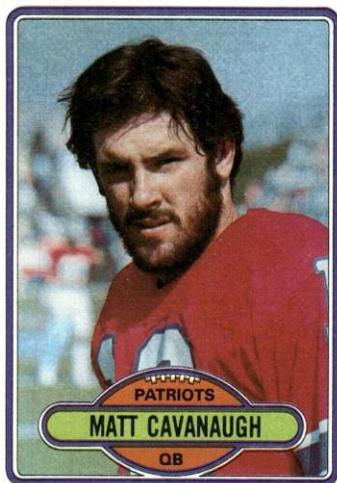




Matt Cavanaugh

This article was written by Matt Keddie

Wherever Matt Cavanaugh donned a helmet, cleats, and pads, he was a winner. He played on high school, college, and professional football championship winning clubs. There are few players in football history who can boast such success. In his second ever NFL appearance on October 5, 1980 with the New England Patriots, Cavanaugh stepped in for the injured Steve Grogan. He threw a fourth quarter, 37-yard touchdown pass to Harold Jackson, that netted the winning points in a 21-11 triumph over the New York Jets.¹ The win sparked the tone for his 13-year NFL career that saw him spend time with the New England Patriots, San Francisco 49ers, Philadelphia Eagles, and New York Giants.



A native of Youngstown, Ohio, Matthew Andrew Cavanaugh (b. October 27, 1956) powered the football program at Chaney High School. During his high school years, the Cowboys won the city league championship in consecutive years in 1973 and 1974, with Cavanaugh leading the offense at quarterback, captaining the team in his senior season.² Among the accolades he received, he was an All-City and All-Northeast Ohio player. He left his mark upon induction into the St. Christine's grade school athletics hall of fame's inaugural class. He proudly remarked, "The greatest thing that's ever happened to me was being raised in Youngstown, OH."³ Cavanaugh translated his high school success to the next level at the University of Pittsburgh, when Panthers head coach Johnny Majors came calling.



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Cavanaugh was a prized recruit for his athletic ability as both a runner and as a passer. He stood at roughly 6'2" and 212 pounds. In his freshman season, he attempted approximately as many passes (65) as rushes (56) in the Panthers' run-first offense behind backs Tony Dorsett and Elliott Walker.⁴ This was during a time where schools like Pitt were bringing in roughly half as many recruits as elite programs such as Georgia, Oklahoma, Southern California, etc. Majors' decision to bring in Cavanaugh proved to be valuable for Pitt. The eight win campaign in 1975 garnered the team's most victories since 1963.⁵ It was, however, the 1976 campaign where Cavanaugh earned his lore in Panthers' history, on the undefeated squad that finished 12-0, bringing the first national championship back to Pittsburgh since 1937.⁶ Tony Dorsett was Pitt's star player, but it was Cavanaugh who was its leader.

In game two against Georgia Tech, Cavanaugh stepped in for the injured Robert Haygood, accounting for three touchdowns in leading Pitt to 28 second half points in a 42-14 victory.⁷ Two games later at Duke, Pitt jumped out to a 30-7 halftime advantage, courtesy of Cavanaugh's gunslinging performance. He set a school record with five passing touchdowns on 339 yards in the 44-31 romp. Pitt's 4-0 record had them ranked in the top ten. Adversity set in, as Cavanaugh missed the next six games due to injury. He returned for the regular season finale against Penn State, and saved his most memorable performance for the Sugar Bowl.⁸ The stage was set as Pitt squared off against the SEC champion Georgia Bulldogs, who boasted a tenacious, nasty defense dubbed, the "Junkyard Dawgs." Cavanaugh was not intimidated. He opened the game with a 6-yard touchdown run to give Pitt a 7-0 lead. After the score, he jumped into the arms of Tony Dorsett, raising his arms in celebration. The moment is iconized on the cover of the January 16, 1977 issue of *Sports Illustrated*.⁹ In the second quarter, Cavanaugh threw a 59-yard touchdown pass to put the Panthers up 14-0. Pitt never looked back, cruising to a 24-3 victory. Cavanaugh was named the Sugar Bowl MVP.¹⁰ The performance set the stage for his senior season in 1977.

