



Still in the Game

A BOAT RIDE REVEALS HOW JOE NAMATH IS SPENDING THE FOURTH QUARTER OF HIS LIFE.

BY

I decided to pack the jersey. It was still wrapped in a layer of squeaky plastic, but I placed it gingerly into the waterproof rucksack with the same level of care a curator would afford to an original Monet. Stepping out of the Lyft, I wondered if anyone on the boat would question the need for a dry bag when we were only running 20 minutes down the Intracoastal to a restaurant. Too late. I swung the straps over my arms, praying to the same football gods that had hitherto cursed me with a lifetime of misfortune to throw me a damn bone.

Deposited amongst the stars in Jupiter Island, Florida, I opened the bag to give the contents one last furtive glance—the white number 12 adrift in a sea of kelly-green—before cinching it up again. It was the wrong color combination; the Jets wore their white away jerseys in Super Bowl III, the club's only Super Bowl appearance, let alone win, but never mind all that. There were more pressing things to worry about. One of the editors on staff had advised me not to bring it. A wise suggestion, seeing as the whole enterprise had a whiff of the unprofessional. In truth, I didn't need any help on that front. I had second guessed bringing it almost immediately after making the purchase, followed by a couple sleepless nights pregnant with indecision. But as I tossed and turned, I kept coming back to the 13-year-old Jets fan who grew up 30 minutes from the Meadowlands. Could I look my teenage self in the face and tell him we met “Broadway Joe” Namath, but I didn't have the nerve to ask for his autograph?

It was unthinkable. So instead, against the better judgment of my peers, I went through with the plan, stopping at a CVS for not one, but two Sharpies (just in case) and a bottle of hand sanitizer. Believe me, I knew the whole thing was stupid, maybe even a little pathetic; a grown man in the throes of hero worship. Not to mention reality was ever-ready to topple my carefully constructed image of Namath being the epitome of cool. Could it all be an illusion? Worse, would



Located along the Jupiter Inlet Village waterfront, Charlie & Joe's at Love Street features views of the lighthouse. The nearly century-old Bystander gives the entire scene a decidedly Old Florida kind of vibe.

I even *want* his signature if he was anything less than the real deal? No regrets, I whispered, like some incantation. If I said it enough, I hoped it would instill in me some much-needed temerity, steeling my nerves against any last-minute doubts.

The truth was, signature or not, it was already an opportunity of a lifetime. I had been invited to take a boat ride over with Namath and real estate magnate Charlie Modica to the ribbon-cutting ceremony for Charlie & Joe's at Love Street—their new, multifaceted restaurant destination billed as “The Heart of Jupiter.” (Get it? Love Street, heart of—ah, forget it.) Part upscale American grille, rooftop tapas bar, tiki lounge and dockside delivery service, the site on the Loxahatchee River near the infamous Jupiter Inlet had been expressively chosen to allow easy access for boaters, while staying true to its origins as a working commercial fishing wharf—a cool project no matter who was behind it. The fact that Namath had attached his name to it made it even more special.

Not wanting to leave anything to chance, I arrived early to Modica's waterside compound on the Indian River. Modica met me out in the backyard, and we fist bumped

in the shade of a banyan tree, its airy roots guided into the earth to form a series of trunks like a row of Roman columns. Locally, Modica is famous for purchasing the home of Burt Reynolds in 2015 for \$3.3 million, and agreeing to let the struggling actor live on the sprawling property rent-free until his death three years ago.

Flags embroidered with the letter M poked out of a practice green where Modica and Namath compete in friendly putting contests. “I know there's a guy named Joe Namath that's a legendary football player, but I know a guy who is also named Joe Namath who is just a friend,” said Modica in a Long Island accent. There was also a Joe Namath who, when teased by a writer about his coursework at Alabama, asking if he majored in basket-weaving, replied, “Naw, man, journalism—it was easier.” As I silently wondered which one I would be meeting today, there he was, stepping out of his SUV. The four of us, including photographer Robert Holland, exchanged polite introductions, before making our way over to the dock.

We were greeted by an eclectic collection of boats. Modica is what you might call a certifiable boat nut, and here was the physical representation of his wide-ranging tastes,





Namath, accompanied by his business partner, Charlie Modica, heading up the ramp on the way to their restaurant's ribbon-cutting ceremony.

including a mahogany runabout, an old Boston Whaler and a bevy of sailboats large and small. Reynolds named his property Valhalla, and in this moment, surrounded by so many legendary figures, it seemed fitting here too. Well, make that one more. As if it had come gliding out of the Kennedy's "Winter White House" compound circa 1940, there was *Bystander* tied up to the face dock. The nearly century-old America's Cup tender commissioned by none other than Harold S. Vanderbilt himself would be our ride for the day. What? Did you think a man named after the most iconic street in American theater would've taken anything less to a ribbon-cutting ceremony? "It left it all on the line," said Namath of the classically restored vessel. "Damn, it looks good for its age."

