Introduction

Bob Angelo (born 1953)
Producer, Director, Writer, Editor, Cameraman, Football Fan

I spent my entire professional career at NFL Films. I did thousands of interviews with players, coaches, owners, and team executives. Over forty-three football seasons, I worked with just about every NFL broadcaster or commentator of note. I shot more than 850 NFL games and forty Super Bowls. I’ve heard things that most people haven’t, been places most people aren’t allowed to go, and experienced things most people will never see. Needless to say, I have stories!

My favorites are in this book.

On June 6, 1975, at 1:35 p.m., Ed Sabol, the founder and executive producer of NFL Films—based on his son Steve Sabol’s recommendation—offered me a production job. I accepted it on the spot. By the time the NFL season began, I was editing and writing segments for NFL Films’s weekly highlight shows. Soon, I was added to the field production roster, which meant working with network TV commentators on nationally televised pregame and halftime pieces (in particular, CBS’s The NFL Today and NBC’s GrandStand). By my third season, 1977, I started shooting a hand-held film camera on the sidelines of NFL games. And so it went for the next four-plus decades.
Along the way, I produced enough quality work to collect twenty-one Emmy Awards and create some enduring legacies. One particular project I pioneered lives on: Hard Knocks on HBO Sports. I retired on February 16, 2018—just four months shy of forty-four full years in the business.

I abandoned this book more than once. I told myself that nobody truly cared about an NFL Films producer's memoirs. The word itself sounded pretentious. And who the hell was I anyway? Then, one night during COVID-19 hibernation, a friend of the family said, “Robert, these stories have value!” Suddenly, I had a brand-new outlook and the resolute determination to finish what I’d started.

This book is designed to be read in short installments. No story exceeds three pages, and all can be read in a few minutes. Even if you suffer from a short attention span, you will learn things that will amuse or inspire or anger you about pro football people from someone who sat in their presence and questioned them, who worked among them in games, at practices, and in their homes for more than four decades. My objective is to reveal, in a quick read, new and unseen aspects of familiar NFL names. My “Random Access” Table of Contents takes you to your favorites. You can read a story before bed. Or during a commercial break. Or while you’re taking care of business in the bathroom—before the paperwork.

I have written only about people with whom I had personal interactions. When I could quote a subject directly, I did. Where I paraphrased from memory, I did my best and indicated that in the text. Nothing in this book is made up to embellish a story. I depict my subjects just as I remember them: some good, many amusing or complicated or problematic, and a handful—pretty damned despicable. Football players and coaches, at the end of the day, although exceptional by their occupation, are still people. Some are decent, and some struggle to be. All make their mark. Cameras can only capture so much. This book is my attempt to reveal more.

So, take this book to your bathroom and get started.
After four-plus decades of observing, filming, and studying great NFL pass rushers, I’ve reached the following conclusion:

The greatest pass rushers are not created in weight rooms. They are not created on practice fields. Strength and technique can only accomplish so much. How about height, weight, and wingspan? How about not! Hall of Famer John Randle and future Hall of Famer Aaron Donald are both just six feet one inch tall with relatively short arms. Larger men either can’t get to the QB regularly or simply run out of gas along the way. I acknowledge some exceptions, but here’s my bottom line:

Great pass rushers are born that way! “Want to” and “Will do” coarse through their veins. They smell blood in the water. My long-time acquaintance Jared Allen was such a guy.

At less than 260 pounds, Allen was much smaller than the tackles he lined up against. He once remarked to me, “Your arms are bigger than mine!” He was exaggerating, but I appreciated the notice. He looked more like a small forward on a college basketball team. Cleveland offensive tackle and future Hall of Famer Joe Thomas said about him, “At the
top of the pocket, when he started to turn the corner, all of a sudden you
would lose him. You thought you had your hands on him . . . and then
you didn’t. . . . He was a little unorthodox . . . and he was slippery.”

The Kansas City Chiefs selected Allen in the fourth round (126th
overall) of the 2004 NFL Draft. In his senior year at Idaho State (a 1-AA
college in the Big Sky Conference), he recorded 17.5 sacks and led his
team to an 8–4 finish, the first time the school ever posted back-to-back
eight-win seasons. In Kansas City, Allen earned the league minimum sal-
ary in each of his first three seasons. In 2007, his 15.5 sacks led the NFL
and earned him All-Pro honors. It prompted the Chiefs to place a fran-
chise tag on him, which elevated his 2008 base salary to $8.8 million.

