shot halfback, the greatest thing since sliced bread. My dad believed in practicing, and Barry was the same way. But Marcus felt he didn't have to practice that much in high school. He came to the game, and ran for 500 yards and 900 touchdowns. OK. So he comes to Oklahoma, and he feels he doesn't have to practice that much. And some days he gets away with it. And then what does he do? He goes out and runs for 3 jillion yards, and 500 touchdowns. So he's seeing himself perform in the same way he did in high school. Go to practice, play, do whatever I want. He thought he could go to Oklahoma, practice a little bit, and run all over people. He could usually do that, because he was that kind of athlete.

But Barry didn't believe in that. He didn't care who you were. Marcus Dupree, Joe Washington, you practiced. Lee Roy Selmon, you practiced. They butted heads on that. Barry wouldn't tolerate it. And with Barry having the type of defiance he had, and being as honest as he is, he's going to tell you what he thinks. "You're big, you're fat, you're slouchy, you're up to 280 pounds. I don't care if you can run a 9.7, if you're down to 235, when you're in great condition, you can probably run a 9.3 and gain more yards."

How did sophomore year begin?

Well, we started off on probation. Barry Switzer became head coach at that time. He had been assistant coach under Chuck Fairbanks, and Fairbanks left to become head coach of the New England Patriots. I remember when Barry announced that the Oklahoma football program had been put on probation, which occurred shortly after he became head coach. I remember Barry saying he was a fighter, and they can take the bowl games away from us, and the television, but they can't keep us from competing for the Big Eight and the national championship. They can't keep us from beating people. Him getting emotional up there—that sticks out. That made an impression. I knew even as a young sophomore that there was something pretty special about Barry Switzer.

Did Switzer have anything to do with building a positive racial atmosphere at Oklahoma? He gets credit, even from his detractors, for having good rapport with black players. There are a fair number of coaches who don't have that rapport. They were a conservative lot generally.

Barry had good rapport with black players, but I don't think it was something he was consciously trying to do. It was just Barry period. He just related. There was something pretty compassionate about Barry as a coach. I think it came from his growing up in a place where people looked at him as an outcast from the wrong side of the tracks.

Of course, we didn't know about Barry's background at that time. To us, he seemed to be the Establishment. The conservative Establishment. We saw him that way because, first of all, he was white, and second, he was coaching at a university that was predominantly white. But he was totally different from what we perceived him to be. Because of his background, he could relate to black players, and he recruited a lot of blacks to play at Oklahoma. He even had a black quarterback, Kerry Jackson at one time.

That in itself is unusual.

Unheard of. I'm talking about 1972, a freshman quarterback.

Oklahoma had a tradition under Bud Wilkinson of not being particularly interested in recruiting black players. And he was like a state institution. So this is a major shift.

It really is.

Looking at your sophomore year, were there any areas you wanted to improve in then? Or were you generally satisfied?

One thing, as a little hotshot running back, I thought I should be carrying the ball more. I sort of took my running for granted. I didn't think there was anything I could improve on. As far as my skills as a running back, I don't think they changed from high school to the pros. You could have taken me in high school and put me right in the pros. As far as maturity, and being able to handle every situation, that's another story.

I enjoyed blocking, and wanted to show our coaches that I could do it. That was the way we impressed them. They expected you to be able to run. They knew you could run. But you wanted to show them that you could do everything, especially block. You wanted them to see that you were going in attacking, blocking.

From my sophomore year on, Barry kept me out of physical contact during scrimmages. That was sort of unheard of. He didn't allow certain players to engage in contact if he thought that their getting injured would hurt the team. He did this only with players he thought could handle it. He knew I was a hard worker. I wasn't the type of prima donna who felt he didn't need to practice. Barry knew that I had been brought up as a kid knowing that to play well on Saturdays, you had to practice during the week. He just felt it wouldn't do any good for me to risk major injuries in contact, when participating wouldn't really make any difference. He did that with the Selmons and some of the other players too. We went through everything else. We just didn't participate in the scrimmages.

On the Oklahoma schedule, Nebraska is usually the big game. What are your impressions of your Oklahoma–Nebraska games?

At Oklahoma, Nebraska was always *the* game. It took place around Thanksgiving, and it was usually for the Big Eight championship. You knew it was going to be tough. It was always cold. My freshman year, I had never been so cold in my life. Pruitt was hurt, and I started that game. They had a linebacker named Willie Harper, with great hands, who was impossible to block. I don't think I ever did block him in the NFL, when he played for the 49ers. They had a nose guard named Glover, a tough college player. I'd seen him whip many a center. That sucker was tough. He covered sideline to sideline.

There was always a certain kind of respect for Nebraska. It wasn't a dueling of words, like you had between Texas and Oklahoma. There was always animosity with Texas, because they felt Oklahoma was stealing players from Texas.

With Oklahoma fans there's a lot of emphasis on spectacle. A lot of people are more there for spectacle; the Oklahoma–Texas game comes to mind. The students go down to Dallas more for what surrounds that game. These are not people interested in football, necessarily. Whereas the Oklahoma–Nebraska confrontation seems to me more the pure football kind of thing.

The students of the winning team would take the next Monday off from school. [laughs] The Nebraska game was just pure football. There was nothing else to it. It came at the end of the season, and it was now down to brass tacks. It decided who was going to a certain bowl game, who was going to represent the Big Eight.

There was nothing flamboyant about Nebraska. Bob Devaney and Tom Osborne were pretty straight-laced guys. Nebraska players wore these dead suits—two-color uniforms. There wasn't any extra hoopla about that game. I kind of like that, though.

Nebraska was always a well-coached team, and they'd come at you, and take their shots. I used to be a sore rascal after that game. I can't ever remember them jawing or talking that much. Just going about business. Whether they were winning or losing, it was always basically the same thing. You enjoyed playing guys like that. They'd take their shots. They'd try to kill you. But there was nothing cheap or dirty about it.

Other teams weren't like that. My junior year, we were playing Oklahoma State in Norman, and when I ran out of bounds, one of the coaches gave me a forearm to the cheek. I asked him what was wrong, and he said he was just trying to slow me down. But he actually threw a forearm shiver at me that caught me right on the cheek.

When were you beginning to think about the Heisman Trophy? When were you selected All-American?

The first All-American team I was ever placed on was the one selected by *Playboy* magazine, my sophomore year. I went up to the Playboy mansion in Chicago for that, and it was great. Right before that, some of the guys at Oklahoma, including me, shaved their heads. So I was pictured in *Playboy* with a shaved head.

Was that just a frivolous act, not a political statement, a symbol of militancy?

There wasn't anything militant about us. I was having a very good year statistically my junior year, and at that time I started thinking about the Heisman Trophy. How many yards did I have? I knew I was going to be at a disadvantage here, because you didn't carry the ball a lot in the Wishbone. And in the Wishbone, the opposing defense could take out of the offense whomever they wanted to. If they didn't want you to carry the ball much, you didn't. I also knew that my chances would be slim because our games weren't on television.

You did get to a bowl game your senior year.

Orange Bowl. Played Michigan.

After beating Nebraska 35–10. Can you describe the experience of being in a bowl game? What were Oklahoma's and Michigan's rankings then?

We went in ranked number two in the nation. Ohio State, which had been ranked number one, lost earlier in the day in the Rose Bowl, giving us a shot at the national championship. Michigan was ranked somewhere in the top five; their only loss had been to Ohio State. We won the game, and the national championship.

The week going in to the Orange Bowl, I was really concerned about what shoe to wear. We had played in Miami earlier in the season, and the footing there was terrible. I always traveled with ten or fifteen pairs of shoes, for different surfaces. I knew how impor-

tant that was. I had a shoe that was great, which I had designed. It looked good too. Red shoestrings, and I was ready to roll.

A few plays in that game stand out. We were backed up on our one-yard line, trying to decide whether to punt or take a safety. Tinker Owens had to do the punting for us that year, and he had never punted since high school. They handed the ball to me on what they call a 91 Sweep, and I got jammed deep in the end zone. I don't know how I got out of the end zone, but I missed going 99 yards by one man, or by one yard. If the field had been one yard wider, I'd have gone 99 yards.

Number One Draft Choice

What was the NFL drafting process like?

I hated it. Everybody wanted to come by and weigh you, and see how fast you were. They knew how big I was, and they knew how fast I was. They could look at me, and see I wasn't that big. Everybody always talked about "his size, his size." That bothered me more than anything else. That's all I ever heard, "Well, he won't be able to play college, he's a little too little. He won't play pro, because he's too little, and he's not the world class sprinter everybody else is."

