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BROADWAY JOE: THE MAN WHO MADE THE SUPER BOWL SUPER

INTERVIEW BY LOYD MCINTOSH

With just a few weeks before the football world turns its attention to Super Bowl XLVIII co-host New York, who better to catch up with than Broadway Joe himself. The man practically set the ball in motion, making the Super Bowl a de facto national holiday, with a sense of humor and style that still reverberates throughout professional football, no matter how much the NFL tries to live up to its No Fun League reputation.

It's been 44 years since Namath made headlines after guaranteeing his New York Jets squad would beat the heavily favored Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III. Now 70, Namath has told the story of his famous prediction countless times. Even after all these years, though, he still talks about that moment in a way that is fresh and funny, but also underscores the animosity felt by the NFL, its fans and the sports media toward the American Football League since the AFL's inception in 1960. "I didn't realize it myself until I arrived with the New York Jets," says Namath. He says playing for the Jets and sharing the city with the traditional NFL power, the New York Giants, made things a little uncomfortable. At the time, the Big Apple apparently wasn't big enough for two pro football teams.

"There were uncomfortable moments socially with New York Giants players and with traditional restaurants that the Giants went to," explains Namath. "If you went into one of those places, you felt like an oddball. The Giants were there first and for a long time, so wherever we went around New York City, we were considered the minor league. We weren't accepted by the

New York-established NFL fans. They refused to believe that we could compete with the Giants."

Namath admits some of the bad voodoo leveled at the AFL was justified. The league was 0-2 against the NFL's Green Bay Packers in the first two Super Bowls, after all. Regardless, Namath believed in the AFL and felt it was a good league with some great talent, like Cookie Gilchrist, Lance Alworth, George Blanda and Keith Lincoln. "Watching the AFL perform, I saw good ball playing. I was seeing ball players that could flat get it done," Namath says. "We were *angry* and trying to get a shot at proving it."

Going into Super Bowl III, the Jets finished the 1968 season with a record of 11-3, defeating the Oakland Raiders in the AFL Championship Game. Their opponents, the mighty Baltimore Colts, finished the NFL season 11-1, losing only to the Cleveland Browns in the regular season, before crushing the Browns in a rematch, 34-0, to win the NFL title. Led by legendary quarterback Johnny Unitas and coached by all-time great Don Shula, the Colts epitomized the traditional, blue-collar American football ethic, all flat tops, crew cuts and no nonsense. The Jets, and Namath in particular, were seen as part of the youth counterculture, attached to the social upheaval ripping at the seams of the American fabric circa 1968 and '69—long hair, loud music, free love, Vietnam, civil rights protests, desegregation, etc. "I was a part of it. I grew up with it, so to speak," Namath says.

"It was at a time in our society when things were changing. I think there was an element of change throughout the country.

In a few different areas, there was a rebellious stage taking place and not accepting the way things always were. I was influenced by part of our society that believed in another direction, of more freedom, more liberty," he adds. "I can see how some people during the mid and late '60s, and early '70s didn't like the style of music, the style of dress, the attitude sometimes. But, hey, when has everything been perfect? We're in a constant transition."

By the time the Jets and the Colts arrived in Miami, the narrative had been set in stone. The Colts were going to crush the Jets, and the NFL was vastly superior to the AFL. Despite the two leagues planning to merge in 1970, the AFL and its players were disrespected to such a degree that the merger was coming into question. It didn't help that the Kansas City Chiefs and Oakland Raiders were relatively uncompetitive in the first two Super Bowls. "To be told that we were such an underdog, it got tiresome, and it got under not just my skin but the other players', as well," Namath says.

When Namath met with the public at the Miami Touchdown Club three days before the game, Broadway Joe had all he could take and finally uttered these now-infamous words: "We're gonna win the game. I guarantee it." Namath says, "It was in response to a wise guy saying they were going to kick our butt, and that was enough. That wasn't polite of him, and it showed his disrespect, and my sincere feelings came out. That's how it happened, and of course Coach [Weeb] Eubank was *furious* the next day, man."

In an NFL Films interview, Eubank was quoted as saying he "could have shot" Namath



for his comments. Fortunately, Eubank was unarmed when the team arrived for practice the next morning. Namath says he was disappointed in himself for making the comments and upsetting Coach Eubank, a man who commanded and deserved a tremendous amount of respect. As he arrived for practice, Namath could see Eubank and his offensive coordinator, Clive Rush, waiting for him. The conversation went about like you'd expect: Eubank yelling at Namath for firing up the Colts and giving them bulletin board material. Leave it to Namath to know the perfect way to diffuse a ticking time bomb.