That’s when Minnesota entered the picture. The Vikings sent KC a
basket full of draft picks, then signed Allen to a multi-million-dollar six-
year contract, the largest ever for a defensive player at the time. Over those
half dozen seasons, Allen recorded 85.5 sacks, including 22 in 2011, just
a half sack shy of Michael Strahan and T. J. Watt’s single-season record
of 22.5.

I got to know Jared by sticking my wide-angle lens in his face during
pregame warm-ups. Before the 2008 postseason, he declared, “Playoff
football, man. . . . You gotta have a mullet and a Fu Manchu.” He fluffed
the hair hanging out of his helmet, then got on with his business. In a
later interview, Allen remarked, “The mullet isn’t just a hairdo, it’s a life-
style. . . . I might cut it at some point . . . when I die!”

Yet for all his bravado, Allen didn’t mangle quarterbacks. He wran-
gled them down, then immediately transitioned into his signature “Rope
a Steer” celebration. At one-per-sack, he performed at least 136 of them
over his twelve-year career, making him twelfth on the all-time sack-lead-
er board. He also forced 36 fumbles, recorded 4 safeties, and scored 4
touchdowns—2 as a receiver and 2 more on defensive turnovers. Rumor
has it, he also could have made an NFL roster as a long-snapper.

We cemented our relationship in London. The Vikings (0–3) were
scheduled to play the Steelers (0–3) at Wembley Stadium on September
29, 2013. The Discovery Channel had contracted NFL Films to produce
a ninety-minute, behind-the-scenes special called NFL in Season. Two
full production teams were dispatched: one to Pittsburgh, and the other
to the Grove Hotel/Resort in the historic old town of Watford, England.
That’s where the Vikings stayed. I drew the overseas assignment.

On our first day there, Allen joined Vikings quarterback Matt Cassel
on the golf course. Cassel birdied the second hole. Allen played in flip-
flops and struck his ball much farther than Cassel, but more often. Later that evening, my Minnesota-based soundman Paul Dahlseid and I walked to the complex’s pub and sat down for a few glasses of ale. Allen showed up with a pair of teammates, acknowledged our presence, then sat at an adjacent table. When his peeps departed early, Jared politely asked, “OK if I hang out with you guys?”

Soon, we were discussing ultimate matters. I learned that Allen was a practicing Christian who believed that Earth was created by God about six thousand years ago. He learned that I had a philosophy degree and was writing a book on human subjectivity (self-published in 2014). We agreed to disagree on the whole Adam and Eve, Garden of Eden thing.

Eventually, our conversation turned to Sunday’s game against the Steelers, at which time, Allen offered this prediction: “Their left tackle can’t handle me. . . . I’m gonna have a day.” This man was a born pass rusher, so I believed him. At precisely three minutes before midnight, Allen drained his final drink, then walked down the lane toward his dorm, just in time to make curfew.

As foretold, on Sunday, Allen recorded four quarterback hits and recorded 2.5 sacks against Big Ben Roethlisberger. On Pittsburgh’s final possession, with his team clinging to a 7-point lead, Allen forced Big Ben to fumble, which the Vikes recovered just 11 yards shy of a game-tying touchdown. Game over. Final score: Vikings 34–Steelers 27. Allen wanted to—and so he did.

At season’s end, Allen and the Vikings parted company. In Chicago in 2014, pneumonia ended Allen’s consecutive game streak that dated back to September 2007. It also affected Allen’s God-given pass-rushing skills. In 2015, the Bears switched to a 3–4 defense and converted Allen to an outside linebacker. He played there just three weeks before Chicago traded him to the Carolina Panthers. As luck would have it, the Panthers won the NFC Championship, and Allen’s last NFL game would be Super Bowl 50.