Funny, one could say the same of the 78-year-old quarterback that *Sport Illustrated* once described as "stoop-shouldered and sinisterly handsome." There was the stoop shoulder, maybe a little more hunched with age, and there was that confident gleam in his light green eyes. Once on deck, I tried to give him a wide berth, focusing instead on undoing the lines. But the parallels between the two legendary icons—man and yacht—run deep. A lifetime of injuries sustained on and off the gridiron have left him with two artificial knees, and it's no small wonder he can move at all. (Age comes for all men, except Tom Brady.) Up close, you could tell *Bystander*, like Namath, was a good-looking workhorse in its prime, designed to

tow 130-foot J-class sailboats with nothing but a single 175-hp engine. Before Namath had ever heard of Broadway—coming of age in a blue-collar, steel-mill town 30 miles outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—he was powered by a different, but no less powerful, kind of engine: a competitive desire to be the best. A gifted athlete, he had the option to play professional baseball for the Cubs. I think I speak for Jets fans everywhere when I say: Joe, I'm really glad you didn't.

Both man and yacht took separate journeys to be here, ensconced in the languid, cerulean waters of the Sunshine State. Both were aging gracefully, but sometimes, there's more going on under the surface that the eyes can't see. For the quarterback, CTE; for the tender, a stem in disrepair. Call it collateral damage from one too many shots taken across the bow. In recent years, professionals had looked inward—for Namath, hyperbaric oxygen therapy at Jupiter Medical; for *Bystander*, the deft touch of yacht rehabilitator Elizabeth Meyer—restoring considerable functionality and grace. "Dives" into the hyperbaric chamber and a historically accurate restoration took more than 8,000 and 23,000 hours respectfully, of careful, cutting-edge treatment. But if you knew where to look, you could still make out the physical trauma associated with a full-contact sport. For *Bystander*, that meant the installation of an entirely new keel; for Namath, multiple surgeries were required to replace practically everything in his knees, leaving him with two long scars. Whether



colliding with wind and waves or 220-pound linebackers—if you continually push the limit, sometimes the limit pushes back.

Of course, Namath didn't become a cultural icon for his athletic prowess alone. Off the field, he donned mammoth fur coats that accentuated his swagger, and was a megawatt addition to the Big Apple's nightlife. He had dalliances with models and actresses, and cavorted at Toots Shor's, Mister Laffs and Dudes 'N Dolls—local predawn haunts frequented by everyone from Mickey Mantle to Frank Sinatra. He was such a staple, in fact, of the perennial scene, that in his memoir, *All the Way*, he confesses to not knowing if he ever made a single meal at home the entire time he lived in New York.

And then there's the business of guaranteeing a Super Bowl win at the Miami Touchdown Club banquet. What's sometimes lost in the retelling of that story is the boast was made in response to a heckler; Namath has said he never intended to make such a brash public prediction. (After seeing the headline in the papers the next day, Head Coach Weeb Ewbank was quoted: "I could have shot him for saying it.") The Jets were facing an uphill battle, as the 18-point underdog against the Baltimore Colts, who already had been dubbed "the greatest football team in history." The Colts, led by Johnny Unitas—Namath's idol—were always going to be a formidable foe for the Jets, who had fought their way to the top of a fledgling American Football League. Guaranteeing a win was like pouring gasoline on a fire. Before the opening kickoff,

there was a rumor floating around the locker room that a player on the Colts had prematurely spent his championship bonus money fixing up his house.

Even with all that riding on the outcome, number 12 went out and orchestrated one of the greatest upsets in sports history. "Can you imagine if a quarterback were to say that nowadays?" Namath said, shaking his head.

"I always say: he had the skill, I had the luck," said Modica. As Namath readily admits, it also didn't hurt to have a stalwart defense on his sideline.

Above our heads, the azure sky was streaked with feathery white clouds as if plucked haphazardly from a down pillow. Namath became a permanent fixture in Tequesta, Florida, over 30 years ago. Like a long list of New Yorkers before and after him, he traded fur coats for Tommy Bahamas shirts when a Jets trainer suggested he spend his off-seasons in a warmer climate to help with his knees. "I love the blue skies as opposed to gray up north at this time of the year, especially. I started hating gray with the Oakland Raiders," he said, laughing. Modica was at the helm, but Namath was no stranger to *Bystander*. Together, the two recounted hosting donors of local foundations, including the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse, on her decks. "Sometimes Joe accompanies me," said Modica, "and it's great because obviously, he's the attraction."