I was first-team All-American both junior and senior years. I had a lot of yards my junior year—1300 yards gained rushing, an average of 6.8 yards per carry. My sophomore year, I had 1189 yards gained rushing, for 6.7 yards per carry. Senior year, my stats weren't as high, 871 yards, and an average of 5.1 That isn't bad, but I was really disappointed about it. I was a little banged up that year, with a heel and foot injury. For someone like me, that was bad. I cut on my heel. I changed directions on my heel. And my toe and the instep of my foot was hurt as well. I was in terrible shape.

NFL teams were concerned about your size. Was that about it?

NFL teams were definitely concerned about my size. I don't think about my speed much. I only weighed about 171 pounds, maybe, and stood a little under 5'10". When they weighed you, they stripped you down to socks and shorts. From reading *Street and Smith's Football Magazine*, I found out about these little wedges that you put in your shoes, which made you 2 inches taller. I got me some of those. So I cheated on height. I took the little metal bars from my ankle weights, rolled them up, wrapped them in tape, and got on the scales with them in my hands. My weight would be up to 176 or 177 that way. I was so conscious of my size, that that's what I felt I had to do to get drafted high, or even have the NFL teams interested in me.

Did you figure you would be drafted in the first round?

I was told that I was going as one of the first five players in the first round of the draft. There were two expansion teams—Tampa and Seattle, which got the first picks. The drafting order was going to be Tampa, Seattle, New Orleans, San Diego. Up until draft day, I wasn't very much concerned; I just wanted to play. I couldn't wait, just to get my hands on the ball.

How did the draft process unfold?

When draft day came, it was assumed that I would be the third player selected. That meant that Lee Roy Selmon was going to Tampa, Chuck Muncie was going to Seattle, and I was going to New Orleans. I was on the phone with the guy from New Orleans. We were talking, and the draft had just started. He was telling me about how great it was going to be for me in New Orleans, because Hank Stram was the coach, and he loved backs like me. He couldn't wait, it was going to be exciting. New Orleans was near Texas, and my folks would be able to see me play there. I would create all kinds of excitement in New Orleans. And I was thinking, "Yeah, yeah!" The New Orleans guy told me, "Joe, things are going fine. Tampa just got Lee Roy. Seattle should take Chuck, and then you'll be a New Orleans Saint."

I was just sitting there grinning and listening. He said, "Seattle's getting ready to select." Then he said, "Joe, hold it! Seattle just took Niehaus. I'll call you back." The funny thing about it was, that I didn't think anything of it. New Orleans ended up taking Muncie. That was good, because I went to San Diego. San Diego played on grass, and it was a team I had loved since I was a kid. They used to have Dickie Post, Lance Alworth, Ernie Ladd, and John Hadl. I used to love the AFC. So this was great. I didn't care. I later found out that the Saints had still tried to go ahead and buy me for \$500,000, but the Chargers wouldn't take it. That made me feel pretty good.

Looking back, you can say my ego was in pretty good shape. I just laughed. I was pretty honest with myself. I'd seen Chuck Muncie. Awesome. He's one of the best I've ever seen. I played with him in the Japan Bowl. You can name anybody, and I'll take Chuck Muncie any day. He was 230 pounds, had great hands, and could run over people and around people. He was one hell of a back. Nice guy, too. He had drug problems, but he was a nice guy.

Barry Switzer said I was probably the smallest player ever taken as high as I was in the history of the NFL draft. At the time, I weighed maybe 170, cheated up to 177. And I kept cheating in the pros, to where I always showed 185, when I actually weighed 175.

What were the contract negotiations like?

I didn't participate in the contract negotiations with the Chargers; my agent handled them. I wasn't satisfied, and thought I could have gotten more with another agent. And I think I could have gotten more if I hadn't been set on playing in the College All-Star game. You had to be basically signed by that time, if you were going to play in it.

Playing in the Last College All-Star Game

Could you describe playing in the College All-Star game?

I played in the very last College All-Star game, and I was its Most Valuable Player. We played the NFL champions, the Pittsburgh Steelers, in the rain. And I knew then that I could play in this league.

Did the Steelers approach it as a serious game?

Yes! Everybody was hitting. They were determined not to lose to a bunch of college guys. New young guys that were supposed to be making all this money.

There must have been resentment about that. Big salaries and bonuses started to come in around the mid-1960s, with some rookies being signed for much more money than long established veteran stars. Like Donny Anderson at Green Bay.

Yes. It's always tough for an NFL veteran to negotiate up. When you're a rookie, this is the time you're supposed to get your money.

So you have two things going on in this game. The world champion Steelers want to show the college boys what the NFL is going to be like, and there's also some resentment about developments concerning salaries.

Yeah, and you probably had some guys on the college team who were going to the Steelers. I was just as excited as a pig in manure to be in this game. I was in the jersey with the stripes, and the stars on the shoulders, and everything. We had Archie Griffin, Tony Davis, and Chuck Muncie as running backs on our team. And I started.

How did Ara Parseghian, who coached the College All-Stars, approach the game? Do you remember anything he said?

No, the only thing I remember is Sid Gillman, who was coaching our offensive linemen, telling them about the pro game, and the techniques they used. The line wasn't doing something the way he wanted it done, and he told one of the linemen, "You can't do that! If you go up to L.C. Greenwood and do that, he'll throw you around like a sack of shit!"

Did anything strike you about the Steelers' defense? Was there anything different from what you'd seen?

No. I thought they were good. L.C. Greenwood and Joe Greene.

Did they hit any harder?

No. If anybody got a good shot at you, they could hurt you. The thing about those guys was that they were good enough to get good shots at you more often than others.

So how did the game turn out?

One particular incident about that game sticks in my mind. It was pouring, and we were playing on artificial turf. We were in the huddle, and all of a sudden a kid came sliding in, and said, "What's the play?" I'll never forget that. He came sliding into the huddle, and was looking up at us, drenched. People were all over the place, sliding.

The Steelers won the game. All I remember is that they stopped it at halftime, because the conditions were so bad.

The Art of the Running Back

How difficult was it for you to adjust as a running back to the NFL?

My running skills were such that I was definitely ready for the pros. Like I said, they never changed from high school to the NFL. I took my running for granted. But it was somewhat hard to adjust, because in the NFL they were always trying to change everything. I remember a coach told Mercury Morris, who had been All-Pro for ten years when he came to the Chargers, that in order for him to play, he was going to have to change his stance. That shows in a nutshell the mentality of some of the professional coaches.

Some of the stuff they wanted you to run in I found restrictive. At Oklahoma, they were wearing these red, snap-in hip pads. I hated them. I couldn't move in them. You had to wear hip pads, knee pads, thigh guards, shoulder pads, and a mouthpiece. I didn't wear any elbow pads. I didn't wear any arm pads. At that time, you could wear a little tape on there, just to kind of prevent the turf burns. But after a while, that got too cumbersome. I figured that the less weight I carried, the better off I was. You wore either a long or a short T-shirt for the straps on your shoulder pads. I would always wear a short T-shirt. If it got cold, I'd put on a longer T-shirt, but with short sleeves. And if it got really cold, you'd wear a long-sleeved T-shirt. I didn't like to do that. I didn't want to do anything that would keep me from holding on to the football. So I wouldn't wear a long sleeve on my right arm, the arm I used to carry the ball.

I'd also wear a wrist band, to keep the sweat off my hand. I really wore it more as a result of a childhood superstition. There was a cartoon I watched called "Space Ghost." The hero had these power bands. And every time he'd press these power bands, they'd energize them. From ninth and tenth grade on up, my sweat bands were my power bands.

My uniform had to always be a certain way. It had to fit right. My pants had to be 28 shorts. I always took my helmet home with me during the summer. I felt that if they refurbished it, they'd move the face mask on it. I needed my face mask loose, where I could pull it down, so I could see. I had a lot of face exposed. But I did wear two mouthpieces, so it didn't make any difference.

Most of what you need to know as a running back you should know by high school. As far as what made me Joe Washington, that had been mostly developed by high school. There isn't too much more that you're going to learn to improve your game, no matter how long you play. As far as things like cutting and changing directions, that's etched in stone.

I had already developed the running backs skills by the time I came to Oklahoma, and that's what allowed me to start as a freshman. I was already a complete football player, because my dad was my coach. I did get a little bigger in college, and maybe a little tougher, because I blocked a lot at Oklahoma.

I was watching Monday Night Football the other night, and the color man was criticizing this rookie that Dallas is playing now in place of Emmitt Smith for moving laterally, when he should be moving forward. He attributed this to his being a rookie.

It was a lineman, Dan Dierdorf, who made that statement. For as long as I was in the pros, it was always upfield, upfield. Yeah, upfield. I'll get upfield when there's a

chance for me to get upheld. I never believed that if you run up in there, and there's nothing there, you just lower your head and run on in there. You should consider your other alternatives. Go this way or that way. I had tussles with coaches now and then about running north and south.

