

"If you want to learn what grit, a sense of humor, and true leadership look like on and off the football field, you will enjoy this book. Joe Kapp makes me proud to be a Cal Golden Bear."

—JARED GOFF, LOS ANGELES RAMS QUARTERBACK

A LIFE OF LEADERSHIP

# JOE KAPP

"THE TOUGHEST CHICANO"

50<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary  
of the 1969  
NFL Champions

BY **JOE KAPP** WITH J.J. KAPP, ROBERT G. PHELPS, AND NED AVERBUCK  
FOREWORD INTERVIEW WITH ALAN PAGE

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## CHAPTER THREE

# MY NEW HOME IN NEWHALL

We moved back to Southern California because my parents somehow bought a small Spanish-style house in Van Nuys about twenty miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles. R. D. had secured a good job at Lockheed. He had a knack for making great recoveries. Mom stayed with him, in spite of his drinking and gambling on cards and cock-fights, because she always felt that he was good with the kids and a loving father, at least when he wasn't a really bad drunk.

I went to Van Nuys High School and was looking forward to playing as many varsity sports as I could—football, basketball, baseball, and track. Basketball was my favorite and best game at that time. I used to shoot baskets for hours and hours. I have always said to people, including my kids, that if you want to get better at sports, you have to practice. If you want to be a good shooter in basketball, you have to shoot a million shots. It is the same for passing a football. In a way, our economic disadvantages afforded me the opportunity to excel in sports. Because we had no money for toys or television or piano lessons, shooting baskets and throwing a football were inexpensive forms of recreation and entertainment. I wanted to be ready to excel for my new high school, so I practiced all the time. Then I got the bad news: according to the rules and regulations at Van Nuys High, if you played football, you could not play basketball! This was a crisis to me. My dreams were going down in red tape. Now what?

Luckily, I had an unlikely champion. My aunt Odelia Adler lived in Newhall, California, a small agricultural town about forty-five minutes

from Van Nuys. It's now surrounded by Santa Clarita and the Magic Mountain Amusement Park. Aunt Odie had serious health problems. I was always welcome to help care for her boys Jimmy, Fred, Chris, and Ted. I spent summers and holidays with the Atlers helping out any way I could.

While I was staying with them I met George Harris, the principal of William S. Hart High School in Newhall, who gave me a job. He assigned me to work with Charlie Dillenback, who ran the Buildings and Grounds Department for the High School. I became the man with the hoe, and I hoed a lot of weeds. While working at the stadium during the first summer in Newhall, I met Mr. Al Lewis, the school's football coach. Coincidentally, he lived in Van Nuys too.

I called Coach Lewis for help with my basketball crisis. Immediately, he invited me to attend Hart and play for him. I accepted; the basketball crisis was settled. I commuted to Hart with Coach Lewis until I moved in with the Atlers. But my family had its own crisis. At Lockheed, R. D. was found sleeping off a hangover in the back of a plane he was supposed to be helping assemble. He lost his job. We lost our house in Van Nuys. This kicked off a series of tough times and moves for the rest of my family.

But I avoided those tough times: I got to stay with the Atlers, play sports, and finish high school at Hart. I have always felt a certain amount of guilt for that, but the family was always extremely supportive. Coach Lewis did many things for me, but perhaps the most significant thing was to make me the quarterback of the football team. I had always been the quarterback until tenth grade in Salinas, where they played me at end. By the time I got to Hart, I was not sure where I fit on a football team—but Coach Lewis was not confused. From the very beginning, he had confidence in me. His unflinching confidence bolstered my belief in myself. He was my champion.

I spent a lot of time studying the game with Coach Lewis. As his quarterback, he taught me his system and expected me to call plays

accordingly, and I worked to honor his trust in me. He was my second father. For whatever reason, he believed in me. He used to start his pregame speeches by reminding us that it didn't matter whether we were playing for money, marbles, or chalk—the game demanded you give your best. That included playing by the rules. The way he taught us always stuck with me. To give less than your best or to cheat dishonors yourself, your teammates, and the game itself. Coach Lewis expected his players to honor the game at all times. He was an old-school gentleman and the fiercest competitor I ever knew. If he was my second father, then the teams at Hart High were my extended families. I felt camaraderie and kinship playing sports. The structure, stability, and camaraderie of team life under Coach Lewis replaced something that was sometimes hard to come by in my childhood. A team is a family, and a family is a team.

