

GIOTTO AND JOE

By Bob Carroll

My most immediate reaction to Super Bowl XXIV was, "For this I gave up Murder, She Wrote?"

Seriously, there's oodles more suspense in any episode of that regular CBS series than in the over-hyped disaster that pre-empted it. And I'll bet Angela Lansbury could cover Jerry Rice better than the Denver defensive backs too. When you sit through the second half just to see how bad it can get, you're either watching a Super Bowl or Grand Slam, the dog that followed. Games like XXIV could bring back bear-baiting as a spectator sport.

Anyway, loyalist that I am, I stayed through the final gun and most of the post-game interviews, but I finally got tired of hearing it proclaimed in umpti-ump different ill-chosen words that Joe Montana is the greatest quarterback of all time. Happily, Joe himself wasn't one of the proclaimers; any scintilla of modesty is pleasant to behold in an age when athletic egos are too big to get landing clearance on the Forrestal.

For his becomingly unassuming demeanor at a time when canonization is being thrust upon him from all corners, I have to like Joe Montana. (Of course, I'm easy; I also like Mark Malone who has been modest for years with far better cause.) And I have no quarrel with those who want to tell me ad nauseum that Joe was the best quarterback of 1989 (and January of 1990). Their evaluation can even be extended to encompass the whole decade and I won't kick up much of a fuss. Oh, I could say something about the diva being surrounded by a heckova chorus of spear-carriers, but imagining Boomer or Dan or Warren in a 49er uniform borders on the metaphysical.

(The last time I used metaphysical in a sentence, someone wrote to ask if the New York N.L. baseball team had an Italian doctor.)

So, like I said, eventually on the Sunday night that will live in infamy (at least amid the Rockies) I grew weary of listening to Montana accolades and switched off my Sylvania. But perhaps the concept of "greatness" had wormed its way into my psyche because I decided to look at some paintings by Giotto. I should explain that I didn't look at the real paintings; that would have meant a trip to Italy. What I looked at was pictures of the pictures, which is somewhat akin to frolicking at the pool with the Sports Illustrated swim suit issue. I mean, one's aesthetic enjoyment is severely limited by the realities of the three-color process.

In case there are any philistines out there who don't know about Giotto, let me elucidate. If there was a Hall of Fame for painters, he'd be a charter enshrinee. Charter is a good word, because there are those who will tell you that the entire history of western painting was charted by Giotto back around 1300 when he broke away from the flat, decorative conventions of the time and began to paint people and angels as real, three-dimensional human beings with real, three-dimensional emotions.

Until Giotto, people in paintings had the depth of a People interview and the emotional range of cardboard. They came off like anchormen on the six o'clock news.

Giotto was so great -- How great was he? -- that he has a whole book in the Time-Life History of Art. A whole book! I'll bet there won't be a whole Montana book in the Time-Life History of Football! He was so great he didn't even have a last name! Even Michelangelo had a last name. I think it was Bono-something.

But I'll tell you the truth. When I look at all those full-color illustrations of Giotto frescoes, I'm disappointed. They come off as sort of ordinary and -- well -- unpolished. There must be hundreds of third-year art majors out there who can paint more convincing saints than the Giotto-saints in my Time-Life book.

I mention Time-Life first of all because there's always a chance that somebody from the company may spot this and send me a free book for the plug and second because I want to quote what the author of the

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 1 (1990)

Giotto book -- someone I never heard of but who seems to know what he's talking about -- had to say about his subject:

To a modern eye his art may appear crude by contrast to that of later titans. Next to the musculature of a figure by Michelangelo or the anatomical perfection of a figure by Leonardo, a figure by Giotto seems cloddish and shapeless; alongside the swirling movement of a scene by Rubens, a scene by Giotto seems static; the richness of Titian's palette makes Giotto's colors look flat. Nevertheless, such comparisons are pointless: Giotto prepared the soil that nourished all the rest.

After I read that, my mind kept wandering away from 14th Century Italy and into 20th Century NFL-land. There I'd be, reading a fascinating account of how Pope Whoozis XII commissioned Giotto to paint a fresco of Saint Whatsis for the bapistry of St. Somebody Cathedral, and my mind would be saying: "Luckman, Baugh, Waterfield, Graham, Layne, Unitas, Tittle." I gave up reading when my mind said Pope Lombardi told Starrio to render the agony of St. Lenny.