Here you are, you're running a sweep, and you've been coached to get to a certain point before you start looking upfield, and they say, "He's running laterally too much!" Well, the play is designed to go outside the wide receiver. Then you start looking for a place to get upfield. Now, there are certain plays that are designed to just run up in there, no matter what. But still, I was the type of back who could run those plays and turn them into lateral plays that ended up somewhere else. Once you've had that free reign from high school up to college, you expect that everywhere else.

One thing that comes to mind in terms of a running backs development is fumbling. Is that something that a more experienced running back is less likely to do? How do you learn how not to fumble?

I had learned how to hold the ball while running, so as not to fumble, by high school. I always carried the ball in my right hand. I might switch it every now and then. I had big enough hands where I could grab the ball with two hands if I got into a pile, and bring it closer to me. Fumbling occurs when a back feels more comfortable carrying the ball in a certain hand, and then changes from one hand to the other, back and forth. I very, very rarely fumbled the ball held in my right hand.

Of course, the method coaches recommended to you in carrying the ball didn't always work for your own style of running. They'd tell you to hold the ball with one finger over the point, and to put the other point in the crook. Well, yeah, that's good if you're a big back, and you aren't going to run in the open field, and try to stiff-arm or finesse anybody. But if you're going to duck people and move, you've got to be able to hold the ball in a way where you can run naturally with it. So I think a guy should hold a football in his most comfortable hand and position. If you're running along the left sideline, and nobody's near you, I think it is really dumb to switch the ball into your left hand. That's the stupidest thing in the world to do.

If you're running on the left side, close to the sideline, and someone's getting ready to hit you, you need to go ahead and brace yourself to get hit, and not worry about moving the football. There are just going to be some instances where you're going to fumble if you get hit right. I don't care how well you have the ball in your hand.

So this is something you can teach a running back at the college level, and from that point on he shouldn't have any problems?

I think you could start at the high school level.

Whose fault is it usually if a fumble occurs on a handoff: the running back's or the quarterback's?

If a running back misses a handoff, it's usually the quarterbacks fault. You're supposed to just make a pocket, and run where you're supposed to run, and he's supposed to look the ball into your pocket. It's the quarterbacks job. If he's handing off, he doesn't

have anything else to do but put the ball in your pocket. Now if you run too wide sometimes, OK. Even then, he's supposed to make sure he either can put the ball in your pocket, or not handoff if you're too wide.

What do you do when you're playing in the rain?

I always held the ball the same way, no matter what the weather. They kept the footballs dry enough, so that you could hold them almost as well in a wet game as you would in a dry game. Rain wasn't much different from snow, because they were both wet. There are times in a dry game, because of your perspiration beading up, and where the grass is mixed in, when it's easier to fumble a ball.

What observations can you make generally about running in different weather conditions, like rain and snow? What adjustments do you make?

The biggest difference is between running on dry artificial turf and wet grass. The former is unreal. Dry artificial turf sticks, and you've got to be able to pick your feet up. You're worrying about making a cut, and before you make it, your foot grabs the turf, and then you're stumbling. I always got hurt making different cuts on that artificial turf and my feet not giving. And then you go to wet grass, where you've got a lot of give, and it's slick. Usually, the guys who have the biggest problems on wet grass are the fast, track-type sprinters. Football players have a tendency to run with a wider base. Track stars run with a very narrow base. They're more concerned with the elongating of their stride—one foot way in front of the other. With football, you want to have a wide base, and keep both feet on the ground.

I never had much of a problem running on either dry artificial turf or wet grass. I had a wide base, and my feet on the ground, and I was always able to cut at the drop of a hat, because I always had something on the ground that I could cut off of. I loved to get guys on wet grass. I was going to run just as fast, and cut just as sharp, as I would on turf, because of the way I run. Guys like Dickerson would have more of a problem on wet grass, because he had a long stride. It wasn't as elongated as a sprinter's, but he wasn't nearly as effective on wet grass. But in reality, most backs aren't. Gale Sayers could cut on butter.

Wet artificial turf, if you've got the right shoe, is like playing on grass. When you make a cut, it gives just a little, which is what you want. You want a little give in your cut. So I always wore a shoe on dry artificial turf that had a bottom that didn't grab as tight. When you planted your foot, it just gave a little bit, which is a little safer.

Artificial turf makes football a lethal game, because everybody is able to run fast. You have a little bit more spring in your stride. They say injuries are a little bit more severe on turf I think they are. And one thing that you've got to take note of is the burns you get. Oh, man, that's terrible! I'm talking about taking off layers of skin, on your butt, shin, elbow—whatever skin that hits the ground, you can count on having a strawberry there the next day.

I got tackled at Oklahoma State my senior year, and fell on my calf in the end zone, and when I got up, I saw nothing but brown skin on the yard marker. A long, six inches by six inches burn. Oh, it was horrendous! It was ugly. You don't get that on grass. If for

no other reason, they should get rid of artificial turf for that. Plus, I think games are more exciting when it's muddy.

When I played at Oklahoma, everybody in the Big Eight used artificial turf except Missouri and Iowa State. I looked forward to those two games. I think it's slowly going back to grass now, which is the way it should be. If a cow can't eat it, you don't need to play on it.

What about running in very cold weather?

Playing in cold weather, even in severe cold, doesn't make much difference in how you play as a running back. We didn't play too much in cold weather in Texas. But when I got to Oklahoma, and we went up to Nebraska, I'd never been so cold before in my life. And playing in Pittsburgh in the NFL—oh my God! And I was the type of guy who couldn't wear all the thermals and the extra stuff underneath, because it cut down on my maneuverability. The best I could do was wear maybe a long T-shirt. I tried to wear a sweatshirt once against Nebraska, but I couldn't play in it because it was too bulky. You try to put gloves on, and that doesn't work. So as a running back, you're playing in what you're normally wearing all the time.

Where cold affects you is when you're standing on the sideline. If you've got a long drive going, there's no such thing as cold. You don't feel anything at all. So there's really no difference. The only problem is when you're waiting to catch a pass or a punt, then you can feel the cold. But as long as you're involved in the action, you just forget it. Of course, if it's cold and wet, and you're standing in the huddle after a play, you know it's cold. You get in your stance, and your pants are wet, and all you have on underneath is a jock, and the wind is blowing, you're going to feel the draft.

How does the quality of your offensive line affect how you run?

I never, ever thought about how good or bad my line was, as long as I can remember. The only thing that really concerned me was the size. That's the only thing that really worried me.

Is size more important for pass blocking or drive blocking?

Drive blocking. A small line can get by better on pass blocking than on running plays. On pass blocking, they can finesse their way a little bit. They can use their quickness, and maneuver with their hands, and use a little technique. But drive blocking is different. When you're firing out on somebody, going bang, bang, weight has a tendency to come into play a great deal, especially late in the game.

Returning Punts and Kickoffs

You returned punts and kickoffs at Oklahoma and in high school. Punt returning strikes me as requiring a lot of nerve.

Returning kickoffs I think is more dangerous than returning punts, because on kickoffs everybody's going full speed, and you're going full speed. With punts, they've got to let you catch it. Returning kickoffs is like being a *kamikaze* pilot.

Did you volunteer to do kickoff returns?

I've always returned kickoffs, but I never volunteered for it. Nosirree! I didn't do it too much in high school. My last two years, my dad put other guys in to return kickoffs. I always returned punts because I had good hands. I would never volunteer for kickoff returns. I could do it, and I think I was good at it. But it isn't anything anybody in his right mind volunteers for.

You have a better chance to make a movement if you're returning punts. They've got to give you a chance to catch the ball, so they have to brake and gather themselves. Your first movement could be lateral, and they're coming at you vertically,

Is the blocking more organized on a punt return, or on a kickoff return?

Your blocking is less organized on a kickoff return than on a punt return. The guys in the wedge in front of the kickoff returner are assigned just to block anybody coming through the wedge. Everybody is supposed to have a certain man to block. But with guys running down the field at 500 miles per hour, and the blockers at a standstill, and then trying to catch up with the guys they're supposed to block, things can get disorganized. It's probably safer to be returning the ball than blocking on a kickoff, because you can't cut these big guys down running down the field at 500 miles per hour.

Now on punt returns, it's different. I had one guy assigned to protect me on punts when I was at Oklahoma. His job was to stand in front of me, and make sure that I caught the ball. Everybody else is supposed to rush, make sure they kick the ball, then come around down the sideline and form a wall, whether it's on the right side or the left side. A lot of people got sophisticated enough to where they could have a center return. As a punt returner, you're on your own, once you catch the ball, to make sure you get to the wall.

The guy whose job it was to protect me on punt returns at Oklahoma was Tony Peters. And believe me, when you get a guy as tough as Tony, and as ready to hit you as he is, you feel pretty good.