Our tailback was a guy named Gary Yurosek. He later changed his last name to Lockwood and became an actor. He starred in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, among others. Gary taught me a lesson that would be driven home on many occasions when I worked in Hollywood: actors need their proper dose of attention. Gary felt that he should be getting the ball more. I disagreed and explained that I was calling the plays that our coach wanted me to call. I wouldn't give in because it was what was best for the team. The argument got hot, and it brought a challenge to fight.

I've always loved Westerns, and now I was about to star in my own standoff. Gary and I agreed to meet on the hill behind the high school after practice. I arrived on foot and waited for Gary for what felt like forever. Then a brand-new Chevrolet rolled up. Gary got out slowly and strode over to me, and we stood nose to nose. I braced for battle. He looked me straight in the eye and declared, "We don't need to fight." I was relieved. Maybe Gary just wanted to see if he could bully me, or maybe he saw the light. Gary was the son of a wealthy farmer and was established in the town and at school. I was the new guy. Had

I backed down from his challenge, the wrong guy would have led our team. That was, and always will be, something worth fighting about. You do what's best for the team, period. Coach Lewis knew what was best for our team. I wasn't going to be bullied into forsaking his trust in me.

Our football team was pretty good, but our basketball team was better. We were well coached by Bill Beany and Al Lewis. I played forward and was the league-leading scorer. I could handle the ball and shoot from the outside. In my senior year, we were Ventura League Champions, beating Ventura High School by a score of 47–46 for the first time in many years.

In a game against Santa Paula High School, I almost caused a riot. At Santa Paula, my opposite number was hanging back and picking cherries all night. In other words, he was hanging out under the basket waiting for the bomb and an easy score, rather than playing defense. I had to get physical with him, but I was a little late—make that really late! We crashed into the wall under our basket. The spectators in the gym exploded. A downpour of paper cups rained down from the stands. When we played Santa Paula a year later, they threw rocks at us and attempted to roll our bus over when we arrived. Supposedly a posse of Santa Paula players came looking for me in Newhall to take some revenge. They never found me.

Despite the Santa Paula posse, my life in Newhall was stable. I had a second home with the Atlers. I played on the varsity football, basketball, baseball, and track teams. The school offered me the opportunity to take the AP classes required by Cal. As I was striving to get to college, my mom and siblings were striving to keep up with R. D. They moved around California, to Tehachapi, to Greenfield, and up north to Stockton. I did my best to spend time with them during the summers as they migrated north. Their living situations in those times were particularly bad. Eventually, they ended up in Stockton, California, on East Eighth Street. While I was in Newhall, I missed my

family and old friends from Salinas. Besides my family, I got letters from three people from the old days in Salinas: Bob Sartwell, Everett Alvarez, and Jim Langley. Their loyalty left a big impression on me. I've always appreciated loyalty and attempted to offer it in return.

Nobody was more loyal to me than Coach Lewis. He would pave the way to my future. Coach Lewis knew Pappy Waldorf, who was the Head Coach of Cal's football team. He recommended to Pappy that he give me a scholarship. I thought Cal was a better fit for me than UCLA, who showed some interest too. They were interested because UCLA ran the single wing, but I did not think I was a good enough runner for that offense. However, many people still think I was a better runner than a passer. Based on Coach Lewis's recommendation, I was sent up to Cal on a recruiting trip. It was a thrill to be taken to the airport by 1950 Cal All-Pacific Coast Conference fullback Pete Schabarum.

Later, Coach Lewis told me that Cal was going to give me a scholarship. I was ecstatic! As it turned out, Cal football didn't have any more scholarships to offer, but the basketball team did. I could have one of those, but I would have to attend summer school. I was happy to do so. I was heading to the center of the universe.

