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FOREWORD

In a small workout room in the basement of our Indianapolis home is what I call my quarterbacks wall. Hanging on it are nearly thirty photos I've collected over the years of me standing beside the game's best signal-callers, including several I've been privileged to play against.

Scanning the collection, you'll find many of the great ones: Troy Aikman, Brett Favre, Dan Marino, Steve Young, John Elway, Phil Simms, Jim Kelly, Warren Moon, Bart Starr, Roger Staubach, Terry Bradshaw, George Blanda. I like to glance at those guys while I'm working out.

You'll also find photos of my two all-time favorite quarterbacks—my dad Archie Manning and my brother Eli—as well as one of my all-time non-family favorites: Johnny Unitas of the Baltimore Colts.

I knew about Johnny Unitas from stories my dad told me, and every time I look at the photo, I think of the opportunity I had a few years back to let Johnny know in person how much I admired and respected him. In 1997 I was the recipient of the Johnny Unitas Golden Arm Award, and at the banquet that year I presented the Hall of Famer with a pair of black high-top football shoes. Anyone who had the privilege of watching number 19 play will know exactly what those shoes symbolize.

Now, take a closer look at the wall. Focus in on a place of honor near the center of my quarterback collection. You'll see a photo of an elderly man in

a baseball cap and sweatpants sitting on a bench outside on a bright, sunny day; at his side is a barefoot young man in shorts and a golf shirt. The two men are laughing, obviously enjoying each other's company. That picture holds a special place in my heart.

The young man is me; the older is Slingin' Sammy Baugh, arguably the greatest quarterback ever to play the game. Even more important to me, he was a man I was proud to call a friend. As you'll come to know in the pages that follow, Sam Baugh was not only a great athlete but also one of the finest guys you'd ever want to meet.

Let me tell you how I came to know him. In the late summer of 2000, shortly before training camp opened for my third NFL season, I got a call from *Sports Illustrated*. The magazine was planning to run a story that would spotlight two NFL players at each position—the player they felt had defined the position during the twentieth century and the player who would lead it into the twenty-first. Sam and I were their picks at quarterback.

I was honored to be chosen, of course, but one of the stipulations was that the new player had to visit the home of the old, which presented a bit of a challenge. We had to do it quickly because of the magazine's deadline and because teams were about to go to training camp. I ended up going to see Sam in a hearse. (More about that later.)

I had heard of Slingin' Sammy Baugh. I knew he had played for the Redskins, knew he had been a great passer and was in the NFL Hall of Fame, but I didn't know much more than that. I called my dad and told him how excited I was about being chosen and how I was looking forward to meeting a bona fide football legend.

I asked him what he knew about Sam, and he reminded me that not only had Sam been an All-American at TCU and a Redskins star for many years, he also had been a magnificent punter and had played defensive back. Needless to say, times have changed.

I was familiar with Horned Frog football from an earlier era, having won the Davey O'Brien Award as a senior at the University of Tennessee. O'Brien, of course, was Sam's Heisman-winning successor at TCU. I've been back to the annual banquet several times since and have gotten to know the O'Brien family, but I was eager to learn more about Sam.

Dad said we also had almost a family connection to Slingin' Sam. One of the great influences on my dad's life was Johnny Vaught, the legendary coach at Ole Miss during my dad's playing days. Coach Vaught had been Sam's teammate at TCU in the 1930s.

Dad said that Coach Vaught thought highly of Sammy Baugh and used to tell stories about his exploits. Dad said he also had heard about how, when

Sam himself became a coach—at Hardin-Simmons—he would come out at halftime during games and hold punting and passing clinics. Fans were almost as eager to see the old Redskins quarterback’s pinpoint passing and precision punting as they were to see the game itself. Not something you see every day, right?

Anyway, *Sports Illustrated* told me I would have to get to Rotan, Texas, for the photo shoot. I had no idea where Rotan was, but the magazine told me I could hitch a ride on the private plane that was ferrying the film crew to West Texas. They would pick me up in New Orleans, and then we would fly together to Snyder, not far from Sam’s ranch near Rotan.

The plan worked perfectly until we got to Snyder and couldn’t find a vehicle big enough to transport the six-person film and photo crew, all the equipment, and myself. That’s how we ended up piling into the biggest car in town, a long, black hearse, to get to Sam’s Double Mountain Ranch. I made sure I didn’t sit in the back.

I’ll never forget that day at the ranch. It was just a very, very special day for me.

Throughout the day, while the film crews were setting up, Sam and I got to visit with each other, just the two of us. I got to ask him about O’Brien, about Coach Vaught. I asked what it was like playing in Washington during the ’40s. I remember I asked him whether he had met any presidents during his playing days.

He told me he didn’t give much thought to Washington, D.C., or politics, or presidents. He was there to play football, to do the best he could. Once the season was over, he would pack his bags and head home to Rotan to ride horses and rope and be a cowboy. Life on the ranch was his passion, that and football.

Here’s what else I remember: Sam Baugh was a world champion cusser and tobacco-chewer. He usually had his spitter right beside him. Fortunately, he could hit that coffee can as accurately as he could hit a receiver during his playing days.

I also learned that he was a man who knew his own mind and wasn’t afraid to express it. At one point during the day, one of the photographers came over to us with an idea. “Sammy,” he said, “I’d like to get the two of y’all pitching horseshoes together.”

That was fine with me but not with Sam. “I don’t pitch horseshoes,” Sammy told him.

“Well, you know, Sammy, just kind of for the picture, we thought it would be kind of neat having two quarterbacks throwing horseshoes,” the photographer said, all the while getting his camera ready for the shoot.

Sammy aimed a stream of tobacco at the grass (not at the photographer) and looked up at the man. "I don't know if you couldn't hear me the first time," he said. "I don't pitch horseshoes."

That was the end of that.

In the photo that ran in the magazine, Sam is chewing tobacco and I'm sitting beside him drinking iced tea. The "Mail Pouch" chewing tobacco thermometer on the wall of the shed behind us registers 105 degrees. We're just sort of sitting there shooting the bull about football and whatever else came to mind. It was, to me, a more appropriate picture than us pitching horseshoes would have been.

A friend of Sam's, Bob O'Day, told me that the Cotton Bowl people had been after Sam for years to come back to Dallas for a ceremony. (He and his fellow Horned Frogs played in the inaugural Cotton Bowl game.) Sam would always tell them, "Just move that Cotton Bowl to Rotan, and I'll be there in a heartbeat."

Once again, it kind of told you who he was. He was a man who, as long as it didn't hurt anybody, was going to do things his way.

Sam told me that day at the ranch that he still enjoyed football and especially liked watching Troy Aikman, the superb quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys. He also told me he enjoyed watching me play. From that day on, he said, he would follow my career even more closely. That made me feel good.

I left the ranch that day—in the hearse—with great respect for Sam Baugh. I never saw him again, but we stayed in touch.

Sam died eight years later, on December 17, 2008. That next Sunday we played Jacksonville, and on my wristband I wrote "SB," in tribute to my friend. As it turned out, I had a Sammy Baugh-quality day against the Jaguars: 17 straight completions to open the game, 29 of 34 completions overall for 364 yards, three touchdowns in a game that clinched a playoff spot for us.

"I was slinging it tonight," I remember telling reporters. "We were slinging it tonight."

Who knows, maybe somewhere up above that evening, Sammy Baugh was smiling—and, I'm guessing, slingin' a couple of affectionate cuss words my way as well. Sammy Baugh was quite a guy.

Peyton Manning

Indianapolis, Indiana