So I would much rather return punts than kickoffs, because all I had to do was catch the ball. I knew I had somebody in front of me to protect me. I could do what I do naturally, which was try to get to the wall.

The year I led the NFL in kickoff returns, I did it by trying to find a vacant place to fall. And if there's no spot to fall here, then you go a little further, until you can find a place to fall without it looking too bad.

Can any good running back return punts and kickoffs, or does it require any particular qualities you can identify?

One thing I can tell you right off the bat. You can tell a lot about a running back when you put him on kickoff returns. Not just his exterior physical makeup, but his interior, intestinal makeup. If he's tough enough. If he's a slashing type of runner. If he's the kind of runner who makes a decision and sticks with it. If he's a finesse-type runner. If this guy's a coward. Believe me, that will tell it all.

You don't have much time to make decisions on kickoff returns. You catch the ball, you head upfield, you make a decision, and you go with it. There's none of that having to make two or three decisions at a time, like on punts.

For punt returns, you need a guy with good hands, who's cool under pressure, and has enough finesse where he can make decisions, change directions, and make people miss him. I don't think Earl Campbell would have been a good punt returner, because on punt returns, you need a guy who can run laterally fairly well, even though Earl was a great pitch sweep runner. He would have been an unbelievable kickoff returner, because he made a decision and was off.

Superstition in Football

What kind of role does superstition play in people's routines in football? You think in baseball of some guys who won't change a pair of socks when they're on a hitting streak. I guess it's because of the uncertainty, particularly with hitters, where even a .300 hitter fails seven times out of ten. So you feel you need something else. Does this ever enter into playing or coaching football in any significant way?

I always put on my uniform the same way. I'd put on my socks, jock, T-shirt, and then just lounge around a little bit. Then I'd put on my girdle right before I put on my pants. I never put on my shoulder pads and jersey, my whole uniform, just to walk around. I would never wear my silver shoes out to warm up in. Never do that, never. That just wasn't done, not in America. I always warmed up in some regular white shoes, and saved the game shoes for game time. I always carried my shoes separately. I never packed them with the rest of my gear. I didn't want anything to happen, because if I didn't have those, I wasn't playing. It was just as simple as that.

If your silver shoes got lost, say, on a road trip . . . ?

I never would have played. That never happened, because I carried them myself.

How about in a team sense? Did the team as a whole develop any common superstitions?

As far as the team went, at Oklahoma we were so good we didn't need any common superstitions. They had a sign "Play like Champions," and we'd always hit like that. Maybe some of the players and coaches had some superstitions that they performed as rituals, that we didn't know about. Everybody probably had their own—little ones that probably made us as good as we were.

Disappointment in San Diego: The Making of a Player Rep

What was it like being in training camp with the San Diego Chargers?

Unfortunately, I got seriously hurt in my second preseason game with the San Diego Chargers. I had gone out to San Diego, and played in the first preseason game. The second one was in Norman, Oklahoma, against the New England Patriots, coached by Chuck Fairbanks. I guess he arranged that game, because with me a number one draft choice, and him having several former Oklahoma players on his team, it would be a good draw.

I was having a great game when I got injured. I had already scored two or three touchdowns, and at that point I knew I could surely play in this league. I was doing everything I wanted to do. I was running and jumping over people, doing everything I had done at Oklahoma. I was getting ready to score again on a kickoff return. I broke through, and it was just me and the kicker. He was the only guy between me and the goal line, and you could hear the fans, because at Oklahoma, when I returned a punt, you could always feel people anticipating something when I touched the ball. I could feel it then. I was thinking, "Now it's show time." I was going into 300,000 different moves, and my foot got stuck, and I tore up my right knee.

I felt that pain. And a hush just fell over that stadium. It was like everything was in a time warp. I'd never been hurt on that field, never missed a game on that field. And I came back and ripped up my knee. You could hear it pop forty rows up.

After that game, we were scheduled to play in Japan, where I was fairly well known. I had played at the end of my senior year in the first Japan Bowl, an East-West Collegiate All-Star game. When I was at Oklahoma, we had also had a gentleman from Japan come and spend the whole season with our football team, learning American football. I think they broadcast one of our games back to Japan.

San Diego's general manager or head coach told me to make sure not to tell anybody that I wasn't playing due to the injury, because I was definitely a big draw in Japan. But I didn't really know then whether I was going to play or not, because at that time, it wasn't really stated whether I would need surgery, or be out for the year, or what. At least nobody stated anything to me.

So we went over to Japan, and as it turned out, I didn't play. I didn't practice; I just jogged a little bit, and my knee swelled on me a great deal. It was sore, very uncomfortable. I ended up doing the color commentary for the game in Japan.

This was broadcast back to the United States?

Yeah. After that, we flew to Hawaii, where we played our last preseason game. I didn't play there also.

When we arrived at the San Diego airport on our return from Hawaii, I was met by an onslaught of reporters, asking me what I thought about the surgery I was supposed to have, and about missing the first part of the season. I said, "What surgery?" I didn't know anything about any surgery. They had failed to tell me that I was going to have surgery. I was really upset about that. I was upset to the point that I couldn't see straight. Plus, I'd never had any type of operation. So initially it scared me.

They had made the decision without consulting you?

Oh yeah.

What doctor had you seen up to that point?

The team doctor.

What had he told you?

Well, he looked at my knee, and really didn't say too much. When we get to Japan, we'll do such and such, or whatever. But they never said anything to me as far as having surgery.

So what did you do when you learned this from the press?

The first thing I did was get a hold of the trainer, and ask, "What's going on?" I did eventually have surgery, and I was back in four weeks. I worked hard to get back in shape. I ran the beaches. You name it, I did it. I ran the stadium steps, and lifted weights.

Did they say that the surgery would take care of the problem completely?

They just said I had torn the cartilage basically. They took out the inside cartilage in the knee. In the short period between the injury and the time I got my splint off, you wouldn't believe the atrophy. When I got that splint off, my arm was bigger than my right leg. It was the most depressing time I can ever think of.

I noticed during this time that something was wrong. The knee didn't feel right. I originally thought it was just the surgery. My little brother had had surgery when he was in the seventh grade, so I was calling him every night. I said, "Ken, did it feel like this, did it feel like that? Can you do this?" I must have run him crazy. But he was very supportive and patient with me, and very understanding.

I finally got to the point where I was back working out with the team. But something just wasn't right. I was complaining that something was still wrong with my knee. They didn't take me off the roster, expecting me to be able to come back during the season. I was expecting to also. Well, I kept complaining. Then I started really getting ripped in the papers. They said I wanted to collect my money, but I didn't want to play. They said my best move was a limp to the sideline, that sort of thing. The press was actually calling the problem psychosomatic.

The main guy ripping me was a writer named Jerry or John Magee, whom I had had a slight discussion with the day I signed with the Chargers. He had asked me, "Well, Joe, they've got all these backs. What do you think?" I asked him, "What do you mean, what do I think? What do you think? They're obviously qualified players, or they wouldn't be here. What does that have to do with me? I'm the number one draft choice. They expect me to come here and help, and that's what I'm here to do."

So of course, when I responded like that, in the way an intelligent person would, rather than in the manner of some shy, inexperienced rookie, it upset him. So he blasted me in the paper, It was horrible.

I started asking the Chargers to let me see my own doctor, Dr. O'Donoghue, in Oklahoma, who was world-renowned. They kept telling me that I didn't need to see him, that it was all in my head. One day at practice, one of the coaches told me, "Washington, you can run faster than that!" I replied, "Coach, I can't. Something's wrong with my knee." That was it, and I just walked off the field.

That was very uncharacteristic of me. I loved practice; I loved the game. My dad was a coach, and I thought coaches walked on water. You didn't challenge them. Hey, they know it all. But I went into the dressing room, and said, "That's it. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I can't handle this. Something's wrong with my knee."

What is the role of the players' representative here? There had been a players' strike in 1975 [this was 1976], and I would think this was the kind of issue . . .

The next year I was a players' representative. But this wasn't the kind of issue that I, as a rookie, would even think of . . . I wanted to play. My concern was being able to see another doctor, and me thinking there was still something wrong with my knee. They were telling me it was all in my head.

That day, Coach Prothro came in and said, "Washington, if you need a security blanket, I'll let you go see your other doctor." It's funny, but I can still see him saying this. I left to go see Dr. O'Donoghue in Oklahoma. After a few seconds examining me, Dr. O'Donoghue said, "Joe, I wouldn't hesitate to operate on you again." But then, we always used to say he was kind of quick to cut. I went back to San Diego, and the surgeon who had performed the first operation went in again, and took care of the outside cartilage.

This is about midway through the season?