When I spotted Allen in a stadium corridor, I asked, “Why not you today, Jared?” He understood. His heart-felt reply as we shook hands: “You’re right, man. Why not?” Allen didn’t get a Super Bowl ring that day: Denver won, 24–10. But he rode off into the sunset tied for a pair of NFL all-time pass-rushing records, two years leading the league in sacks, and the most career safeties (4). His eleven consecutive games with a sack from 2011–12 remain the standard by which all future generations of “naturally born” quarterback-wrangling pass rushers will be judged.
Marcus Allen (born 1960)

Running Back
• Los Angeles Raiders (1982–92) • Kansas City Chiefs (1993–97)

Over the phone, Marcus Allen dictated very specific directions to his Brentwood, California, home. I asked about mileages and road markers along the way. I made him repeat specifics as I wrote everything down. This was the early 1990s: MapQuest wasn’t reliable, GPS wasn’t yet an option, and I didn’t want to arrive at the wrong address in a strange part of Los Angeles with my tail between my legs. When I was certain I knew where we’d be driving and how to get there, I thanked Allen profusely, reconfirmed the call time, then hung up. I still had my doubts.

On interview day, we piled our equipment into rental vans outside the LAX Marriott, then headed north toward Brentwood, one of LA’s poshest communities. I navigated while a crew member drove the lead vehicle. We arrived long before our scheduled early-afternoon call time, then checked the multiple mailboxes in front of the building to which we’d been directed. The name on the mailbox that matched Allen’s address read SCHWARTZ. Hmm . . . ?

So, we waited. An hour passed. Our call time came and went. My crew grew restless. We played whiffle ball to pass the time. We consumed cold beers from our Styrofoam cooler. A second hour passed. Mutiny swelled in the ranks. I assured everybody that my directions came from the man’s own mouth and that we were parked outside the exact style of building he had described over the phone. But nobody answered the doorbell, and there was no sign of life within. So, we waited.

Finally, as we began repacking our gear, a sleek sports car with tinted windows approached. Mr. “Schwartz”—aka Marcus Allen—powered down the driver’s side window.

He smiled that mischievous smile of his, then said, “Man, you guys were serious!”

We took our good old time lighting Allen’s well-appointed sitting room. His tardiness aside, this guy already had a Hall of Fame NFL résumé. But one particular thing he said during my interview stood out: “You know what I’d really like to do someday? Be MVP of the Pro Bowl.” When I asked him why, he responded simply, “It’s one of the only awards I haven’t won yet.”

In 1981, at the University of Southern California, Allen was a first-team All-American. He won the Heisman Trophy, the Maxwell Award,
The Walter Camp Award, and Pac 10 Player of the Year honors. He was the second person ever to rush for 2,000 or more yards in a season, and he led the nation in scoring. As an LA Raider, he was the NFL Rookie of the Year (1982), the Super Bowl MVP (1983), and the league’s Most Valuable Player (1985), the year he also won the NFL rushing title. In 1993, as a Kansas City Chief, he won the NFL Comeback Player of the Year award.

As you can plainly see, his résumé was not complete.

Allen possessed one of the most complete skill sets of any running back I’ve ever seen. He played quarterback and defensive back in high school, then began his college career as the blocking back for Heisman Trophy–winning tailback Charles White. In the pros, his receiving ability plus his red-zone elusiveness resulted in 145 total touchdowns, the highest total of all time in 1997. (As of 2022, he ranks sixth.) Anybody who witnessed his 74-yard reverse-field TD run in Super XVIII (18) will never forget it. I watched it from behind Washington’s bench. As it unfolded, I could feel the “agony of defeat” settling in for Washington.

But “Marcus Magic” was not contagious. Raiders owner Al Davis pioneered the “vertical passing game,” meaning that the more Allen handled the football, the fewer times it was being thrown. And Big Al certainly didn’t like Allen’s reminder that “as 60 percent of the Raiders’ offense, I want[] to be paid accordingly” or the remark “We need to run the ball more.” Again, hmm . . .?

By 1987, Marcus was sharing running-back duties with Bo Jackson. Allen became the Raiders’ fullback, blocking for the younger, bigger, faster man. Yet Allen still scored 26 touchdowns to Jackson’s 16 during Jackson’s four-year Raiders tenure. In 1991, Davis brought in former 49ers star Roger Craig to share the rushing load. The next year, it was Eric Dickerson. Eventually, Davis labeled Allen “a cancer to the team.”