Despite battling injuries, he tossed 15 touchdown passes as a senior, totaling over 1,900 yards on offense. Head coach Jackie Sherrill remarked, "Matt Cavanaugh is the finest quarterback in the country. I shudder to think what we could have done had he stayed healthy."¹¹ His performance in the Gator Bowl put an emphatic stamp on his collegiate career, a 34-3 romp over Clemson. Cavanaugh broke the game passing record with 387 yards that stood for a decade, and again he was named the bowl MVP, in front of 72,289 fans. The Panthers finished the season with a 9-2-1 record and a No. 8 national ranking. At the conclusion of his college career, Cavanaugh ranked second in school history with 1,921 passing yards. The success primed his journey of quarterbacking in the NFL.¹²

With the 50th pick in the 1978 NFL Draft, the New England Patriots chose Cavanaugh in the second round. His time in New England mostly consisted of backup duties to Steve



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Grogan. Because Grogan was injury prone, Cavanaugh received a limited starting role from 1980 to 1982. In 1980, he started four contests, going 3-1.¹³ His finest performance was Week 16 against the New Orleans Saints, passing for 233 yards, three touchdowns in a 38-27 victory, that saw the Patriots overcome a 27-24 fourth quarter deficit.¹⁴

In 1981 and 1982, the winning did not translate. Cavanaugh won only two of nine starts, as New England struggled to a 2-14 mark in 1981, but rebounded to a 5-4 mark in the strike shortened 1982 season that saw a playoff appearance, as Grogan returned from injury.¹⁵¹⁶ In 1983, the 49ers traded for Cavanaugh, sending two seventh round picks (1984 & 1986) and an eighth (1985) round draft choice.¹⁷

Cavanaugh spent three seasons in San Francisco, behind Joe Montana, starting just one contest during the 1984 campaign. On September 23 he outdueled Philadelphia's Ron Jaworski, completing 17 of 34 passes for 252 yards and three scores. His three touchdown passes were caught by Roger Craig, Freddie Soloman, and Dwight Clark to seal the 21-9 victory.¹⁸ Cavanaugh once again came through in relief. The week before, on September 16 the 49ers trailed 20-17 when Cavanaugh found Earl Cooper on a 23-yard score in the fourth quarter. The touchdown pass sparked the 49ers to a 30-20 victory, en route to a 15-1 campaign.¹⁹

Cavanaugh earned a Super Bowl ring when the 49ers beat the Dolphins, 38-17 in Super Bowl XIX. He was subsequently traded to the Eagles in 1986 for second (1987) and third (1986) round draft picks.²⁰ In 1990, he was claimed by the Giants off waivers, spending the season as the third-string quarterback, behind Jeff Hostetler and Phil Simms.

Following the 1991 season, Cavanaugh retired as a player. He appeared in 112 games, enduring 19 starts (8-11 record), tossing 28 touchdowns and amassing 4,332 passing yards, and three game-winning drives/fourth quarter comebacks, including a 71.1 passer rating.²¹ He also won two Super Bowl rings. Going out on top, he utilized his playing experience, venturing into coaching in 1992. Cavanaugh spent stints in the NFL and college in various offensive roles. Returning to his alma mater, he served as tight ends coach from 1992-1993, then offensive coordinator in 2005 thru 2008. He had several stops in the NFL as an assistant coach including the Arizona Cardinals, 49ers, New York Jets, Chicago Bears, and Washington Redskins. He also worked as offensive coordinator with the Bears, Baltimore Ravens, and Washington Redskins.²² Cavanaugh won a third Super Bowl with the Ravens in Super Bowl XXXV, becoming just the twelfth individual to win a Super Bowl as both a player and a coach.²³

Of all the quarterbacks and prospects he interacted with over the years, Tom Brady was among Cavanaugh's highest regarded, during his time as Baltimore's offensive coordinator. Before the 2000 NFL Draft, he praised Brady, "He looked like he belonged.



He was comfortable in the pocket. He had good delivery mechanics... He looked like a decision-maker, and his ability to get the guys around him to play hard jumped off the tape.”²⁴ Despite the club's decision not to draft Brady, Cavanaugh had belief the team would have won with him, “If we'd taken him, we probably would've won a couple more championships.”²⁵ Little did anyone know how Brady would have panned out at the time. Though the irony lies that such a successful, multi-level championship winner was able to accurately pick out a future great, who turned out to also be a winner. It must be the pure instinct of the winning plays Matt Cavanaugh made throughout his football career.

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