# GOODBYE, COACH

By Joe Kapp

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 1993**

**11:00 A.M.**

I didn't hear the phone right. I could barely hear anything over the breathless giggles and shrieks of laughter from my three little kiddies as they mugged ol' Dad in the middle of our den floor. We were obviously involved in our routine Saturday-morning pajama version of World Championship Wrestling. These weekly romps are obvious fun for kids, but even more special to me. I've been an athlete all my life, even played professional football, so I tend to relate to the world on a more physical basis than most people. To Will, Gaby, and Emi, our three-on-one weekend tickle fests are pure delight. To me, each hug, each stolen kiss on the cheek is one more precious memory to treasure.

It takes tremendous concentration to fend off a trio of energetic grade-schoolers determined to pin your shoulders to the ground. When the phone rang a second time, I heard it, but my hands were full of bare feet and tiny, flailing arms. My wife, Jennifer, picked up the phone in the kitchen. Buried under a Medusa-like crown of miniature arms, legs, tummies, and grinning faces, I didn't know how long she was on the phone and I didn't see her come into the den . . . but I felt her standing over us. When I looked up at her face, it was clear



something awful had happened. For no apparent reason, the room was instantly silent.

"Joe," she said, almost whispering, "there's a call for you. It's Peggy Lewis."

I untangled myself from the kids, whose expressions were now a mixture of disappointment at the time-out and hopefulness that I'd quickly return, and started toward the phone. Within two steps, I already knew what this call meant. My legs felt weak. A minute ago, I was tossing my children in the air like Frisbees; now, as I reached for the phone, I felt like I was running underwater.

Peggy had been Al Lewis's wife for over fifty years. There could be only one reason she would have to call me at home on a Saturday morning. And I knew what it was.

Al Lewis had been my football and basketball coach at Hart High School. He was the strongest man I had ever known. Like every other athlete and student at Hart, I always referred to him as Coach Lewis. Never "Mr. Lewis" or just "Coach." That would've placed him in the same category as every other coach. It wouldn't have given him the respect he deserved. When I spoke to him directly, even after I reached my middle-aged self, I called him Coach Lewis—it never occurred to me to call him Al.

"Mrs. Lewis, this is Joe," I softly spoke into the receiver. "How are you?"

"I have bad news, Joe. He's had a turn for the worse. I thought you'd want to know," Mrs. Lewis said. She uttered the words without any discernable emotion. I'd seen her stoicism before, but it had never concerned matters this critical.

I don't remember what I said next, but I know it was more to encourage myself than it was to cheer up Mrs. Lewis. The entire conversation lasted barely a few moments, yet it had a devastating effect on me. Sure, I knew Coach Lewis was sick. I knew his illness was life-threatening. But, hey, we're talking about *Coach Lewis* here.

Nobody ever allowed themselves to believe anything could defeat that grizzled old competitor, least of all me. Coach Lewis could never die!

I first learned Coach Lewis's body had been invaded by this insidious monster more than a year ago. I guess I understood what was happening, at least intellectually, but I emotionally denied all negative reality. Not once did the notion that Coach Lewis would—or could—be defeated by this senseless killer ever enter my thoughts. “If any person in the world could conquer cancer, it would be Coach Lewis,” I’d tell myself. And I believed it.

Throughout my lifetime in the arena—not just in sports, but at all levels of competition—I looked to Coach Lewis, who had so profoundly affected me as my teacher, mentor, and ally, to be my touchstone. No one was more responsible for influencing the direction my life would ultimately take. No one else had left such indelible fingerprints on my personal development. At the crossroads of my young athletic career, it was Coach Lewis who first saw the quarterback in me. I was an end. Tall for my age, with pretty good speed, it never occurred to me—or to any other coaches—that I’d ever be anything else. Coach Lewis was convinced I should be a quarterback, so naturally he convinced me too.

He didn’t only teach teams how to play the game; he taught us why playing the game well, and by the rules, was important. He instilled old-fashioned notions about fairness, sacrifice, hard work, dedication, and commitment into each of his players. In today’s age of “winning at all costs,” those early lessons learned in the gym and on the practice fields at Hart High School from that unassuming Irishman are challenged as being tired and out of steam. Was Coach Lewis now wearing out just like this arcane philosophy? How could any sense be made out of this situation?