So, in 1993, Allen joined the Kansas City Chiefs. I shot sound in Kansas City the day the Raiders came to town (October 3, 1993). I knew what was at stake. In pregame, Allen told me, “I don’t say much, I’m one of those quiet guys.” In the second quarter, Allen scored a touchdown, the 100th of his NFL career. As he approached the Chiefs’ sideline, head coach Marty Schottenheimer told him, “That couldn’t happen to a better guy in a better situation.” On the bench, Allen read the Jumbotron, then
told a teammate, “That’s a whole lot of touchdowns.” Finally, in the Chiefs’ postgame locker room, as he pulled off his game jersey, Marcus addressed my camera: “Poetic justice, that’s all it is. I don’t question fate, I just appreciate it. It’s in my favor, that’s all.”

Over his career, in ten games against the division-rival Raiders, Allen’s new team beat his old team nine times.

At some point near the end of Allen’s career, I produced and directed a commercial for the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Marcus was the talent. As we walked through the hall’s exhibits, lit our backgrounds, and made our shots, Allen confided, “I really hope I get in here someday.”

I reminded him that at one point in Kansas City, he had been the active career rushing leader in NFL history. On the day of our shoot, no running back in history had scored more touchdowns.

In 2005, eight years after he left football, Allen was elected to the Hall of Fame. His body of work rivals anybody who’s ever played the position. After his enshrinement, I sent a note to his Brentwood, California, address, not even sure whether he still owned the place. My note read, “Dear Schwartz, congratulations. But you never did get that Pro Bowl MVP.” I never heard back.

**Lyle Alzado (1949–92)**

Defensive End and Tackle
- Denver Broncos (1971–78) • Cleveland Browns (1979–81)

Over his shortened lifespan, gentle giant Lyle Alzado offered many ways to remember him, each intentional to whom he wanted or needed to be at that moment.

I first met him in the early 1980s at the original Gold’s Gym in Venice, California.

On a late spring morning, he strolled off the boardwalk, asked me what my film crew needed to capture, then loaded more than seven hundred pounds on a leg press.

“Ready when you are,” he said. Without so much as a stretch or a toe touch, he performed three dozen deep-squat reps before asking, “You guys got enough?”

I should have known then what the entire world would learn a decade later from *Sports Illustrated*: Alzado was juicing—big time! In that
now-famous tell-all exposé titled “I Lied,” dated July 8, 1991, he admits that he’d been using anabolic steroids since 1969 and claims that 90 percent of the athletes he knew were using them. When he was diagnosed with lymphoma of the brain, he attributed his advancing infirmity and abbreviated life expectancy to their use and abuse.

He died in 1992 at age forty-three.

Yes, I knew the same Lyle Alzado whom family and friends, players and coaches had observed for most of his brief life: a great big cuddly bear when speaking with sick children in a hospital room, as he did for the segment I was producing that day; a fire-breathing, man-eating beast when pissed off on a Sunday afternoon, once quoted as saying, “Anybody who tells me they go out there to have fun playing football . . . they’re a liar. This game is a war!”

One of my all-time favorite NFL Films images features Alzado (as a Bronco) pointing his index finger at and threatening the worldly existence of Raiders guard Gene Upshaw. The future Hall of Famer wisely took refuge in the Raiders huddle.

“I’ve never been afraid of any man in my life,” Alzado brags in that infamous SI article.

Born in Brooklyn and raised in Long Island, Alzado played his final two years of college football at a tiny National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) school in South Dakota called Yankton College, which no longer exists. As the legend goes, a Broncos scout discovered Alzado by accident while studying film of Yankton playing Montana Tech. Denver selected Alzado in the fourth round of the 1971 NFL Draft.

Steve Sabol took an immediate liking to him. An early NFL Films segment shows Alzado back home in New York, helping his mother arrange flowers, a visual testament to his softer side. It also shows him breaking a two-man blocking sled, then fiddling with the mangled parts, as if trying to put the thing back together. It’s comical to watch. I never did hear the full story behind that one.

In 1977, Alzado rounded into All-Pro form. Not coincidentally, that’s also the year Denver went 12–2, made the postseason for the first time in franchise history, then beat the Raiders in the AFC Championship Game, 20–17. But in Super Bowl XII (12), Dallas dismantled Denver, 27–10. Following a stellar 1978 season, when the Broncos wouldn’t meet Alzado’s contract demands, he announced that he was retiring to become a heavyweight boxer and that his first fight would take place in Denver’s Mile High Stadium in July 1979—an exhibition against Muhammad Ali.
In February 1978, Ali lost his world title to Leon Spinks in a fifteen-round split decision. Later that year, he regained that title in a rematch victory over Spinks. Soon thereafter, “The Greatest” retired.