The season was four or five weeks old at that point. Because of the second operation, I ended up missing the whole year.

The surgeon claimed that the problem had been caused by an old injury, something that had happened in college. Well, if that was the case, why hadn't he found that out when he went in the first time? That's what I was upset about, because if they had done it right the first time, I'd have been back playing already.

Had you ever been seriously injured in college?

Just ribs, foot, toe, heel. My senior year I had my toe, instep, and heel, elbows, and shoulder every now and then. But nothing that would really keep me out. So this was really the first injury, other than in high school when I broke my leg, that kept me out. So that was really, really tough.

What was the doctor's view of this injury after doing the second operation? Did he figure you could come back and start the next season?

I guess he felt that I'd have a complete recovery after the second operation, but I don't remember that ever being stated. The Chargers didn't have the type of equipment I wanted to work out on during the off-season, so I ended up looking for different places to work out myself. I used to drive down to Santa Ana or Tuston, to a health club, especially on weekends, to work out with their up-to-date equipment. I worked out real hard.

Unconsciously at least, the Chargers were upset with me for being injured the whole year. They seemed to want to write me off as a bust. They had put billboards up, with my picture on it, around San Diego. Me, Charlie Joiner, Bill Walsh, and Ernie Zampese were going to be the new wave for San Diego in 1976. And hey, the main ingredient, the guy who was going to put the lightning back into the belt of the Chargers, wasn't there.

The next year, 1977, the Chargers wanted me to come to camp early, and that was fine with me. My backfield coach, who was black, told me Prothro wanted me in early so I could get my timing back. He told me that there wouldn't be any contact. Well, I

said that was fine, because I was eager. And the first day I get to practice, they're going through a live drill. Hey, this was my first day back. I was a little nervous taking the ball, because this was a live drill, and they told me I wouldn't have to go through contact if I came in early. So the first play I ran, the guys on defense just grabbed me, but they didn't tackle me. They knew I had just come off surgery. As I was walking back to the huddle with the ball in my hand, Prothro blew the whistle, and said, "Tackle him! Tackle him! This is live!"

I looked up, and everybody was chasing me. So I was ducking, dodging, and weaving. I even grabbed the team owner, Eugene Klein, and pushed him in front of me. I was desperate now. They finally got me, a little tackle, no big deal. But that really set the stage of how things were. I was really upset about that.

What kind of record did the Chargers have the year you were out?

6-10 or 7-9. I didn't get on a .500 team until my first year in Washington. They started me in a couple of preseason games, but I didn't play well. I made some bad decisions. It was just a matter of confidence. I didn't play a lot, and I was upset about that.

I felt that being the type of runner I was, if Prothro could relate to me in any way, he would have had me run through situations where I wouldn't get hit, where I could run and actually get my movement down. Getting hit on my knee—what good was that going to do? My confidence was going to come when I was in a situation where I could take this foot and cut at a ninety degree angle, without it collapsing on me. That was where the mystery lay, whether I would be able to do that.

I was never really with it during the first part of the season, but as the season progressed, I started getting a little more confidence, and they started playing me more. I won some games for them. Now, I was a little upset that I wasn't playing more. I was upset that they had thrown me to the wolves in training camp, and hadn't been allowed the chance to build up any type of confidence. Now Prothro was shuffling me in and out. What is this? I was really fed up. That season ended pretty uneventfully.

I had become the Chargers' player representative that year.

Why did they pick you as player representative? Are there certain qualities your teammates saw in you? Or was it that they weren't interested?

I hadn't really been interested, but the players asked me to do it. I had spoken up about a lot of things, because I was disgusted with everything. I was probably the most vociferous player on the team.

My third year, the coach wanted everybody to come to camp early again, but I refused. I was doing a United Way promotion in Utah, and I wasn't going to come in. I told the coach that reporting to camp early was not required by the Players' Association. So I and some of the other veterans came into camp later, when you were supposed to report.

I had a pretty good preseason, and I went to the coach and asked him to trade me. He said, "Nope." So I asked him again, and he said, "You start playing football, and then I'll start thinking about trading you." In preseason, I probably made some bad decisions on some runs and some blocks. But hey, it wouldn't be the first time, and it

wouldn't be the last time. At that point, he told me again, that he wouldn't trade me, and to start playing some football.

I ended up having to have another operation, this time on my eye. I got poked in the eye in practice, and that caused a detached retina. I had to have laser surgery on the eye. If you don't repair a detached retina, you can eventually go blind. I couldn't practice for about ten days.

I was really disgusted about things.

Is it because they're not playing you enough, or are there other reasons you were disgruntled? Was it the personality of the coach, the nature of the team itself, how the players on it interacted, were there cliques . . .

Cliques and personalities on the team—that never concerned me. It was more the interaction between me and the coaches. My head coach and my backfield coach. I didn't really care about other guys in the backfield.

You thought they weren't giving you enough playing time. Were they critical in film sessions?

It all went back to the preseason, the year I finally played, the way I was treated with that. They even had me blocking punts. I don't block punts.

Why did he do that?

I don't know. I'd been returning punts all my life. Then they shifted me into the line to block punts.

We had gotten to my third year with the Chargers, and I was totally disgusted. You can tell if a coach wants to keep you in his plan. By this time, I was sure that he had just written me off completely. He just figured he had wasted a draft choice. I was still thinking, though, that I could work through all of this.

What was Tommy Prothro's background?

He was a brilliant guy, and supposedly a great judge of talent. I guess he was pretty good at one time, because he drafted me number four in the first round of the draft. He had been an offensive lineman, a heralded college coach at UCLA and Oregon, and had coached the Rams. But I think that football had basically passed him by. I don't think he'd ever had a running back like me. There was basically nothing that he could tell me to coach me. He might have had a problem with that.

I definitely had a problem with Prothro telling me to lower a shoulder, and run over the biggest man on the football team, Louie Kelcher, who weighed 325 pounds. I didn't think that made any sense. I'm an improviser. I'm going to lose a few yards, and get fifteen some times. I could see then that he didn't get it.

A few games into that third year, I was getting a little more confidence. I was playing real well, returning punts all over the place. My legs felt good, and I could cut. The third week of the preseason, I returned a punt about eighty yards for a touchdown. I was getting a little better press. But right after that third game, I got poked in the eye again in practice, suffered another detached retina, and had to have another operation.

Is the possibility of a detached retina something you have to watch out for frequently in games?

Guys wear these cages and everything. I started wearing goggles after that. I wore a small face mask, where it was easy to get poked.

After the eye surgery, I was just sitting up in my room watching television, when Prothro came and told me that the Chargers had obliged me, and traded me to the Baltimore Colts. And I just said, "Thank you, coach."

How did you feel about going to the Colts?

I thought Baltimore was a great place for me to go. The Colts had been one of my favorite teams as a kid. One of the reasons I wore number 24 was for Lenny Moore. And my little brother wore number 19, for Johnny Unitas.

Success and Struggle With the Baltimore Colts

What was the adjustment process like, moving to a new team?

It was hard adjusting to Baltimore. I moved from the newness of San Diego to a team that was practicing in a vacant monastery, on an old field. I said, "My God, what is this?" My wife and I stayed out in a little hotel in a remote place until we got an apartment. It was different.

Before I could even practice, I had to go through a battery of medical tests, because I had had the knee injury, and the eye injuries. Baltimore figured that they were getting a blind cripple. They told me that the Colts' quarterback, Bert Jones, came out in practice after he found out they'd traded for me, in a sling and wearing a patch over his eye.

One of Baltimore's defensive linemen, Fred Cook, told me, "Joe, you just jumped out of the frying pan into the oven when you came here." I had been traded for Lydell Mitchell, a guy who'd done everything in the world for Baltimore, and then had gotten traded over a couple of thousand dollars in a salary dispute. But I didn't care. I just wanted to be out of San Diego, and with a chance to play.

Does it take a lot of time to learn the playbook?

Oh yeah, because everything was totally the opposite of what I had been accustomed to at San Diego. At San Diego, the numbering system was such that odd plays went normally to the left, and even plays went to the right. With Baltimore it was just the opposite. The terminology was also different. So when we got up to the line of scrimmage, and lined up in the I-formation, Roosevelt Leaks, the fullback, patted himself on the hip to indicate to me which side the play was going to.

When they traded for you, was it to get a starting running back?

No, they had traded for me just as a third down running back, and to return punts and kickoffs. I didn't get much of a chance to play the first game of the season, against Dallas. All I did was return kicks, and maybe one punt. They finally gave me a chance to

run the ball a little bit in the second game against Miami. I ran the ball real well. So I guess they saw I could run the football.

You had a performance on Monday Night Football that was voted the best . . .

