

Top 8 Takeaways From Playing With Hall of Fame Quarterback Joe Montana

- JJ Birden

Whenever I'm asked to name a highlight of my NFL career, I can't say a Super Bowl appearance because, unfortunately, I never made it to one. So then I quickly go to the 1993 and 1994 seasons with the Kansas City Chiefs. Those were the years I was able to play with Joe Montana.

When Joe first joined the team, I was a little star struck. Staring at him in the huddle, I'd think to myself, "That's Joe Montana." Being star struck wore off quickly after a few practices. When I saw him perform, I realized I was playing with one of the great ones and I better step up my game.

They say "success leaves clues" and if that is the case, my plan was to learn as much as I could from possibly the greatest quarterback of all time. So that's what I did! During those two years with Joe, I watched him from afar, asked him questions and took advantage of every opportunity to learn from him. I witnessed that the attributes that made him great as a professional athlete are simple success principles which anyone can apply. Here are my 8 takeaways from playing with Joe Montana.

- 1** **Humility** - Like many superstars, I expected Joe to be arrogant and unapproachable. However, he was just the opposite. He was down-to-earth and just a regular "Joe." The humility he showed was rare for an athlete of his caliber. I've been around athletes, entertainers and successful business people, and many allow success to go to their heads - even to the point where they feel if you're not on their level, some will not give you the time of day. Joe was just one of the guys who genuinely loved playing the

game and being around his teammates. It didn't matter if you were a rookie or a veteran, he treated you in the same way. It was refreshing to have conversations with him and not feel intimidated. This is a good reminder for all. No matter what you've achieved, remember the golden rule, "treat others the way you would like to be treated." If you're in a position of authority, your co-workers or business partners are more responsive to a humble leader rather than an arrogant one.

2 **Preparation** - By the time Joe joined the Kansas City Chiefs, he had already been in the league 14 years. The year he joined us, the Chiefs also hired the San Francisco 49ers former offensive coordinator Paul Hackett. Paul brought with him the San Francisco 49ers' offense. Here is an offense Joe was quite familiar with. However, more than once I'd see him studying on his own. I recall going up to him once and asking him "don't you already know this offense?" Joe responded, "Yes, I do. Nonetheless, if I memorize the formations, the coaches only need to give me part of the play from the sideline. That allows us to get in and out of the huddle faster therefore giving me a few extra seconds to look at the Defense to see if we have the right play." With his level of experience, if he could spend that much time in his preparation, I certainly could as well. "Preparation is a key to success" so how well to do you prepare for your commitments?

3 **Precision** - Best way to describe this is to share one of my favorite Joe Montana stories. It was the very first huddle in our very first practice together. The play was called X Hook. Since I played the X position, it was thrilling to know I was going to get Joe's very first pass as a Kansas City Chief. I lined up to get ready to run my 12-yard Hook route. This was a pass pattern I could run in my sleep. As I ran off the line of scrimmage, right around 10 yards I felt the football hit me in the back of the helmet. I turned around puzzled, wondering why he did that. Joes said, "Come here for a

second. I don't wait for you to get open. I've already read the defense so I know who the open player will be so I anticipate it and throw it to the area. Consequently only you have the chance to catch it. I need you to get to the top of your route fast and turn your head around quicker." That statement alone changed my game and made me pay more attention to the small details as a wide receiver.

Joe was even precise about where he placed the ball when throwing to us. For instance if he threw me the ball on my left side, he was telling me to turn left because there's someone coming at me from the right. If he threw it to me on my right, he was telling me to turn right because someone's coming at me on the left. This was a small tip that protected me as a wide receiver.

Think about yourself as you are carrying out your responsibilities or focusing on your goals. How much attention do you give the details? Do you demonstrate "painstaking attention to detail" or do you just go through the motions?

- 4 Production** - Even at the age of 36, he was still producing all-pro results. One of the differences that separate an average achiever from a high achiever is his or her ability to produce the successful results with consistency. For Joe, it did not matter the situation or the circumstances, he always brought his "A" game. His production clearly had a lot to do with his preparation. John Wooden, the famous UCLA basketball coach said, "When opportunity knocks, it's too late to prepare." Joe was always a step ahead of the competition and ready to seize his opportunity.

Many people talk about producing when they get their big moment. However, not all are able to do so. For some, the moment is too big for them and they go into panic mode. Therefore resulting in another "missed opportunity." Don't let that be you!

- 5 **Example** - Leaders are supposed to set the pace for success and they don't wait on others. Joe led by example in so many ways. When we were in the huddle for instance, he had clear command. There was never a doubt about who was in charge. As players we respectfully listened and followed his lead.