During his collegiate years, Alzado had boxed as an amateur. Records show that he won 44 of his 45 bouts. In 1969, at a Midwestern Golden Gloves tournament in Omaha, Nebraska, Alzado pounded his way to the semifinals. Presumably, that was the last time he had boxed, so why was he willing to risk life and limb against a three-time world champion just days prior to the start of Denver’s training camp? I genuinely believe that Alzado thought that he could win the fight.

Alzado said, “I grew up in Brooklyn . . . and I don’t particularly think there’s a person in this world who can kick my ass.” With indomitable courage and steroids on his side, how could he lose?

Alzado reportedly mortgaged his home to help make this cross-sport, pseudo–super event happen. Ali agreed to the “exhibition,” but he insisted that the contest be an eight-round event, a situation favoring his experience and savvy. Alzado said yes. He trained like Rocky Balboa. Ali made a few promotional stops in Denver and barely lifted a glove. Ali weighed in at 235 pounds, a good thirteen pounds more than he carried when he defeated Spinks in his world championship rematch. Of course, Ali had also beaten Joe Frazier twice and George Foreman once, not to mention every other world-class heavyweight of his generation.

When I later asked Alzado about the July 14, 1978, event, his remarks were telling. He remembered going after Ali early, hoping to use his weight advantage and strength to corner the champ so he could land “one big shot.” He remembered landing several body blows and sensing early on that Ali was not in peak condition.

He also recalled a quick Ali flurry—“a bunch of punches that I never saw”—followed by a clinch that Ali initiated so he could whisper in Alzado’s ear, “We can do this any way you want.”

This candid recollection sent a chill up my spine. Bravado aside, I can imagine how Alzado must have felt. After eight rounds, the fight ended in an unscored “no decision.”

In January 1984, Alzado, now with the Oakland Raiders, ran Washington off the field, 38–9, in Super Bowl XVIII (18). Late in the game, one of our cameras captured an image of Alzado clenching his fist toward adoring Raiders fans. I witnessed the moment. His triumphant expression was truly priceless. That’s how I choose to remember this gentle giant of a man who feared nothing in this world, perhaps contributing to his own early demise.
Morten Andersen (born 1960)

Placekicker
• Minnesota Vikings (2004)

Placekicking takes a rare confidence. The possibility and memory of failures are ever present. A placekicker must commit to the moment and approach each new attempt without trepidation. The number of kickers who can stand unthreatened in the shadow of the uprights is very small—much smaller than the number of roster spots in the NFL. The most mentally tough kickers are in great demand year after year after year. Understandably, many put together long careers.

Hall of Fame placekicker Morten Andersen (aka the Great Dane) hails from a small town in Denmark. He migrated to America as an exchange student, kicked an American football for the first time at Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis, then earned All-American honors while kicking at Michigan State (1981).

New Orleans selected him with their fourth pick (eighty-sixth overall) in the 1982 NFL Draft. For thirteen seasons, Andersen piled up points for the Saints, earning six Pro Bowl trips along the way. When New Orleans dumped him due to salary-cap concerns, he joined the Atlanta Falcons. In a 1995 game against the Saints, he became the first kicker to hit three 50-yard field goals in a single contest. He scored seven points in Atlanta’s 34–19 defeat in Super Bowl XXXIII (33).

In 2006, Andersen passed Gary Anderson to become the NFL’s all-time leading scorer. He retired officially in 2008 with 382 games played, also the most of all time. Not until 2018 did Adam Vinatieri pass Andersen to become the game’s most prolific placekicker. Only Hall of Famer George Blanda (age 48 years, 109 days) was older than Andersen (age 47+) while still active.

Even before his retirement, Andersen was developing his broadcasting and communication skills. Several NFL Films Super Bowl productions show Andersen doing Danish radio broadcasts. His résumé includes motivational speaking, keynote addresses, TV appearances, and much more. So, imagine my surprise when he showed up in my life one night in London, England.