No! Coach Lewis is the fiercest competitor I’ve ever known. If he faced them, he’d run over Dick Butkus; he’d slam down on Wilt Chamberlain; he’d brush Hank Aaron off the plate. He’ll surely know

how to win this one. He may be wounded, but not wounded forever. His team will help! The family, doctors, nurses, and all us old athletes he coached, we'll use our skills and talent and cunning and strength to pull him through. And we'll pray. It's the fourth quarter. Mrs. Lewis just called with the two-minute warning. Coach Lewis is facing the game of his life.

## **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1993**

### **7:30 P.M.**

Young Brian Lewis tried to phone me at home. He left this message on my answering machine: "It happened. . . . Dad passed away today."

Standing alone in my small home office, the recorded words ringing in my ears, I felt like I was in an elevator falling forty stories. A part of me clung to the cruel possibility that some kind of mistake may have been made. It was torture to imagine the truth. I had to call his house. I wanted him to answer the phone himself.

I called and reached Mrs. Lewis.

"It's true, Joe," she said. "The Coach is dead."

Her voice was sad, tired, and in pain. But the words she spoke as we continued talking demonstrated an inner strength that could only exist in a woman who'd mothered six children and been married to a high-school teacher for half a century. Don't forget, she shared forty-eight winning and losing football seasons with Coach Lewis. That provides a unique understanding of life's ups and downs. Despite her formidable stamina, she sounded vulnerable. I knew tears were somewhere nearby, but she kept them harnessed. She sounded tough, just like him.

## **TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 1993**

### **10:40 A.M.**

The funeral services for Coach Lewis were starting in twenty minutes. I sat in seat 18A on Reno Airlines on flight 59 from San Jose to San Diego.

It had been a beautiful, peaceful flight over the Salinas Valley and the LA Basin, where I first met Coach Lewis. We had traveled these skies many times together. A lifetime—my life—was flooding through my mind as I looked down from thirty thousand feet over the State of California, the place where many opportunities were opened for me by my high school coach. He challenged me to be what I wanted to be. He motivated my mind to the possibility of going to college. He recommended me to Pappy Waldorf and Pete Newell at the University of California–Berkeley. He was a second father to me, there for me at the right time.

We were scheduled to land at 10:20 a.m. Frank Mattarocci, a former Cal teammate, was picking me up in one of his presidential limos in time for the 11:00 a.m. service in Ocean Beach.

But there was a problem on the runway. No planes were landing at the San Diego airport. We circled the airport fourteen times in twenty minutes. We were going to have to refuel soon. Then we were rerouted to Ontario.

As a captive of this stranded plane, I was helpless. I grew numb with unventable anger. My stomach churned from pent-up sadness and empty feelings of loss. I was overwhelmed by my lack of power over this situation.

How could I miss this appointment? Coach Lewis had taught me the respect for self and for others demonstrated by being on time. And here I was, missing the whole event. How could I do this to the Coach, Mrs. Lewis, and the Lewis family and friends? How could Coach Lewis forgive me for this? How could I forgive myself? I was suspended ten

thousand feet over north San Diego County—consumed by grief, guilt, and regret—when I sensed something. I wasn't sure, but I thought I heard . . . I felt . . . Coach Lewis.

"What's that?" I muttered, not quite aloud.

"Hello, Bub!" came that voice, that familiar greeting. I'd know it anywhere. Coach Lewis always greeted me in person with "Hello, Bub."

My mind was playing tricks on me. Had sorrow shaken my sanity? "But I *heard* him," I insisted to myself. I didn't imagine it; I'd actually heard Coach Lewis speak to me.

"Sure you did, Bub." There it was again: clear, audible, undeniable. "Relax, Joe. Take it easy. It's great up here, don't you think?" he said soothingly.

"Coach Lewis!" I whispered. Was I really talking to Coach Lewis on this airplane? "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at your funeral. Father Sproul is waiting for you. It's bad enough I'm not going to be there."

What moments before had seemed surreal and impossible suddenly felt comfortable. Doubts about my sanity, my belly full of frustrated anger, the brokenhearted sadness I had endured for the past eight days—it all evaporated at the sound of his voice. It felt completely reasonable that Coach Lewis had come to talk to me, to give me confidence and strength, to offer me alternate choices. That's what he had always done.

"Don't worry, Joe," he said. "I don't think anybody will miss me for a few moments. I knew you could use a little conversation right about now."