Yes. In the third game, I had a real big day, and was voted all-this and all-that for the week. I gained about 300 total yards, and got headlines. We played the New England Patriots, who were coached by Chuck Fairbanks, who had been Oklahoma's coach my freshman year. At San Diego, I had called Chuck numerous times about making a trade for me. But nothing ever happened. I thought a little about that before the game. But it wasn't that big a deal, because I didn't think I'd get to play much.

But lo and behold, Don McCauley hurt his shoulder early in the game, and they had to put me in. I knew it would be a sink or swim situation for me. They didn't have my regular helmet for me yet, so I had to wear a typical helmet with the other face mask on it. And there was so much rain that I had to take my goggles off.

The game started off a little slowly, but it got really exciting. I was leading the field, coming back, lanes were opening up all over the place for me. There was a lot of scoring, back and forth. It boiled down to the last minute of the game. They had just scored, and they kicked off to us. But instead of kicking the ball up, they squib kicked it to me. I returned it ninety-one yards for a touchdown to win the game. I threw a touchdown pass in that game, caught one, and ran one. It was really a chance for everybody to see what I was capable of doing. They could see that I wasn't just a broken-down running back, that I could do anything you needed done. That was big. And I had good games in Baltimore from that point on. I was an alternate All-Pro that year.

The day after the Baltimore–New England game, San Diego fired Tommy Prothro as head coach, and replaced him with Don Coryell. If Coryell had been the coach when I was there, I'd never have asked to be traded. He was the type of coach who could relate to someone like me, because he had had Terry Metcalf in St. Louis. I did get a chance to play for him the next year, when I went to the Pro Bowl.

People in Baltimore were crazy about me, and the next year I was All-Pro. We weren't winning many games, but I didn't care. I was playing well, doing all I could to help the team win. It just wasn't happening. That second year in Baltimore I led the NFL in number of pass receptions as a running back. So I was pretty busy, which was fine with me.

What's the mood like on a team that's losing a lot of games?

Oh, it's tough; you're on pins and needles. When a team is losing, the coaches have a tendency to reevaluate players. They get rid of a lot of people.

Unfortunately, they fired our head coach, Ted Marchibroda at the end of the season. I really liked Marchibroda. He gave me a lot of respect. He gave me a chance to play. We could relate to each other well. He was the one who called me and told me I was going to the Pro Bowl. I got a big kick out of him telling me that.

Then they hired Mike McCormack, who was 6'5" and 240 pounds, and I said to myself, "Oh, God, here we go again." When the head coach is a big guy, he's not going to be able to relate again. And Baltimore drafted a running back named Curtis Dickey

in the first round, a big, fast specimen. A world-class sprinter running back. So I thought I'd probably be challenged for my position.

At this time, Baltimore asked to renegotiate my contract, which was fine. I was going to ask them anyway. I had had two All-Pro years. I was probably the lowest paid guy at the Pro Bowl. They figured I'd probably come in, so they beat me to the punch. Dickey held out for three games, and when he signed, we started sharing time. I wasn't too pleased with the way McCormack was handling it. He was being dictated to by the owner, who wanted to play Dickey, because he was the new kid on the block. I was still going back and forth with the owner, Irsay, about my contract. It was really aggravating. He wouldn't remember that we had talked. He was inebriated by a certain time. He forgot every doggone thing.

What were they looking for in negotiating the new contract?

I guess to tie me up a little longer. They were going to redo the contract because I was probably the lowest-paid guy at the Pro Bowl.

Was this to benefit you then, to take into account your performance?

Oh yeah, they figured they were being good guys, because I was going to approach them anyway. And they probably wanted to stop what had happened before with Lydell Mitchell, because he had left over a contract. I don't know if I can give them that much credit for that. They figured I'd probably come in, so they beat me to the punch.

We went through the whole season, negotiating back and forth, and finally agreed to some numbers that were basically fine. They were going to triple my present salary. They agreed to the numbers, and said they'd be back to me. Well, when they finally got back to me, they presented me with a deferment plan where ten years after I retired, I would collect maybe \$2000 of deferred money one year, but the next year I'd get \$15,000. Then another year, I'd get \$1000, then another year, I'd get something. I said, "How are you all doing this? This isn't what we agreed to." I told them, "You can forget this. I'm not signing this. Unless we can get it back to what we agreed upon, then I'm out of here. You can trade me."

During that season, I was upset, because I was dealing with all this, plus splitting time with Dickey. We ended up playing about equal time. I was going from two All-Pro years, to not starting every time. I was upset with that, but that was something you could deal with if you were getting paid the way you should be. So I told them that they could expect to trade me.

I moped around after I told them I wanted to be traded, and I didn't go to any of the camps. Then they knew I was really serious. I was sitting home in Port Arthur, depressed. I didn't even want to go back to Baltimore. I was hearing rumors that I'd be traded to Houston, and New Orleans, and all over the place. Then on draft day, I got a call. My mother-in-law answered the phone. She said, "Joe, it's Coach McCormack." So I knew then that I'd been traded somewhere. My wife and I looked at each other. I walked up to answer the phone, and he told me I'd been traded to the Washington Redskins. I said, "Oh, I don't believe that. I don't even have to move!" Then Joe Gibbs, the Redskins' coach, called. He had been on the Chargers' staff, and had been one of the

coaches when I played in the Pro Bowl. He had told me then he would love to have me. I felt that I had just gotten a new lease on life.

Wins and Wounds With the Washington Redskins

What was it like at the Redskins' training camp?

I reported there, and I figured I had to show myself right off the bat. So that's what I did. I just gave them a taste of some of the things that I was capable of doing. I started the season real well. Dallas beat us in the first game, but I caught ten or thirteen passes.

But then the next game, I got tackled and hurt my ankle, and was out for three or four games. They thought it was my Achilles heel, but I knew that it wasn't. That's one thing about getting hurt. You hate for them to tell you what they think it is, when you know that it's something different. I'm not crazy about physicians. I hate orthopedists. It's just not my cup of tea. They think they know every doggoned thing, and they don't. I can think of a lot of people I'd rather be friends with than orthopedic surgeons.

Even missing those games, I still ended up with seventy-something pass receptions that year, and 900 yards rushing. I had a real good year. The team only finished 8-8, because we started out 0-5. That was the first time in the NFL when I hadn't been on a losing team. I wasn't on a winning team until 1982, when we went to the Super Bowl.

The next year, 1982, I got seriously hurt in a preseason game, and the Redskins' team doctors told me to retire. I made a cut, and my left knee went out on me. I not only tore cartilage, but I messed up my anterior cruciate ligament. It frayed like when you tear a piece of cotton, you see little strings. The team doctors felt they couldn't perform reconstructive surgery, because a guy like me relied on his quickness, and it just wouldn't work. After I had the surgery, though, I felt I could still play. I told them just to let me go rehabilitate it.

Then we went out on strike, with the rest of the National Football League players. I had been going down to the Redskins' training facility every morning around 5:00 or 6:00 for rehabilitation. But when we walked out on strike, they barred us from using the training facility. So I put the rehabilitating machine in my apartment in Washington. The strike gave me a chance to rehabilitate my knee and come back.

What was the experience of being on strike like? What was the feeling on the team?

Everybody on our team supported the strike. We knew we had a terrible deal. Washington was a pro-union team. Definitely pro-union. Our player rep, Mark Murphy, was a level-headed guy. He just wanted to be sure he had the support of the players. What we were striking for really wouldn't help guys like me, who was one of the higher-salaried players. We walked out more to help the younger players, to boost their pay to the level it should be.

I did feel that we didn't present our case in the right way. We presented it in a hard-nosed, hard-butting manner. Negotiating took place in the newspapers too doggoned much. You have to appeal to the fans in a manner they can relate to, you've got to appeal to their fanaticism. And I don't think we did that.

In addition, for the players to develop any kind of public sympathy, they can't go through the angle of trying to make more money. It's tough for the public to sympathize with a guy who's making six figures on up, playing a game. I always felt that the players should have focused on injuries, and benefits for care. They should have talked about guys needing knee operations ten years after they had finished playing, and not being able to walk. Those are the things that you've got to bring to the forefront. People can relate to that. They can't relate to a guy complaining and bitching about making \$100,000, and trying to make \$300,000, when you've got homeless people in line, and people out of jobs. I can't give anybody any type of sympathy in that type of situation, and you shouldn't expect it.

If you want to appeal to a human's emotion, focus on the physical side of football. Look at guys getting paralyzed on the field. A guy gets hit, and you don't know if he's getting up.

How was the players' position arrived at? Were there meetings where the team would come up with a position? How did the different teams unite in the strike?

There's a player representative on every team.

They get the feedback from who's on their team.

Exactly. They take it to the executive committee, and you don't really know how that's received. Once things are in the executive committee's hands, it's basically how they feel they should proceed.