In 2009, Films sent me to London to shoot the Patriots–Buccaneers game at Wembley Stadium. My wife, Barbara, accompanied me. On our
first night, we visited a popular local pub where lots of NFL Films folks had gathered. Many pints of ale later, the entire team was pretty toasted. In these spirited situations, my wife—normally a nonsmoker—sometimes craves a cigarette. So, she spent a few euros on a pack and then headed outside with a friend to indulge. Sometime later, she returned with Andersen in tow. He’d been bumming Barb’s cigarettes.

“Morten, what are you doing here?” I asked, followed by “I see you’ve met my wife.”

For the next few hours, Andersen sat with all of us and drank. We talked about the NFL and lots of other things, none of which I remember. When the pub closed, Andersen tagged along with us back to our hotel. There, in a huge, deserted lobby, a group of us continued the conversation. I lingered after Barb went to bed. So, it wasn’t until the next morning that Barb disclosed that the NFL’s all-time scoring leader had invited her to go to a party with him. Not us, just Barb.

In 2017, I was happy to learn that Andersen would be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But when it comes to the Great Dane, I derive even more satisfaction from this: If his overtures toward my wife constituted a tactful but intentionally crafted “scoring attempt,” his mighty kick sailed wide right. But I’m sure he’ll shake it off and bum his next cigarette with the exact same confidence.
I resented John Elway before he took his first NFL snap. How dare this great big talented kid from Stanford threaten to play major league baseball and force a trade rather than report to the lowly Baltimore Colts, the team that selected him with the first overall pick in the 1983 NFL Draft? Sometimes, in our zeal to tell a story, we storytellers fail to recognize that, given the right opportunity, great players will tell their own. Elway didn’t like being “sentenced” to a bad team. But once he gave his commitment, he honored it for a lifetime.

I shot his NFL regular-season debut against the Pittsburgh Steelers, on September 4, 1983. As Pittsburgh fans taunted him, Elway stuck his hands behind a Broncos guard rather than his center. No football forthcoming there! From an end-zone angle, I watched Pittsburgh linebacker Jack Lambert faking blitzes on nearly every snap. Eventually, Lambert came and leveled Mr. Too-Good-for-Baltimore for a major loss. I cheered the moment. Before being replaced, Elway completed one pass for 14 yards with an interception. Welcome to the NFL.

His rookie season numbers were not impressive: 7 touchdown passes against 14 interceptions, with a 54.9 passer rating. I shed no tears over his
year-long struggles, and I wasn’t satisfied yet. When he started winning games with fourth-quarter comebacks, I pointed out, “That’s because he plays horribly for three quarters.” In his first NFL decade, he threw more interceptions than touchdowns and only once posted a passer rating above the league average of 80. In three Super Bowls (XXI [21], XXII [22], and XXIV [24]), he led Denver’s offense to just 40 total points in those defeats.

After a 55–10 drubbing by the 49ers in Super Bowl XXIV (24), I did not see Elway in person again until January 9, 1994. That day, I shot a Broncos–Raiders playoff game in the LA Coliseum. Raiders fans were shoveling more verbal sh*t Elway’s way than even he deserved. After documenting the profane abuse, I scurried over and knelt down in front of Elway for a reaction.

“Looks like you’ve got a fan club?” I said out loud. Elway studied me, smiled broadly at all the hoopla going on behind him, then uttered a response that immediately changed my feelings: “LA mutants!” He glanced down again to gauge my reaction. I smiled. Quick wit!

The Raiders beat the Broncos that day, 42–24. But Elway eclipsed 4,000 passing yards in a season for the first time in his career. Slowly, my attitude toward Elway began to morph into respect. I realized that he was stuck in an old-school system with little support from skill players. In 1995, all that changed when Mike Shanahan became Denver’s head coach and general manager. First, he drafted Georgia running back Terrell Davis. Then, he installed his “Stretch Play” running-game system, turning Davis into an instant star and giving Elway the offensive help he’d always needed.

In 1996, the Associated Press named Davis the NFL Offensive Player of the Year. Denver won thirteen games before an upset loss to Jacksonville in the playoffs. In 1997 and 1998, Elway and the Denver Broncos became the sixth team ever to win back-to-back Super Bowls. Prior to Super Bowl XXXII (32), I spent a week in Denver directing “Super Bowl Diaries,” a pregame segment series for NFL Network. My crew spent one lovely evening as guests of John and Janet Elway at their suburban Denver home—or at least, that’s how things got started. As Elway served us beers, I decided not to share my feelings regarding his early years. Instead, I listened with curiosity (and sympathy) as Elway described his son Jack’s football aspirations: “Guess what? He wants to be a quarterback!” he lamented. Not many Hall of Fame passers want their sons to follow in their footsteps.

