

Matte Ascends From Emergency QB To NFL Standout

By JOE DEMPSEY
Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

Tom Matte made a name for himself at Ohio State by making a rare position switch. He transitioned from running back to quarterback under Woody Hayes in 1959, and the rest is history.

Due to his prowess as a runner, Matte earned All-American accolades for the Buckeyes. To his surprise, he became a first-round pick in the 1961 NFL draft by the Baltimore Colts, who were led by Hall of Fame quarterback Johnny Unitas.

The former Buckeye back won an NFL championship and a Super Bowl in Baltimore, playing alongside the likes of Unitas, Lenny Moore, Jim Parker and many more standouts. After playing for Hayes and Bo Schembechler at Ohio State, Matte enjoyed the tutelage of all-time great NFL coaches in Don Shula, Don McCafferty and Weeb Ewbank.

While still in the NFL, Matte returned to Ohio State to finish his undergraduate degree and ended up receiving his master's with some help from Hayes. Following his playing career, Matte helped start the Player Care Foundation for retired athletes.

Matte and his teammates disowned the Colts franchise after its move to Indianapolis because they did not feel welcomed by owner Jim Irsay. When the Ravens came to Baltimore from Cleveland, however, he and his teammates were embraced. Matte became a color analyst for CBS, and he also broadcast Ravens games for local radio.

Buckeye Sports Bulletin spoke with Matte about his time at Ohio State and beyond, including his perspective on his best teammates and coaches and a whole lot more.

BSB: With your father playing professional hockey, how prevalent were athletics in your house growing up?

Matte: "My dad played professional hockey for 17 years. He was a Canadian born in Montreal. He played for the Chicago Blackhawks and ended up in the American Hockey League, playing for the Cleveland Barons and, before that, the Pittsburgh Hornets, where he met my mother. Then they got married and then they moved to Cleveland, and my brother and I came along.

"Let me tell you, he was one of the toughest. I remember a couple times where I'd get out of hand, and he'd just come over and pick me up by the shirt and just pick me up off the ground. He had arms on him like a weightlifter. He was a strong guy and a tough, mean guy, played defense and had a lot of respect.

"If I didn't put up 150 percent, there was a boot in my butt because my dad said, 'You could do better than that.' It was challenging growing up, but I'll tell you what, I count it as blessings."

BSB: With that tough hockey background, were you always destined to be an athlete?

Matte: "Well, my grandfather was decathlon champion of Canada. My uncle Jock and my uncle Henry played professional hockey. My aunt Marcel was a division champion in tennis. I think it was a pretty well-rounded athletic family, no question. And my brother came along, and he was an All-American at Miami of Ohio, got drafted in baseball and football, and then got drafted by the U.S. Army."

BSB: How do you think being an Eagle Scout may have helped you become so successful in football, and beyond?

Matte: "Being an Eagle Scout was something that my dad pushed me to do, and it was fun. It taught you the lessons of life. It taught you how to survive. I really have a lot of respect, and I really went all the way up to the Eagle Scout, which is the top dog. And I enjoyed it. It was an outlet for me. I went to camp every year for a couple weeks, and then I became a counselor after that. I went as a kid, and as I got old got older, 16 17, 18, I became a counselor for the Boy Scouts."

BSB: Moving forward, how did you end up at Ohio State and why did you want to play for Ohio State? What was it like playing for Woody Hayes and Bo Schembechler?

Matte: "Well, Woody convinced my parents real quick. He came up and he was recruiting me, and he said to my mom and dad, 'Mr. and Mrs. Matte, I will guarantee that your son will graduate from college.' That's all my parents wanted to hear. And he did. He made me come back even after my rookie year with the Colts. I had to come back. I had seven hours to make up to graduate. And then I went on and I said, 'Well, as long as I'm here, I might as well start my master's,' which I got, and Woody Hayes picked it up for me, picked up the cost of me getting my master's degree. So I was very, very blessed with somebody kicking me in the butt and making sure I got that education.

"Bo Schembechler was there at that particular time, and he was a guy I had to report to, so you know how tough Bo was. He made sure my buns were there every day. My education at Ohio State was very special, and it was fun. It was fun. I had a great time, great coaches. I ran track also while I was in college and so I was pretty well-rounded."

BSB: Considering you were primarily a runner in football, how did that track background help you on the gridiron?