I decided to think seriously about the greatest quarterback of all time and get it out of my system, but now a passel of painters kept putting in their palettes. Finally, the message came through: there ain't no all-time greatest quarterback anymore than there's an all-time greatest painter.

Think about it. Nobody -- well hardly anybody -- ever says "greatest painter ever." Oh sure, there are levels of greatness. Rembrandt was a consensus on the All-Painter Team; Copley was great but only made the Painter Bowl a couple of times; Picasso goes into the Painters Hall of Fame on the first ballot, but Whistler may have to wait a couple of years. But nobody -- not Rembrandt or Picasso or Rubens or Leonardo or Giotto, for Pete's sake -- makes it as the greatest-ever because each one was unique and maybe the best of his time -- but each painted in a different time. Just what a painter was expected to do and be was quite different for one than for another. And for dozens of others in between.

I'm sure you won't mention money at this point, but somebody might. You probably know that somebody recently paid 80- kazillion dollars for a Van Gogh painting of flowers or trees or something. Now, nobody in his right mind is going to tell you than Van Gogh (who wasn't in his) is the greatest-ever even if they saw the movie. And the market value of a painting is based on all sorts of stuff like rarity, what's hot, and how much somebody can spend. Right now I wouldn't pay even a million for any old Van Gogh, but, if I had 300 million lying around taking up space, I might consider it. And I'd certainly buy some dinky little Van Gogh that might look just fine in my kitchen before I'd buy a Giotto. See, most Giottos are plastered onto the walls of Italian churches. I mean, I'd have to buy the whole church! And it would never fit in my kitchen.

And here's something else. If you look at a painting by Rubens, it darned well better look more convincing than one by Giotto because Peter Paul could go down to Italy to see how Giotto had done it and then take off from there. If he was just going to match Giotto, he could have traced one of the paintings with his Crayola's. And then years and years later, Pablo could study a Rubens, sniff, and say, "Here's how I'd do it!" In other words, each generation has to get "better" just to stay even.

Everything that's true about painters is just as true about quarterbacks. (Actually, those things are also true about linebackers and offensive guards, but quarterbacks come off as artists.) So let's review:

First, it's pointless to talk about "all-time greatest" quarterback because each reasonable candidate is unique to his time and team. We can never know Sam Baugh's completion percentage had he been able to throw to a cadre of today's specially-trained receivers. Or Johnny Unitas' yardage had his line been able to block under today's rules. Or what Y.A. Tittle might have wrought had his rules freed Del Shofner and Frank Gifford of bumping once they were five yards downfield. How many yards might Norm Van Brocklin have accomplished over a 16-game season?

Second, it's doubly absurd to bring a paycheck into the debate. Supposedly, Otto Graham was the highest-paid player in the early 1950s at \$25,000 a year. Shucks, today's quarterbacks spend that much for lunches. But now that you've brought it up, do you think Graham -- at the top of his game -- would have retired after his tenth season if the Browns had paid him a couple million a year? If Montana had gone on to his "life's work" after ten seasons, we wouldn't be having this discussion.

And third, just like painters, quarterbacks should "improve" with each generation because their forebears have solved so many problems. Didn't Sid Luckman invent (or re-invent) the T- formation? Bobby Layne

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 12, No. 1 (1990)

created the two-minute drill out of ether. Unitas perfected it. Remember in 1950 how Graham destroyed the Eagles with passes in the flat? And did anybody ever run better play-action passes than Bart Starr? Montana and the rest of today's q-backs are the inheritors of 50 years of quarterback education. Your Volvo runs fine, but the Model-T made it possible.

If none of this convinces you that San Francisco's Joe deserves "great" sans "est-of-all-time," then try this. Any such all-or-nothing appellation diminishes his accomplishment. Because once you fall into such a short-sighted view, you'll keep at it. Ten years from now, maybe even next season, there'll be a NEW Greatest Ever and the band-wagon boys will be saying, "Joe who?"

Montana is just too good to be dispatched to the cellar as soon as the latest, shiny new model comes out. Likewise Luckman, et. al. You wouldn't hang a Van Gogh in front of your Giotto, would you?