When you're a player, dealing with management, no matter who you are, you're on the short end of the stick. With management, you're talking about an entity that shares revenue, that doesn't need any one piece of the puzzle. There isn't any one player who can be a franchise player to bring more people into the stands. Joe Montana's gone, and San Francisco's still selling out. In that situation, you're going to lose, because you're dealing with an entity that can always replace one component. And that's all you are. Wear out one running back, bring in another running back, who'll take less than what you're making anyway.

You have these strikes, they bring in replacement players. That can work, even with vastly inferior players, if the talent is at the same level. You will still see good football. You'll still see guys make good runs, good tackles, good catches, good throws. Now if you had one of the regular teams playing a replacement team, it would be different.

Let's say you put replacement teams for Dallas and Washington on the field, and you put the numbers of the real players on the replacements. John Q. Fan couldn't tell. He'd still think he was getting real good football. He'd think that just so long as you had two teams playing each other that were comparable. People will watch, and think, "Hey, this is the NFL."

Nevertheless, this went on for 57 days. And apparently there was strong solidarity among the players.

Oh yeah. I was really impressed with that. What really helped was that the owners locked everybody out. If they hadn't done that, then guys would have eventually drifted back.

I hurt my knee a few more times because one of the cruciate ligaments wasn't stable. It went out on me in the NFC Championship game against Dallas. Going for a first down, I was jumping in from about eight yards out, and missed it by about two inches. And then the next play I made a movement, and it just collapsed on me, and that was it.

We went out to the Super Bowl the next week, and I didn't know whether I could play, because I was in pain. The knee had collapsed on me three times since I came back to play. I was really concerned. I went to see a top orthopedic surgeon in Los Angeles, where the Super Bowl was being played. After my appointment, I went to see Bert Jones, the Colts' quarterback when I was there, who was now with the Rams. He had broken his neck in a game, and was in the hospital. I was thoroughly depressed then, because the surgeon had told me that I should definitely quit. He said I wouldn't be able to come back, and do such and such and this and that. It wasn't one of my better days.

I didn't play in the Super Bowl, against the Miami Dolphins, which we won. We practiced for it, and I suited up, but I wasn't doing anything. Then I had a couple of days off to see the doctor about my knee. I was suited up for the Super Bowl, and I was really thinking about playing. But there was no need for me to go in and be a detriment to the team. The worst thing I could have done was to have gone out there and not been able to protect myself. So I didn't play.

The Super Bowl is not a big up, because you were hurt and couldn't play in it.

We won the Super Bowl, and I was probably the only guy who wasn't as happy as he probably should have been. I was happy, but I was thinking about my knee. But I really would have been upset if we'd have lost.

Then I had surgery. I wanted them to operate on both knees at the same time. I had some type of growth on the outside of my right knee, for whatever reason, just from wear and tear. I wanted that cleaned out and the other knee done too. That way, they could look and see how the two knees compared. They took the outside cartilage out of them, which I think cut down on some stability. I got out of the hospital on a Friday, and my daughter was born that Sunday.

After the surgery, the doctors said I shouldn't play again. But I was determined to come back for at least one year. There was no way I could just go out like that.

So I came back the next year, 1983, and had a real good year. I led the NFL in yards per carry, with a five yard average. I think I had about 700 yards rushing. I was splitting time.

Who else is a running back?

Just me and John Riggins.

It's a good combination of two different types of runners.

We did the same thing my first year with Washington. I had been the starter, and he had been spelling me, until I got hurt in that preseason game the year before.

Would you say Joe Gibbs was attuned to your style of play, more than some of these other coaches?

I think he was, but he really wanted to play me more in third down situations, because I was 174 pounds. Even though he saw that I could do all these things, it was just the mentality. He can do it, but he's only 170 pounds. So I don't think he really wanted to play me that much. He mentioned to me that playing less would prolong my career, which I really didn't care about. I was always of the mind that "I'm a running back. Let me play, let me do it. If I get hurt, too bad; if I don't, good. Let me go out and do what I want to do." But Joe, whom I had a lot of respect for, felt that being the size that I was, I could do more, and do it longer, playing more in certain spots, which I probably could.

Like I said, I had a real good year in 1983, but my knee went out on me again in a regular season game against Dallas, and so I played sparingly in the playoffs. So here I am again, doing everything to get them to the playoffs, and then I'm not able to show up again. And that really bothered me more than anything else. But I did play in the Super Bowl against the Raiders.

I came back again the next year, and was playing well, and then against New England I was trying to get out of bounds, and my foot got caught. The guy pulled me back, and it twisted my knee again. I was out a long time after that. I think that really made it tough on Washington. Really tough. Because here I am—I run the ball on first down, on long situations, block, catch passes—I do some of everything. To replace me, they ended up having to put a tight end in my spot to block sometimes, and they needed another back for this, and another back for that. Besides that, John Riggins was getting to the end of the line himself, a little bit.

Injections and Steroids

What about the use of pain-killing drugs in the NFL? You read about mature, veteran NFL players sometimes using them so they can play hurt, and then going out on the field knowing that that can exacerbate the injury.

On no occasion during my career, did I have a pain-killing drug injected to permit me to play while injured. I always felt, that if I needed a shot to play, I didn't need to play. I'm scared of needles anyway.

That's why I can't put steroids in the same category as drugs like cocaine and marijuana. I may take a lot of flack for saying this, but I look at steroids in the same vein as a kid taking a class, and he's going to the library. There's this wealth of knowledge on the shelf at the library for him. Now, he has his own books and periodicals available to him. But here's a chance for him to increase his learning level, and his intellectual skills, by going to the library and gathering as much as he can. Using steroids is a guy's chance to increase his physical capability, to be as good as he can be. Not that I condone this. But I can understand why an athlete would do this, even though he knows that he shouldn't.

Of course, going to the library would have a better long-term, lasting effect on me than using steroids. But look at the length of an athlete's career, especially a football player's. As far as he's concerned, it's all for now. There's no tomorrow.

When did you first see steroids used?

I never did see steroids used. I always heard a little bit about them, though. I can think of two guys I played with at Oklahoma who were probably using steroids. But I never saw it. And as far as the majority of players are concerned, I can't say I know, because a lot of us were scared of needles. Why would you go and volunteer for a needle, when you don't even want to take a flu shot? I guess for the above mentioned reasons.

Back to a Loser: Final Year With the Atlanta Falcons

How did you feel about getting traded to the Atlanta Falcons the next year, 1984?

The next year the Redskins traded for another running back, George Rogers, and traded me to the Atlanta Falcons. I was a little upset about that, because I didn't know about it. I eventually understood that there weren't going to be enough balls around. You had Rogers, who was going to need it, and Riggins was going to need it. Henning, the Falcons' head coach, had been offensive coordinator with the Redskins. He'd been trying to get me.

I think Henning, when he had been with the Redskins my first year, had pushed for me to be a full-time player. But he always told me Joe Gibbs kept saying, "Gee, Dan, he ain't but 170 pounds!" But Henning had wanted me to go full-time, carrying the ball twenty-five times a game, catching ten passes, and returning punts and kickoffs.

I really wasn't that pleased about going to Atlanta. I'd been through that already—playing with teams that weren't winning. You're at the bottom of the heap. Here I was at the end of my career, and I had to go through this crap again.

But you get more playing time, don't you?

Yeah. I did play a bunch. I went down to Atlanta, and played well. I met the owner, who wasn't too pleased with having me there. He wasn't too pleased with Henning trading for all these ex-Redskins.

But you get more playing time, don't you?

How Owners Meddle With Teams

Owners seem to intervene a lot in player selection. I noticed, for example, that this punter for the Redskins shanked his first punt against Dallas—it went only 27 yards—and the Redskins owner was already making comments that he'd have to get rid of the guy. I imagine owners are just amateurs when it comes to knowledge of football.

But it's their team. Owners look at things like spectators do. They watch games like spectators, and comment like spectators. They'll see a player do something they don't like, and they'll say, "Oh, that's terrible. I'm getting rid of him."

Football is such a complex game, that very few people can tell what's going on from the stands. Isn't that the thing with the owner?

Well, he feels he can tell. (Laughs)

How would a guy like Joe Gibbs react, who has such an impressive winning record in the NFL? What is the power relationship like when you have a Joe Gibbs getting communication from an owner about getting rid of a guy?

Let me give you a prime example of how an owner meddled with a team. When I was with Baltimore, we were playing in Miami. Irsay, the Colts' owner, called down to the coach, Mike McCormack, and said, "Look, I want Bert Jones out at quarterback. I want you to play Greg Landry." And McCormack did it.

Once you do that, it's the kiss of death for a coach. First of all, you're going to lose the respect of your players. Nobody's going to respect you. His goose is cooked. How can you have any respect for a guy like that?