Matte: "I ran the quarter mile and did a pretty good job at it. And I had come in second or third in the state of Ohio, when we were in high school. I had as many track scholarships as football. And I was also pole vaulting. At that time, (U.S. Olympian) Bob Richards was doing

14½ feet, and I was doing 13½ feet as a high school kid. So I was sort of a jack-of-all trades. I could do everything well, nothing fantastic. But it was fun. It was very competitive. And I came from a very, very competitive family."

BSB: With your family's hockey background, how drawn were you to the ice?



Tom Matte

Matte: "I played at Ohio State, I got my letters in hockey. When I came here to Baltimore, they had just started the American Hockey League with the Baltimore Clippers, and Terry Reardon, who was the coach, had played with my dad. And he said, 'Tom, will you come down and play a couple games with us, so we can get the crowds interested in hockey in Baltimore?' And I said, 'I'd love to, I'd love to do that.' So I started working out with him, and all the sudden

the Colts found out about it. And they said, 'Read your contract, Tom. No other sports. You cannot participate without the consent of the team.' And they said, 'We don't want you playing hockey.' So I couldn't do it. But I supported the team a lot. I had grown up on skates."

BSB: What was it like playing hockey at Ohio State back in the '60s?

Matte: "It was really fun. It was the first year they had hockey at Ohio State. They had just built the ice rink there. They knew that I had played, and I had come back to school to get my master's. And I said, 'Yes, I'll be glad to come out and work out with the guys.' And they said, 'No, no, we want you to play.' And I got a letter from Ohio State for playing hockey, and I had a ball. And then I had my son come along, and he was a heck of a good hockey player. He had scholarships where we wanted to go, because he was big, he was about 6-4, and he was a tough kid. He enjoyed it."

BSB: In the NFL, what was your experience like filling in as the emergency quarterback when Johnny Unitas and Gary Cuozzo went down with injuries?

Matte: "Woody Hayes is calling Don Shula next thing you know and telling him how to use me. It was interesting because Woody called Shula and said, 'Listen, if you're really in dire need, he'll be able to play quarterback for you. He can throw the ball, but he can also run better.' So he said, 'Set him back there and go from a shotgun,' and that's what we did. And we had some fun with it. The team rallied around me. And the coaching staff with Don McCafferty as the backfield coach, they designed an offense around what I could do. And it worked, so we had some fun with it."

BSB: When you filled in at quarterback, you wore a wristband with the plays written on it. How did that come to fruition?

Matte: "They came up with the idea of a wristband for me to glance down at with all the formations on it. It had a little plastic thing around it. And I get tackled and the guys on defense would try and rip it off me: 'You don't need this wristband.' I'd say, 'Yes, I do.' Then a lot more athletes went to the wristband after that, too. I should have patented the darn thing."

BSB: How proud are you that your wristband will forever be enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame?

Matte: "It's a very nice honor. I didn't think it was that big of a deal. I just knew that I was the last man standing and I had to go in there and do it."

BSB: Where did the nickname "garbage can" come from?

Matte: "(Former nine-time All-Pro defensive tackle) Alex Karras came up with that one.

He said, 'How can a garbage-can halfback like Matte beat us at quarterback?' So we laughed about it. Alex and I were really good friends. He gave me that nickname, 'the garbage can.' And of course, the team loved it. I came into the locker room after the first game I had played, and in my locker, what was there? A garbage can."

BSB: Given that Don McCafferty coached the backfield, served as offensive coordinator and eventually took over as Colts head coach, and that he hails from Cleveland and Ohio State like you, how was your relationship with him?

Matte: "He was like a father to me. His family and my family are very, very close. McCafferty was just a great coach, and he was under Shula, and I can't give enough accolades to Shula because he did such a tremendous job wherever he coached.

"McCafferty was sort of low profile, but he took me under his wing. Each night I'd come home, I would go over to his house and we'd watch film and do all the stuff that we had to do to get prepared for me to play quarterback. And we designed an offense around what I could do best, which was run. Roll out and throw the short passes, and every once in a while, I'd stop there and throw the long one and it worked.

"I think that's one of the reasons why I was drafted No. 1 by the Colts here. I was sort of a good football player, master of nothing but I could do everything. I had that versatility."

BSB: You said you were surprised to be the Colts' first pick and the No. 7 overall pick in the 1961 NFL draft. Why were you so surprised?