"Finally, when he gave me a chance to say something, I guess my mischievous, fun-loving side of me got going, and I said, 'well, you know, Coach, shucks, man, it's your fault this happened. Heck, you're the one that told us we're gonna win. You're the one who told us how confident you are and how we should be confident and all. Shucks, Coach, you're the one that told me this. Heck, Coach I thought I was just following your lead,' Namath says before erupting into laughter as he recalled the story. "Eubank finally said, 'Oh, shit, Joe. Get out of here.' Then the three of us broke up chuckling. That was the big meeting."

Of course, the Jets rolled to a 16–7 win over the Colts, cementing Super Bowl III and Namath into modern American folklore. Despite his public persona as some sort of late-'60s playboy, what is rarely discussed is how much Namath appreciated and flourished under such hard-nose disciplinarians like Eubank and Paul "Bear" Bryant, his head coach at the University of Alabama. Namath recalls that there was constant supervision, not only on the football field, but also back at the dormitory and around campus. "We were aware of a standard that we needed to abide by or we would not be there. We needed that kind of discipline. I needed that kind of discipline," Namath says.

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"When we had a meeting at 9 o'clock, whenever I got there, Coach Bryant was waiting on us. He was always early. *Always early.*" Namath adds, "That impressed me. That in and of itself helped teach me that being there on time means being there early. One of the first lessons I learned when I was there was to learn Coach Bryant's time."

Namath flourished under Bryant's leadership in Tuscaloosa, setting the table for the Crimson Tide's dominance for the next two decades. Unbelievably, however, Alabama nearly missed out on getting Namath. In fact, he almost didn't play college football at all. Although he made some recruiting trips to various universities, Namath was seriously entertaining offers to play professional baseball. His mother, on the other hand, really wanted him to attend college. By the time August 1961 rolled around, Namath had already graduated high school but had yet to make

a decision about his immediate future. “Low and behold, one afternoon there’s a knock at the door, and it was Howard Schnellenberger from the University of Alabama,” says Namath.

Schnellenberger set about charming Mrs. Namath, impressing upon her how he and Coach Bryant would look after her son and give him the structure and guidance he needed. “She went upstairs with a little suitcase and said ‘go ahead, take him,’ and ‘Joey, I love you.’ She gave me a \$5 bill, and that was that. We were out the door,” he says. “My mother just fell in love with the idea of me having that kind of father figure and having that kind of guidance and of going to college and getting an education and someone looking after me.”

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Barely 18 years old at the time, Namath admits that he really didn’t know much about Bryant or any other football coach at the time, with the exception of Frank Lee. Bryant had yet to win his first national

championship at Alabama, and the coach’s legendary status hadn’t yet become established. However, Namath says, the moment he arrived on campus, he realized what an incredible coach and leader Bryant was. “The first time I ever heard of Coach Bryant was during the very first Liberty Bowl. I remember I liked their uniforms, but it was in black and white so you couldn’t really tell about what color they were or anything, really,” says Namath. “I only learned how terrific a leader Coach Bryant was when I got there.”

Today Namath is as busy as ever. In the fall of 2013, he spent a few weeks in Los Angeles filming some scenes for a movie. Tentatively titled *The Wedding Ringer*, the movie stars comedian Kevin Hart, *Big Bang Theory*’s Kelly Cuoco and an old friend of Namath’s, Ken Howard, most famous for his role in the early 1980s show *The White Shadow*.

The comedy involves the father of a bride to be (Howard) who doesn’t care too much for his soon-to-be son-in-law (Hart). The two challenge each other to a flag football game, and Howard convinces his old college teammates, played by Namath, Ed “Too Tall” Jones and John Riggins, to go up against Hart and his group of friends. The movie also features Josh Gad and Cloris Leachman and is due to be released in February 2015.

Namath also has a new business venture with his cousin, professional chef Jon Molnar. Looking to replicate the taste of foods found in fine restaurants and steak houses around the country. Their research led them to some interesting findings. “One of the common denominators was the high heat that these restaurants were able to generate while cooking their foods,” explains Namath. “We figured out a way to make a cooker that’s portable for people to be able to handle with tailgating or at home.” The device, called the Namath Rapid Cooker, is capable of reaching 1,400 degrees and cooks food from the top down, eliminating the flare ups common with traditional grills. At 29 pounds, the Namath Rapid Cooker is portable and perfect for use at home or at your next tailgate party. “It’s a hell of an idea and a terrific cooker, and we’re very excited about it.”

“Excited” is the perfect word to describe Namath. Talking to him, one learns that he’s thrilled to be healthy and to dote on his family. However, Namath says, he’s not really happy unless he’s up to something new. “I get excited about moving forward. Man, I need to be productive,” says Namath. “I need to feel like I’m being productive and improving on a daily basis.” ■

