

## SPORTING LEGENDS: JOE NAMATH

**SPORT: AMERICAN FOOTBALL**

**COMPETITIVE ERA: 1965 - 1978**

Joseph William Namath was born May 31, 1943 in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was an American football quarterback for the American Football League's New York Jets in the 1960s.

He is best known for predicting his team's unlikely victory in the third AFL-NFL World Championship Game, over Don Shula's NFL Baltimore Colts.



Namath was born in the Pittsburgh suburb of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania and was a star player in football, as well as basketball and baseball, while in high school.

When he graduated he received offers from six Major League Baseball teams, but decided instead to avail himself of one of the many offers from college football programs, and attended the University of Alabama, playing under coach Paul "Bear" Bryant from 1962-65. During this period the Crimson Tide returned to being a national force in college football.

Despite having suffered a serious knee injury in his senior year, Namath was the number-one draft pick in the AFL the year he graduated from Alabama, and signed a contract with the AFL's New York Jets the day after starring in the Orange Bowl. This knee injury, which caused his knees to swell up with fluid and require periodic draining, plagued Namath for the rest of his career.

## SPORTING LEGENDS: JOE NAMATH

On some occasions, Namath had to have his knee drained at halftime so that he could finish a game. Later in life, long after he left football, he had to have knee replacement surgery on both legs.

In the 1965 college draft, Namath was passed up by the NFL as "too expensive". Signed to the AFL's New York Jets team by Hall of Fame owner Sonny Werblin, Namath was the first pro quarterback to pass for 4,000 yards in a season (1967).

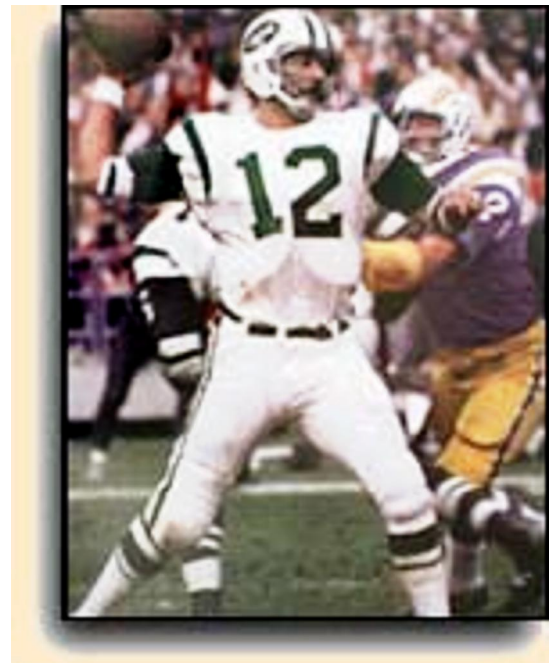
He did so in only 14 games, the standard length of the pro football season at the time, a feat which remains a record for 14-game seasons. He was a three-time American Football League All-Star, although plagued with knee injuries through much of his career. Still, he produced many exceptional performances, one of which came in the 1968 AFL title game, when he threw three touchdown passes to lead New York to a 27-23 win over the defending American Football League Champion Oakland Raiders. This 1968 season earned him the Hickok Belt as top professional athlete of the year.

Namath was an AFL All-Star four times, in 1965, 1967, 1968 and 1969; and a Pro Bowler in 1972. He is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, the Jets' all-time team, and the All-Time All-AFL Team.

The apex of his career was almost certainly his role in the Jets' win over the Colts in the third AFL-NFL World Championship Game, now referred to as Super Bowl III (but not at that time; the designation of Super Bowls by Roman numerals was yet to come).

The Colts were touted as "the greatest football team in history". Former NFL star and coach Norm Van Brocklin ridiculed the AFL before the game, saying "This will be Namath's first professional football game." Writers from NFL cities insisted it would take the AFL several more years to be truly competitive with the NFL.

Much of the hype surrounding the game was related to how it would either prove or disprove the proposition that the AFL teams were truly worthy of being allowed to merge with the NFL; the first two such games had resulted in blowout victories for the previous NFL champions, the Green Bay Packers, and the Colts were probably even more favoured in most circles of "knowledgeable" fans than the Packers had been.



## SPORTING LEGENDS: JOE NAMATH



Joe Namath had all the necessary physical attributes to be one of the NFL's top stars.

Three days before the game, Namath responded to a heckler with the now-famous line: "We're going to win Sunday. I guarantee you." His words made headlines across the country but were dismissed as mere bravado by most observers.

In the game, however, Namath backed up his boast and showed that his success against tough American Football League competition had more than prepared him to take on the NFL.

The Colts' vaunted defense was unable to contain the Jets' running or passing game, while their ineffective offense gave up four interceptions to the Jets. Namath was the game's MVP, completing eight passes to George Sauer alone, for 133 yards.

Namath acquired legendary status for American Football League fans, as the symbol of their league's legitimacy and the patron saint of underdogs.

The game marked a change in eras for professional football, which had long been symbolised by the Colts' Johnny Unitas and his crewcut and high-top, antiquated football shoes; the insertion by Shula of Unitas into the game in the second half after his having missed almost the entire season due to injury smacked of desperation and was in any event "too little too late", but the contrast in styles between the staid, conservative Unitas and the flamboyant, long-haired Namath was almost impossible to miss, and seemed to symbolise a change in American culture than ran far deeper than just football.

## SPORTING LEGENDS: JOE NAMATH



Joe Namath had arguably the best pin-point throwing accuracy of his generation.

In the twilight of his career Namath was traded by the Jets to the Los Angeles Rams. Namath hoped to revitalise his by-then flagging career.

But by this point his effectiveness as a quarterback was greatly reduced by mobility problems related to his numerous knee injuries and the general ravages of a long period of time playing professional football at such a high level, as well as his "hard and fast" lifestyle; he retired from the Rams after a single season and went on to a minor career as an actor in several movies.

He was also used as a colour analyst on broadcasts of NFL games for a while, including the 1985 season of Monday Night Football, but never seemed to be particularly comfortable, or particularly talented, in this role. Joe guest-starred in a 1997 episode of The Simpsons, warning against the dangers of vapour lock.

Namath's nickname was "Broadway Joe"; he is sometimes called "Joe Willie Namath", a characterisation popularized by Howard Cosell. He originated the fad of wearing a full-length fur coat on the sidelines, a habit which was adopted by many players after him.

He also appeared in television advertisements both during and after his playing career, most notably for shaving cream (in which he was shaved by Farrah Fawcett) and pantyhose; they contributed to his becoming something of a pop-culture icon.

## SPORTING LEGENDS: JOE NAMATH



### Scott Burton's Final Thought

Joe Namath is kind of a national treasure for many Americans who grew up during the 60s and 70s.

A great American footballer, yes, but he was also one of the very first sports celebrities.

His famous #12 jersey even made an appearance in the 1989 movie *Ghostbusters 2* which says something!

Namath was also popular off the field, especially with the ladies (which he indulged in happily) and was known for his love of the New York nightlife. Because of this, he was dubbed "Broadway Joe" by the New York press.

Namath became a household name and gave the Jets and the AFL the respectability they were so desperate to have. Namath continued his all-star performances in New York, although he never again played in the Super Bowl.

For several years, he was the entertainer of the NFL (the AFL merged with the NFL in 1970) and even dabbled in movies and television (including a memorable performance in pantyhose for a commercial).

Namath was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985, and will be remembered not only as a sporting legend, but also as a true sporting celebrity.



The classic image of Joe Willie Namath - ready to launch yet another bullet-pass!