Matte: "I was a quarterback in college, and I was saying, 'What the hell do they want me for? They've got John Unitas.' Well, McCafferty had come out, and he went around and checked out the ballplayers, and he was an Ohio State graduate, and he came in and he said, 'We're drafting you.' And I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Don't worry about it, you're not going to play quarterback.' But I had played defense at Ohio State, and I played running back. Woody had just made me a running quarterback, that's all."

BSB: Did you have an opportunity to play in the AFL instead, and why did you ultimately choose the NFL?

Matte: "The San Diego Chargers came after me, and I was drafted by them. And I thought San Diego would be a great place to go to, but I decided that the Colts were the best deal for me."

BSB: Why was playing for the Colts the best option for you?

Matte: "McCafferty had an influence on that, and Weeb Ewbank was an Ohio guy. And John Unitas was my hero, and watching him and Lenny Moore, good god, these guys were great. And Raymond Berry and Jim Parker had come out of Ohio State and gone to the Colts. I had a lot of ties with that, and it was a good move on my part."

BSB: You spent a lot of time with all-time great coach Weeb Ewbank in Baltimore. What was your relationship like with him?

Matte: "He taught me the game. Between Weeb, McCafferty and then Shula, I had some pretty damn good coaches."

BSB: What was it like being a Cleveland kid and losing to the Browns in the 1964 NFL championship?

Matte: "I was getting a lot of static from all the Browns fans saying you've got to be loyal to the Cleveland Browns. I said, 'How can I be that when I'm being paid by the Baltimore Colts?' But it was good, clean fun

THE

CASE BOWEN

COMPANY

Robert Bowen

James Case

**COMMERCIAL & ASSOCIATION
PROPERTY MANAGEMENT**
Brokerage Services | Sales | Leasing

www.CaseBowen.com | 614.799.9800
6255 Corporate Center Drive | Dublin, OH

THE INTERVIEW ISSUE: TOM MATTE

and competitiveness. And the two teams within it were pretty strong. I'd get all kinds of calls and letters and fans would write to me: 'You should be here in Cleveland playing with us. You wouldn't have lost the game.' It was all in good fun."

BSB: Where does former Browns standout and Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown rank for you all-time?

Matte: "He's probably one of the best running backs. You take a look at him, you take a look at Lenny Moore, they were just the class of the whole league."

BSB: You had the opportunity to join the Browns when you were injured and they tried to steal you away from Baltimore. What went into that whole situation?

Matte: "I think they wanted to get a little publicity out of it, I don't know. It was sort of funny. I had gotten screwed up and back in those days, they'd put you on waivers. And then all the sudden, they had to take me off waivers. And I think it was a strategic move by the Cleveland Browns, that's all."

BSB: Joe Namath led the up-and-coming New York Jets from the old AFL to a victory over you and your Colts in Super Bowl III. What was it like when he predicted the win, and were the Jets taken seriously since they were an old AFL team?

Matte: "We had a lot of respect for Joe. He was a competitor. And also, the coach at that time was Weeb Ewbank, who knew us pretty well. I have a lot of respect for Joe. I think he was a heck of a quarterback. I don't know about being an actor, but he was a pretty good quarterback. It was all in the hype. That's what they wanted to do. They wanted to develop that hype and get everybody fired up about it, and they did. But they came out and did a good job. Joe did a great job."

BSB: What was the historical significance of an AFL team actually beating an NFL team in the Super Bowl? Did it show that the leagues may have been more even in talent than people thought?

Matte: "Everyone thought that we were thinking that, but we didn't. We had a lot of respect for the Jets at that time, and especially Joe Namath. He was a good quarterback, had a great arm, could get rid of the ball real quick. And that's the one thing you have to do. That's the one that Unitas was so good at. He could read that defense right away and pop the ball to you. When we saw the blitz was coming, John Mackey and I were the two guys who were outlets. And when the blitz was coming with someone coming through clean, we would turn around and just drop into a 5-yard pattern and we'd turn around and the ball would be in our face."

BSB: Against the Jets, you recorded the highest yards-per-carry mark ever in a Super Bowl, which still stands at 10.5 yards per carry. How does it feel to have a Super Bowl record still stand 55 years later?

Matte: "I had a good game, but if you lose, who gives a s**t?"

BSB: Your 58-yard run in Super Bowl III was the longest rush in a Super Bowl at that time. On that play, former Colts teammate Johnny Sample tackled you, and there was an altercation after the play. What happened there?