Later that evening, Elway gathered his family and whisked them all off to a Denver-based Dave and Buster’s. I remember just two things
about that night. First, everybody in the establishment recognized Elway instantly, but not one person sidled up to him or asked for an autograph. When I asked store managers whether they’d made an announcement or advised patrons to keep their distance, they all replied, “Nope . . . we didn’t even know he was coming.”

Even better was watching father John compete with his son Jack at various ball-throwing events. John allowed Jack to keep scores close, but ultimately, father always made one more basket or rolled up five more points than son. To make up for it later, Elway became Jack’s quarterback coach during his senior year at Cherry Creek High School. Jack made Colorado All-State and then accepted a full ride to quarterback at Arizona State University. But living up to Dad’s standards proved to be difficult. Today, Jack owns a company called Mint Tradition that sells designer hats.

As for Elway, in Super Bowl XXXII (32), his now-famous “whirly-bird” first-down leap late in the fourth quarter became the calling-card moment of Denver’s 31–24 win over Mike Holmgren’s Green Bay Packers. After the game, Broncos owner Pat Bowlen elevated the Lombardi Trophy and then announced, “This one’s for John!” The following year, in Super Bowl XXXIII (33), Elway’s 80-yard touchdown pass to wide receiver Rod Smith propelled Denver to a 34–19 victory over Atlanta. Elway was named the game’s MVP. Shortly thereafter, he retired.

NFL players dream about “going out on top.” Elway actually did it. Five years after Elway’s second Super Bowl triumph, the Pro Football Hall of Fame enshrined him in his first year of eligibility. Then, in 2011, Broncos owner Bowlen hired Elway to become the team’s general manager and executive vice president of Football Operations. Elway was back in the game.

When the Indianapolis Colts made Peyton Manning a free agent, Elway welcomed the veteran passer to Denver. Manning led the Broncos to four consecutive AFC Western Division titles (2012–15) and a pair of Super Bowls. After enduring a blowout defeat to Seattle in Super Bowl XLVIII (48), GM Elway signed free-agent defenders DeMarcus Ware, Aqib Talib, and T. J. Ward. One year later, he dismissed head coach John Fox, then replaced him with his own former backup quarterback, Broncos offensive coordinator Gary Kubiak. Veteran defensive coordinator Wade Phillips and pass rusher extraordinaire Von Miller completed Elway’s front office masterpiece.

In Super Bowl 50, Denver beat Carolina 24–10 to win the team’s third Lombardi Trophy. Von Miller was named MVP, and it was Man-
Bob Angelo

nothing’s turn to go out on top—very fitting. I could not have been more wrong about Elway’s football mission.

Norman “Boomer” Esiason (born 1961)

Quarterback
- New York Jets (1993–95)
- Arizona Cardinals (1996)

O
obody ever looked more like the old-fashioned stereotype of an NFL quarterback than Norman “Boomer” Esiason: six feet five inches, 220 pounds, blonde hair, blue eyes, and a perfect left-handed throwing motion! Seriously, if I were writing a movie about a mad geneticist trying to clone the prototypical professional passer, he would use Esiason’s DNA.

And what hasn’t he done? In 1988, he won the league’s MVP award while leading Sam Wyche’s Bengals to Super Bowl XXIII (23). Only Joe Montana’s last-second heroics prevented Esiason from adding a world championship to his resume. He played for fourteen seasons, made four Pro Bowls, retired with just under 38,000 career passing yards, and earned the prestigious Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award in 1995 for his noteworthy charitable endeavors.

After football, he transitioned into broadcasting as a game analyst on Monday Night Football. He’s been a regular on CBS’s The NFL Today and Showtime’s Inside the NFL. In 2007, Esiason began work on WFAN’s (New York City) morning sports talk show, the top-rated program in its time period. He’s appeared in dozens of television shows and commercials. He cohosted a Miss America pageant and a Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade. He’s guest-starred on episodes of Family Feud and Blue Bloods. He’s coauthored books and grown his Boomer Esiason Foundation (benefiting cystic-fibrosis patients) into a major philanthropic force. Nassau County, New York, inducted him into its Hall of Fame. He may walk on water.