But owners order coaches to make changes, especially in the heat of battle when things aren't going right, and all these emotions are coming out. The owner thinks he can make key decisions, and he wants to get down there and get them done. It's his team, so he feels it should be done.

You've got to be able to have a strong coach, who can stand up to the owner. I can't see an owner telling a Joe Gibbs who to play and who not to play. If the coach succumbs to the owner, he can kill a team. I saw it happen. McCormack did it, and it was total chaos. He had no control afterward. None.

Reduce My Contract—What Is This? Standing Up to Management and Getting Released

So how did it go for you in Atlanta?

I played a year with Atlanta, and came to the end of my contract. I had played real well for them; I was probably the second most productive player on the team, as far as the number of times I touched the ball. We were supposed to be renegotiating my contract. And all of a sudden, Atlanta told me they wanted to reduce my contract. They took a hard line. I said, "Reduce my contract? What is this? I'm the second most productive player on the team, and you want to reduce my contract?" They replied, "Well, we've got such and such a player, and you're making more than he does, and he's a star." I said, "Hold it. You've got to look at the fact that I've been in the league ten years. This is this guy's fourth year. I hope that when this guy reaches his tenth year he isn't making what I'm making now."

We went back and forth, and then the press called me. They said, "Joe, the reason they're doing this is because they want to release you, and then sign you back for less. Do you think this has anything to do with black/white?" I told them that I didn't know if it had anything to do with the black-white relationship. I knew that there were some instances where certain white players hadn't had as hard a time to get things done as some of the black players. I did know that. But as far as my case was concerned, I didn't know. I told them that I'd hate to think that that was the situation, because if it was, I wasn't going to stand for it.

We kept going back and forth, and finally, since I hadn't signed, they released me. They could then resign me. A reporter called me at that point, and I told him that if they released me to take a pay cut, then I'd just retire. I was at the stage then when I was thinking about retiring. I was getting tired of it. You know, getting up on those mornings, having to wear this little outside brace on my knee. I said, "If I'm going to have to wear a brace to play, I'm not playing." I didn't like the way it looked under the uniform. It stuck out, and I just hated it. The Falcons didn't seem to be too happy to have me anyway. The owner wasn't pleased about having me on the team. He couldn't understand the contribution I was making.

The reporter misconstrued everything I said to him, and said I had called them racist, which I hadn't. The things I said were definitely taken out of context.

I just decided I didn't need this. I was tired. I thought it would be a good time to retire. So I did.

I had people actually call me to ask if I would consider coming back to play. I had people call me even three years after that about playing.

Experiencing Retirement

How did you feel, looking back on your NFL career?

I had played ten years in the NFL, which was long enough. It was longer than anybody ever thought I'd play. I'd played in this league for ten years at around 173 pounds, relying on cutting. I was a unique type of running back. I did things totally different from anybody else. I'd basically done everything possible that I could do. Never had a bad game.

When you retire when you can still play, you always think that maybe you left too early. It may be even better to stay too late than to leave too early. Because once you do, that's it. There's no turning back. That's a phase that is gone. That door is closed. So occasionally, I think about that. But then too, I think about the fact that I'm still able to do everything I want to do now. I can still play basketball.

So your knees are not giving you pain?

I do have a lot of pain. My shoulder's giving me a lot of pain. I wake up at night and I'm just in total pain. The shoulder constantly aches. Of course, I don't have much stability in my left knee. I was able to play three or four years after they told me to retire. I consider that being on borrowed time. I was lucky to have that.

I look at it as having had a good career.

How many years were you All-Pro?

I was All-Pro two years, and I led the NFL one year in pass receiving, as a running back. I also led the league one year in yards per carry, and I led the conference in yards per kickoff return. And I was on two Super Bowl teams. I don't have any visions of making the Hall of Fame, because I don't have the stats. I never got 1000 yards rushing. I missed it quite a few times. That first year in Baltimore, I didn't play the first two

games, didn't start until the sixth game, and still had 900 something yards. The next year with the Colts, I had 870 or 900 yards rushing, but I caught 80-something passes, so I had another 800-yards pass receiving. I could easily have had a 1000-yard year, but it didn't happen. I think it would be possible for me to go to the College Hall of Fame. That would probably be the highest one I'd be able to attain. But then again, you don't know what the criteria for that are, whether you have to be a Heisman Trophy winner, or whatever.

Well, you made the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame recently. Oklahoma football history is such that that's quite an honor.

Oh, yeah, it really was. The ceremony was really fantastic. I really enjoyed it. My family was able to experience that night. I couldn't have picked a better person than Barry Switzer to present me. It was very emotional for both of us. I always did like Barry. He was my kind of guy. He's always been one of my biggest supporters.

He talks about you a great deal in his book.

I have a lot of respect for Barry, and for him to be able to present me, and talk about some of the times we had, and the things we shared, it was really, really special. Plus his son was there, and I recall babysitting for him. Letting people know I was able to be part of a kid's life. He's grown up to be a concert pianist. Barry's kids, until they graduated from college, used to call me every year on my birthday. So it doesn't really matter if I get into the College Hall of Fame, because that evening was really special.

I had always looked forward to retiring. I just loved playing, but after a while, you get tired of working out. You dread going to work out, but once you start, it's great. But you get to a point when you don't want to be out there. You hate working out, and you can't wait to get home to sit down. Then you know it's time to retire.

I had finished college in four years, and had my degree in public relations when I went into the NFL. I was really pleased I had finished, because I knew once I got into pro football, that it would be tough to go back to school.

What have you been doing since retiring from the NFL?

After retiring, I was in several different ventures, trying to find the right thing that I wanted to be in. I eventually found it in the consulting business, with my expertise in marketing products. I have several clients. And I play a lot of golf and tennis, and read a great deal.

I notice on your wall that you have some plaques from charitable activities.

Yeah, I participate in a great deal of that. When I was a kid, I was fortunate enough to have two caring parents. I spent a lot of time with them. They took us to *everything*. What we had, we wanted. What we didn't have, we didn't know about. So things worked out. Plus, my parents were professionals. They were in the school system. We were looked after real well.

So I always participate in any type of charity that involves kids. I'm on some charitable boards here in Baltimore, and in Oklahoma. I just got back from Florida—the Children's Wish Foundation. They provide a wish for terminally ill kids. For instance, one kid wished to be a golfer, and meet Arnold Palmer, and take lessons from him. They got him a putter autographed by Arnold Palmer, a bag autographed by Arnold Palmer, and they're going to get him lessons at the Arnold Palmer Institute of golf. And one day Arnold Palmer is going to be there.

I don't know if I look at it in terms of giving back. I just think I look at it in terms of this is the way it should be. This is the way it was when I grew up. Where would I be if I didn't have people who took an interest in me?

The Joy of Football

So how do you feel about having been a football player?

Playing football was what I was put here to do. I think I knew at an early age that I had a unique talent, and that I was a little different from everybody else. I didn't do things in an orthodox manner. Just looking at that picture there, I'm jumping over him, changing directions. And I enjoyed every minute of it. I enjoyed waking up that next morning beat up, in pain, just to say, "I was in the pit yesterday. I had a good day, and I came out. I'm moving around a little slow this morning, but I'll live to fight another day."

I don't care how much money you make, you couldn't play the game with the passion, and the feeling, and the effort, unless you enjoyed it. You can't, because how much money can they pay you to risk life and limb? And that's exactly what you're doing when you're out there.

You don't realize how violent this game is until you're actually away from it, and you watch it on television. Or what can be even worse, when you look at it close up on the field. When I went back to Oklahoma for Joe Washington Day, I watched the game from the sideline for a while, and the college kids were hitting the licks—oh, man, it's scary! It is really scary! Every time I think of that, I'm glad I retired when I did. The longer you play, the more lives of the cat you lose. And you only get nine.

The game has changed a little bit. I don't think guys as a whole have as much passion as players once did. I think for the most part, the passion is only at game time now.

A lot of former players go out of their way not to talk about football. They say, "Well, it's over. I'm through with it." Hey, I'm sorry. It's in my blood. I don't have any problem with talking about something that I was good at. I don't mind talking to guys, hearing some of the stories they have to tell. They have stories to tell, just like I have stories to tell.

I truly feel football is the closest thing to life, as far as participating in different types of situations, interactions with people, responsibility, strife, stress. You can't get it any better than that.

From Oklahoma through the pros, I've kept contact with Tony Peters, Greg Pruitt, and my buddy Kerry Jackson, even though he didn't play pro. Tony and Greg have always been real good friends of mine. Good guys. They'd do whatever they could for you. I know Greg did when he used to block for a little rookie running back. Yessirree. Like I say, it was fun. I loved carrying that football.