Matte: "He and I didn't get along too well. He was a cheap-shot artist. He'd always come up at the end of the play and you're going down, and he'd take a shot at you. He's not one of my favorite people. Just going in after your knees, coming in late on a pile – that's not the way to play the game. You play it competitively. You don't try to hurt people."

BSB: How tough was it to be injured

for Super Bowl V, and how could you help out despite not being able to play?

Matte: "I sort of started acting as a coach and working with the back (Don) McCauley. McCauley was really a good kid and a good football player. And I was just trying to really express what I had learned through the 12 years that I played."

BSB: The NFL went through a lot of changes during your tenure, with the AFL coming in and a lot of new players and new teams. What was the difference in the NFL from when you arrived in 1961 to when you left in the 1972?

Matte: "I think it was a little bit more competitive because they didn't have that many teams to spread out the talent around the country. And you had to really work your buns off to be able to make the ballclub, and if you didn't, there was always somebody out there standing in line to take your place."

BSB: You had former Ohio State standout lineman Jim Parker also playing with you on the Colts. What was it like having him blocking for you?

Matte: "He was one of the best offensive linemen that ever played the game. He could block, he could turn the corner, he had speed, he had size and he was competitive. He was just a phenomenal athlete. He and Lenny Moore made a great combination, and with me at the other halfback, or playing fullback, or even me playing quarterback, we made a good tandem."

BSB: With Lenny Moore's ability as both a runner and a receiving back, how do you think he would do as an H-back, like a slot receiver who also runs the ball in Urban Meyer's offense?

Matte: "Lenny Moore could do anything, from the inside to the outside, as a receiver, as a defensive back. He was just a phenomenal athlete – had great speed, great hands, and was very competitive."

BSB: What was your perspective on Rex Kern playing defensive back on the Colts after playing quarterback at Ohio State? Were there any thoughts that maybe he could play quarterback in the pros, or was he just a good college quarterback?

Matte: "He was more of just a college quarterback, but he was a great defensive back. Because of being a quarterback, he understood the defenses and he'd take a look at formations. Rex was very, very competitive and very bright. He did a great job."

BSB: Would the history of the Colts be different if the Green Bay Packers had not been so great during that time?

Matte: "You can't take anything away from the Packers because they had a great coach with (Vince) Lombardi, and they had some really good football players up there and then they were competitive. They were the toughest team we had to play, and I believe the other one was the Chicago Bears. They were another team that was very, very tough to deal with, and the Rams. I mean, it was always competitive. And you know you had to prepare, and we were blessed. I was blessed to have some great coaches. And then also to have John Unitas as a quarterback didn't hurt anything either."

BSB: As a former backfield mate of Johnny Unitas, you had a unique perspective on the Hall of Fame quarterback. Where is Johnny Unitas' place in history?

Matte: "Well I think he's probably one of the top quarterbacks that ever played the game because he knew how to read the defenses better than anybody. We'd go in the huddle, and he'd just call the formation, saying, 'Out left, flank right, Matte option,' and that meant I could do anything I wanted to do, get out and find a hole. And he'd stay with me, or he'd tell the tight end to do the same thing, or the outside receivers. We'd cover somebody to

come inside, and they could do inside-outside moves, and John could read it that well. And his arm was the thing that was the best thing about him. He didn't have any speed, he wasn't that big, but boy I tell you what, he knew the game of football."

BSB: Your Baltimore Colts teams disowned the Colts when they took the team out of Baltimore and moved to Indianapolis. What happened there?

Matte: "That was (Jim) Irsay. We have our own little alumni association. They don't include us, the Baltimore Colts, in anything at all. And that's frustrating as hell because we don't have a home to go back to. And he wanted to get out of Baltimore. He got out of Baltimore and said, 'Screw them.' So we have to organize our own selves and do stuff. I used to do a lot of getting the guys back together and bringing them in town and have a little bit of fun lying about how good we used to be."

"But the thing is this, if you take a look at the record of all of our Colts teams, why can't it be carried over to the Indianapolis Colts? Irsay didn't want anything to do with us, so the way they did it, they just abandoned us. And I think the NFL made a mistake in not including the Baltimore Colts as a separate organization as far as identification and getting the guys together, having reunions and telling lies about how good we used to be."

"Who identifies with us? There's no organization. When Art Modell came here, he started including us in some of the Ravens' stuff and tried to take us under his wing, which was great of him and we really appreciated it. But you know, we still were a team of destiny, there's no question. ... There's no identification anymore, with who we are, what we did or anything like that, so we're just sort of left in limbo, and Irsay hasn't done a damn thing to include us."