If I still harbored any doubts that an aging Namath might appear sullen, or shy away from the attention, they quickly evaporated the closer we got to the restaurant. Boaters caught gawking at *Bystander* would recoil in amazement after seeing him saunter into view with practiced aplomb. "Hey gang!" he would yell. "Go Jets!" they would yell back. (Whether real or momentary opportunists, I can honestly say I've never seen so many Jets fans in Florida.) And Modica, for his part, seemed to relish it too. In *All the Way*, I learned that Namath, who is famous for donning a pair of pantyhose in an irreverent, racy commercial, had actually passed on an iconic 1972 nude spread in *Cosmopolitan*. Instead, that hairy-chested honor went to Burt Reynolds. Did the two ever talk about it?

Modica jumped in. "Speaking of bystanders, I was a fly on the wall at Burt's 82nd birthday at a local restaurant down here. There were about 12 or 13 people, and [Joe and I] were lucky enough to be in-



Namath with his daughter Jessica and her family.



Growing up in the steel mill town of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, Namath moved to South Florida and immediately set about becoming a boater.

vited. But I gotta tell you, one of the best stories was watching those two guys talk about that photoshoot, and Joe admitted—I don’t know if I should say it, because I don’t know if he wants it printed—but there was a certain person in his life that would not let him do it. And that’s the only reason Burt got it.”

[redacted] that person happened to be my mother,” laughed Namath. “I didn’t have the nerve that Burt had. Burt was a real showman. Pantyhose are one thing, but being 99 percent nude on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* just terrified me, and I knew it would knock my mother out.”

Not only was Namath the real deal, but he was a fairly accomplished boater as well. As Jupiter Lighthouse came into view, and with Modica’s attention turned to the fenders, Namath took over the helm. I’ve never played in a professional football game, so I don’t know what the ceiling is—but for many people, an incoming tide, not to mention a single-screw yacht, would register as a high-pressure situation. To make matters worse, a scrum of local press had gathered on dry land, standing at the ready to immortalize this moment forever should something go wrong. Namath appeared unfazed. With a couple flicks of the wrist, he expertly positioned us upwind like he was calling plays under center. I knew he was a car guy, after famously stipulating that a brand-new Lincoln Continental convertible (painted British-racing green) had to be part of his signing agreement. But I was happy to see that he really was a hands-on boater.

Did he own a European yacht, like Brady, who was seen tossing around the Lombardi trophy aboard his Wajer 55S following Super Bowl LV? Nope. Namath’s biggest boat is a 24-foot Boston Whaler—classic, understated, simple. Maybe a shock to anyone familiar with the outsized image of Broadway Joe, who received his enduring nickname from offensive tackle Sherman Plunkett after the veteran saw his rookie teammate posing on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, but unsurprising the more you learn about his humble beginnings as a kid from a hardscrabble industrial town. As a pastime, he enjoyed fishing with his pal Linwood in the rust-colored waters of the Beaver River. Today, he wakes up to sparkling views of the Loxahatchee. He told me it never gets old.

Before time caught up with him, Namath said he used to go fishing offshore three or four times a week. He still remembers the first sailfish he caught—a far cry from the smallmouth bass or walleye a strapping kid might snag on the Beaver River. “It nearly wore me



out. I was embarrassed how tired I was. And it wasn’t as big as they can get, but boy, it got my left arm and all pretty darn tired. I was amazed at that,” he said. As an inexperienced boater in his twenties, he would cross the Gulf Stream on nothing but his 19-foot Whaler when making runs to the Exumas. His daughter, Jessica, told me he went with Boston Whaler because of the unsinkable mystique surrounding the brand. When he told his daughter how many times he crossed to the Bahamas in that “skiff,” she couldn’t believe it. “He certainly put that piece of marketing to the test,” she said.

I asked Namath if he ever goes out anymore. He told me he’ll go fishing with his granddaughter and her father, but not too far offshore. “It’s just more difficult, even in 3- to 5-foot seas. You’re giving your knees, hips and legs a pretty good workout. But I love it. I just love breathing the air around here. Being on the water, whether it’s here or out on the ocean—I just need it. I feel like it’s partially a spiritual connection for my health.”

But it’s tough to say what really recharges him: isolation or being in public. It’s almost impossible to believe, but even now, late in life, the other thing that does wonders for his soul is going out on the town, and the fanfare that comes with it. Modica has grown to love his friend for how much he willingly gives of his time to fans. “People will come up to him, asking for a picture, and afterward, there’s always two big smiles,” he said. “One is the person or their family, and the other one is Joe. And when we walk away, every time we do one of those, he still has that smile on. And that’s real.” But, he added, his friend has stopped signing

autographs as much as he used to, because too many people were turning around and selling the memorabilia.