The drone of the plane's engines and the din of the other passengers' conversations disappeared. It was as though we were the only two people on the plane, in the world. As I peered out the window at the soft, patchy clouds of the California sky, I eagerly embraced the chance to listen again to my old friend's voice. The past year had

been a horrific nightmare. Watching his body deteriorate under cancer's inexorable assault, seeing his strength sapped, hearing his voice weaken. But today there was renewed vigor in his words. His power was back. There was life in the sound filling my ears, and I wanted more. I closed my eyes and silently listened.

"You fought for me this past year. I appreciate that," he said warmly, with genuine sincerity. "But even the game of life has an end." He said this matter-of-factly, the same way he used to explain how to read a defensive safety's coverage. With pride, he added, "We played our best."

Strangely, I wasn't feeling sad anymore, even though Coach Lewis's words had such finality. It was the absence of his recent pain in his voice. It was the presence of his old strength. "There's so much I want to ask you, Coach Lewis," I said, anxious to speak before he had to go. "I tried to discuss some of them with you this past year, but the strength was missing from our talks. I came to visit you armed with my usual energy, hoping to share it with you to make you better, but as soon as we shook hands, I could feel the force of your spirit flowing into my arm and body. It was supposed to be the other way around; the flow should have been in your direction. You were supposed to take for once, not always be the one to give."

In a low, mentoring voice, Coach Lewis reminded me, "Joe, the harmony of balance and nature is a circle of giving and receiving. You learned to trust your offensive line to block, your ends to get open and catch the ball when you threw it, and yourself to be able to get the pass off. Didn't you find that the harder you worked, the more you gave to your teammates, the more you got back in return?" he asked. "When you've lived your whole life getting the best out of people by giving them your best, it's impossible to stop just because you've got less to give," he explained, almost chuckling.

It may have been due to the rarefied air at that altitude, but I completely understood, maybe for the first time, why it's so important to

give your best at all times. Coach Lewis had been teaching all us gangly, raw, undisciplined athletes back at Hart High how to get the most out of life by always giving all we had. That would be enough.

"Coach Lewis," I asked, "what did you mean when you used to say, 'We'll play for money, marbles, and chalk?'"

"Ah, so you were paying attention sometimes, hey, Joe? That was my way of saying the stakes weren't the issue, but rather being ready and willing to compete is what's important," he said. "Competition measures the heart more than the body. It's when you learn the most about yourself, and you should respect your opponents for providing a means to test your creativity, preparation, skills, determination, stamina, and honesty."

Even as he spoke, my appreciation of all he had taught me, all I had learned and applied throughout my own life, began to grow. Choices I had made and later questioned became more just in light of this conversation. My favorite memories of sports competition involve triumphs of spirit rather than winning trophies. Losing never represents failure, if competition itself is to be valued. Only those who do not compete fail.

"I'm sorry I'm not going to be at your funeral, Coach Lewis," I said regretfully. "But I sure am glad you came to see me so I could say goodbye." My sadness was starting to return.

"What do you mean 'goodbye,' Joe?" he said with a tinge of *I know something you don't* in his voice. "I'm counting on you to keep my spirit around forever. Aren't you going to tell those three little rug rats of yours about your old high school coach?" he teased.

It was true. Coach Lewis had given me enough of himself to always stay alive through me. He knew his ideas and values would live on in his players and be passed down to theirs. He knew it years earlier, when I asked for his advice about accepting a scholarship to Cal, and when I sought his counsel before I sued the NFL for the right to freely negotiate a contract, and when I consulted him about taking the head

coaching job at Cal in 1982. He knew now that I would always keep him alive in my heart, in the way I feel about my family, and most importantly, in the way I feel about myself.

Great teachers like Coach Lewis never die. They live forever in the lives of their players and their families. We remember and honor them because they represent so much more than words—they lived their own lives true to the values they taught through sports. We're influenced to imitate their model because they proved it works by how they lived. I've been undeservedly fortunate. I've had several Al Lewises touch my life: Andy Smith, Brutus Hamilton, Pappy Waldorf, Pete Newell, Russ Messner, Ed Nemir, and Gene Stauber. When I need someone to talk to, all I have to do is sit very still and listen.