BSB: What was it like calling Baltimore games as a broadcaster?

Matte: "The Ravens gave me a chance to do the broadcast, which I really appreciate, and I had a lot of fun doing it. But I was also working for CBS national television, and they get the guys who have retired for a while and then if you're good enough you stick around. If you're not, you drop by the wayside. And then the Ravens wanted me to come back and do some broadcasting. And I said, 'Thank you very much, I'd love to.' And it was a great time, a fun time. And I think it was a sort of a tie-over that the Colts guys were taken under the wing of the Ravens."

BSB: So you do not really have any qualms about Art Modell moving the Cleveland Browns to Baltimore?

Matte: "I think it was an economic move. You can't go down the tubes if you don't have enough money to pay everybody. So I think it was a good move. Baltimore came up with the cash for him to come down here, and we love it. I thought he was a great guy and a great friend."

"They've taken all the old Colts under their wing. And that never happened in Indianapolis. The Baltimore Colts were never brought back into the picture, so we had no home. And what Art Modell did is he took us under his wing and we at least had some place to go, and what he did is he got the guys who lived around – he gave them a couple season passes and we'd go to the games and all this stuff."

"I was doing national broadcasting for CBS at that time. I mean, it was very, very nice of Art Modell, and he's a good friend and the family's always been great friends. And Unitas and I were the old dogs here, and Lenny Moore, Parker and a lot of guys were involved."

"That made us all happy, it I really did, because we were such a part of the city here in Baltimore and put back into the community. The guys stayed here, and they worked here."

And we weren't making any money back in those days. I mean, as soon as the season was over, I had a job. No question about it. I worked with Black and Decker. I went back and got my MBA at Ohio State. And they took us under their wing."

BSB: You helped start the Player Care Foundation, which helps aid retired players. How did that come to be and where does it stand today?

Matte: "After I got done playing ball, I had bleeding ulcers. I almost bled out a couple times. What we tried to do is make sure the athletes who have retired are taken care of. And thank God that Roger Goodell came in because he took the old dogs under his wing. And I have a lot of respect for him as a commissioner and what he's done for us as a team here in Baltimore because we were sort of like forgotten."

"It was very new back then, and thank God, because we were at the forefront. It was so important to be able to take care of you. I had a lot of major, major health problems with bleeding ulcers. One game I went right from the game to the hospital, and they put four pints of blood in me. That was as stupid as I was. And then they cut my stomach out and I lost 40 pounds. And I had to build myself all the way back up again, because of these damn bleeding ulcers. It was stupid on my part to even play. If you're bleeding internally, before the game you go and take a dump and all that's coming out of you is pure blood."

"We just didn't have anything to fall back on. Nothing was here anymore."

BSB: What are your thoughts on the long-term effects of concussions and the prevalence of former football players with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)?

Matte: "If you get your bell rung, you've got to be careful because it will really do damage to you. I think that's what they have to go back and really take care of. There are a lot of athletes that I know that I'm not going to mention, but a lot of guys are suffering from the fact that they played too long, and played hurt."

"When you had concussions like that, you just shouldn't play because it's crazy. I was always worried about that, with the brain damage. And I've seen some of my friends who were pro ballplayers who are suffering from that."

BSB: Baltimore fans are known for being great sports fans. What do you think of that assessment?

Matte: "They are, they really are. They have been. It's still identifiable here in Baltimore, even though the Ravens are here. The old Colts are always remembered and well-respected. They used to have Colt Corrals here, and in the offseason the guys would go speak at them and they'd buy us dinner and serve us beer."

"We had a great time going around just talking. We'd take the highlight film that they made, and we'd go out there and sit down with these Colt Corrals, and there must have been 50 of them in the state of Maryland. They'd pay you 100 bucks and pick up your expenses if you had to stay overnight, but we did that because we appreciated our fans."

BSB: As someone who played multiple positions and has followed the sport for so long, how critical is the mental aspect of football?

Matte: "The mental part of it is important – studying the film – that's what you have to do. I would bring the film home. We used to have 16mm film. Now they have the good stuff, the easy stuff, but I had to bring home 16mm stuff. And my wife and I would watch the film at night, and I would tell her, 'You're responsible for the weakside safety, and I'll take the strongside safety.' And she got to the point where she could read the defense quicker than I could!"