Uh oh.

When I heard that, my heart sank. We docked along the restaurant’s face dock. As the two were getting ready to walk up to their namesake establishment, I pulled Modica aside and tossed a final Hail Mary. “Charlie, I know Joe doesn’t like signing autographs anymore,” I said, trying to sound as casual as possible, “but I should come clean: I have a jersey in my dry bag I was hoping he would sign.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean you,” he replied. “I’m sure he would be delighted.”

My hope partially restored, I followed them up the dock to check out the restaurant. Actually, calling Charlie & Joe’s a restaurant would be grossly underselling it. This was a veritable waterfront complex, with everything from outdoor dining, to a floating water hammock and beach, to a grab-and-go seafood market and a grassy heart arrayed in the middle of the square. The daily catch would be provided by local boats—a sticking point the two shared.

Together, the partners stood on the green heart’s left atrium, flanked by their team, taking questions from local affiliates. “When we rebuilt the docks, we set up slips for the fishermen, and we believe there will be enough volume where they’ll be in and out,” said Modica. “This is the only restaurant where you’ll be able to buy wholesale fish from our fish market, which we’ll be distributing to other restaurants as well.” Next up was Namath. God forbid you ever become famous, here’s some

advice: Do something that will immortalize you in a good way. Gene Simmons has his tongue, Gordon Ramsey calls people things like “idiot sandwich” and Joe Willie is asked to constantly guarantee things.

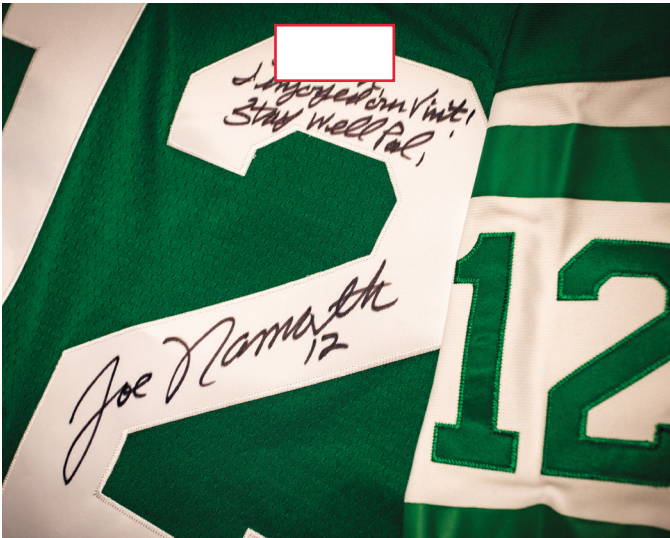
“Joe, are you guaranteeing this restaurant will have great food like you guaranteed the Jets will beat the Colts in 1969?” asked one of the reporters.

Namath smiled, beaming those otherworldly chompers, “I think this is a championship team, given the management and the service, and yes, I’ll guarantee you’re going to have a wonderful time here and come back. Yes, ma’am!” The team and onlookers broke out in applause.

We didn’t stay long. A couple more questions were asked, and a couple more pictures taken, and then it was time to head to the boat. On the walk back to *Bystander*, I was working out in my head how to switch gears from marine journalist to Jets fan when Modica smiled conspiratorially. He turned to Namath: “Joe, one of our crew-members has a sensitive question for you.”

I don’t know what happened next. I sort of blacked out, but I remember Namath’s look of approval and pulling out the carefully packed jersey from the bag. I handed it to him, assuring—no, definitely swearing up and down—that it would never make it onto the secondary market; there was already a space reserved for it on my office wall. He wanted to know what to write. I honestly hadn’t anticipated the question. “Whatever you want!” I finally blurted out, like a kid at Disney World unable to hold back their excitement mid-introduction with a larger-than-life Mickey Mouse. He took the Sharpie, and went to go sign on the numbers, but boat traffic had started to pick up around us, and we were rolling in the wake like a bowling ball. Finally done, he handed it back to me. I let out a sigh of relief. But even cooler than the autograph, and the personalized note, was learning that Namath was everything and more my younger self imagined him to be.

Beneath the aging complexion there somehow still beams through a genuine, considerate, sincere, wonderfully friendly and likeable person. Legends never die, but neither should good men. Lucky for me—and Jupiter—Namath is both. I hope he continues to run up the score. I’m not in the business of guarantees, but I have a feeling that’ll make a lot of people happy. □



Broadway Joe’s jersey with a nice note from number 12. The author promised never to sell it, and has stayed true to that promise.

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