But it took three encounters and three decades for Esiason and me to find our groove. Esiason’s growth over that period was gratifying to behold.

In the late 1980s, a fellow NFL Films producer and I made NFL Kids: A Field of Dreams. We wrote a script about a dream world in which four
children would interact with and learn from their NFL heroes. We employed artists and set designers to turn our sound stage into a combination kid’s bedroom and football fantasy land. We matched four players (Esiason, Ronnie Lott, Michael Irvin, and Christian Okoye) with four children ages eight to eleven. Finally, without the benefit of rehearsal, we started shooting: two days with the four young people, and one day apiece with each of the NFL players matched with one individual youngster. Good luck to us.

The moment Esiason arrived, he started offering free advice. The problem was that his child actor and partner on set was not the most agreeable kid I’ve ever encountered. We didn’t need Esiason making things more difficult: “There’s too much in this script for one day” (that’s because we couldn’t afford two days of your fee). “You guys should be recording your voiceover while I’m in makeup” (it’s not finalized yet, sir!). “There’s not very much room out there on that stage” (no sh*t, Sherlock! Now help us wrangle your little costar, would you please?!).

In the spring of 2005, at a Fort Lauderdale resort, NFL Films produced EA Sports NFL Quarterback Challenge. We asked Esiason to do analysis and commentary alongside Rich Eisen (play by play) and Bonnie Bernstein (color commentary and interviews). I directed the entire event. The original Quarterback Challenge concept used NFL passers and a slew of lifeless standing and moving targets. Despite some strong casts, most of those events went on to yield very lackluster TV shows, so the league asked us to revamp the format. A fellow producer and I went to lunch at a Boston Market and came up with the following.

First, we added real-life NFL receivers for two of the four events. Second, I insisted on wiring the quarterbacks so they could hear the broadcast team and respond to them during actual events. Finally, and most importantly, we weighted scoring in the final event to make certain that the winner would be decided in the show’s closing minutes. We even revamped the “Legends” component, adding some alumni quarterbacks, including Esiason.

Boomer loved it. He said, “Look at all these guys with arthritis” before finishing second to John Elway in the “Legends Accuracy” competition. When Carson Palmer hollered, “Bad ball!” after overthrowing a wide-open receiver, Esiason advised, “Don’t tell him [the receiver] that.” When Drew Brees’s first pass in the “Long Distance” event came up way short, Esiason said, “Hey, Joe Montana couldn’t throw 40 yards either.” Panthers QB Jake Delhomme won the grand prize in our finale, the “Prixosec No-Huddle Drill,” a mouthful even for Eisen. Before it began, Del-
homme complained, “You’ve got to start again, Boomer’s bothering me.” It made for some interesting TV, only this time, Esiason was getting under everybody else’s skin.

In 2015, Esiason and I met again. The NFL was celebrating five decades of Super Bowls and had commissioned Wilson Sporting Goods to create three thousand golden-skin footballs, one for every living player and coach who’d participated in the ultimate game. *CBS This Morning* offered NFL Films major coin to produce ten segments involving Golden Football recipients at various awards ceremonies. Because WFAN is a CBS station, Esiason became one of our subjects.

Norman Esiason had attended East Islip High School on Long Island. At our preproduction meeting the day before Boomer was scheduled to receive his football, the principal and staff of East Islip offered us unconditional cooperation. They scheduled a mid-morning pep rally involving the entire student body; they shuttered the gymnasium and then covered the walls with signs welcoming home their conquering hero; and they swore every teacher, janitor, and cafeteria worker to secrecy. That night, the president of the school board announced to all present that “Boomer is coming.”

When the band started playing and Esiason emerged from the gymnasium bowels, East Islip HS went bananas. Tall, blond, and beautiful, Esiason strode through a gauntlet of cheerleaders and well-wishers like the respectful, well-meaning East Islip boy he truly is. As the director, I knew instantly that this segment would be a cinch to edit and a pleasure to watch. And Esiason didn’t piss off anybody.

When it aired on *CBS This Morning*, the network’s producers opened the program block with Esiason live in WFAN’s studio. Next came my segment, followed by an interview with Boomer still on set. The program block ran nearly twelve minutes, an eternity for live morning television. And throughout, Esiason was all smiles. Our third time was truly a charm.