Goodbye, Coach Lewis. I'll be talking to you.



A LIFE OF LEADERSHIP

# JOE KAPP

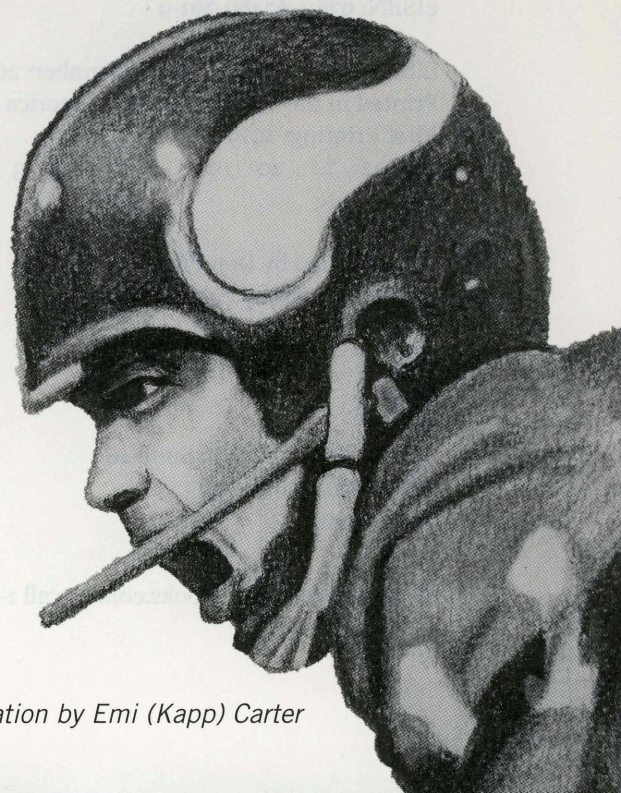
"THE TOUGHEST CHICANO"

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and Ned Averbuck



*Illustration by Emi (Kapp) Carter*



**“Joe Kapp believed in us as men, not just football players, and I loved him for that. This book will introduce you to who Joe Kapp was as a player and coach, who he is as a man, and why his leadership lessons are good for all of us.”**

**—RON RIVERA, CAROLINA PANTHERS HEAD COACH**

**“Joe Kapp: ‘The Toughest Chicano’ shares the recipe for toughness and leadership from a quarterback who played the game like a linebacker, y con orgullo latino. I’ve never come across a man with more passion and love for the game of football. Viva Joe Kapp!”**

**—KIKO ALONSO, NEW ORLEANS SAINTS LINEBACKER**

**“Joe Kapp was the leader the fans thought he was: tough and fearless, focused on the team, believing in the ‘forty for sixty’ mantra that he made famous.”**

**—JIM MARSHALL, MINNESOTA VIKINGS 1961–79 TEAM CAPTAIN**

## 40 FOR 60 FOREVER

In 1969, the Minnesota Vikings were having a moment. On and off the turf of the old Metropolitan Stadium, the Purple People Eaters reigned supreme. At the center of it all was unconventional quarterback Joe Kapp.

Kapp joined the Vikings with the tenacity to succeed. With the motto “forty for sixty,” he inspired the team’s forty players to give it their all every minute, every game. Kapp helped mold the Vikings into a winning team, scoring the 1969 NFL Champions title and blazing their way to their first Super Bowl appearance.

Later that year, *Sports Illustrated* featured Kapp on its cover, dubbing him the “Toughest Chicano” for his Hispanic pride and ferocious style of play.

*Joe Kapp, “The Toughest Chicano”* honors the life, leadership, and legacy of one of history’s toughest football players. Inside, you’ll find a behind-the-scenes look at pivotal moments in football history, how the famous Play came to be, Kapp’s own game-by-game analysis of the 1969 season, memoirs about his early life and successful coaching career, and memories on the set of iconic sports films such as *The Longest Yard*. As a player, coach, and father, Joe Kapp’s legacy shows that every player counts if they give their all, every minute, every game.

***Proceeds go to the Joe Kapp & Family Scholarship for first-time Latinx students at UC Berkeley. Donate at [ucbclaa.org](http://ucbclaa.org).***



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