His execution in practice and the game was relatively the same. He set a standard of performance that motivated the players around him to be better. It irritates me when you have someone barking out orders to you and they don't even do it themselves. If you're going to "talk the talk, you need to walk the walk." That's how I was always taught. Joe was the first one in and the last one out. Always willing to put in the extra work necessary to be successful and to set the example for the rest of the team. I love this saying "the speed of the team is determined by the speed of the leader." For me, it was no mystery when the first year Joe played with us: the Kansas City Chiefs went right to the AFC Championship game. That's one game before the Super Bowl! He lifted up the entire Chiefs organization.

What's the point here? Lead by example! People around you may hear your words but they imitate your actions.

- 6 **Positive** - A positive mindset can take you a long way. When you're positive, you see the bright side of everything. Even in the most difficult circumstances, you still see a way out. More than once, we were in game time situations that appeared impossible to recover from. Defeat seemed inevitable. Yet, in these situations, Joe's positive attitude immediately instilled in us the belief we could win. Belief turned into action, and the right actions gave us the right results. Let me give you an example.

One of the more famous 1994 Monday night football games was verses the Broncos in their Mile High Stadium. It was

touted as Montana vs. Elway, the Game of Ages. In previous games against the Broncos, we'd lose the same way every time. The Chiefs are leading with less than 2 minutes left in the game. Then their Hall of Fame quarterback John Elway would march their offense down the field to score a last minute touch down, game over! On this particular Monday night game, it was going according to that script again. Yet, there were two aspects that were different this time. With Denver leading, we got the ball back last with 1:49 seconds on the clock and this time, we had Joe Montana as our quarterback.

Joe enters the huddles on that final drive with a smile on his face and says, "Ok guys, we are going to run these two plays right away. Lets march down this field and win this game and go home. It's cold here!" Immediately I knew we were going to win this game. We had a confident positive leader who had been in this situation numerous times and at this point it was just a formality. Each player needed to do their jobs and that's what we did. Joe led us down the field and in the end zone for a touchdown with no time left on the clock. Game over!

If you ever struggle with being positive, just remember this: every day we are alive is enough of a reason to be positive. It's another day to be better than we were the day before. It's a do over! So make the most out of it. A positive attitude helps you cope easily with some of the difficulties we may face from day to day. Plus your positive attitude will lift up those around you.

- 7 **Focus** - To play the quarterback position, having laser focus is a must. You must have the ability to have a high level of concentration as you are making split second decisions while running for your life. That is true; the obstacles Joe faced were running right at him. I'd marvel at Joe's ability to see the weaknesses in a defense and lock in on his receiver. It's not easy to drop back 5 to 7 yards, while

some of the biggest and intense athletic men on the earth have surrounded you. Some are blocking and creating a pocket while the others are trying to figure a way to get to you so they can tackle you and slam you to the ground. When Joe dropped back to make a pass, he clearly could feel or see the guys coming after him but it didn't faze him at all. He just would step up left or right and stay locked in on his receiver to make the throw.

This is a simple but very effective principal for anyone trying to elevate up and improve his or her circumstances. You can't let the distractions around you stop you from achieving your goal.

You've must have tunnel vision with a laser focus. If you can master this, you can't be stopped!

8 Hungry - You would think someone of his caliber who already won 4 Super Bowls, MVP 3 times and was selected to the Pro Bowl 8 times, would be satisfied. Yet that wasn't the case with Joe. He had an insatiable hunger to be better than he was in the previous game. Even in his last year with us, which was his final NFL season, he continued to seek improvements. If it required extra throws after practice, taking snaps over and over from the center because of one fumble in a game, or private strategy sessions with offensive coordinator Paul Hackett, he was willing to do it. This is what high performance people do. They're constantly aiming for perfection and committing more time to perfecting their craft. They want excellence and excellence requires the discipline to push yourself every day.

So no matter what degree of success you have achieved, always strive to be better. Think about ways you can challenge yourself. Set goals that make you nervous, that literally scare you or cause your heart rate to increase when you visualize achieving them. Don't get me wrong, you should enjoy and celebrate your successes. Never forget the

journey you traveled. Those reminders will help you reflect on the challenges you faced to achieve them. Nevertheless, don't fall in love with them. Move forward and figure out how you can be even better!

If you find these points I've shared helpful, there are many more in my best-selling book "When Opportunity Knocks 8 Surefire Ways to Take Advantage." You can order your signed copy at www.jjbirden.com.