John Elway

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I have a friend who was at Stanford at the same time as John Elway. He too was an athlete but not in one of the high profile money sports. Over the years he has come to detest John Elway especially the Denver quarterback's success. My friend claims that with every million dollars and every big game victory, Elway is making him look bad. My friend is yet to win a big game or make a million, although he continues to have hope for the lottery.

I relate this story to illustrate the point that not everyone loves John Elway, not everyone sees his retirement as a sad moment. Some, and not just in Cleveland, are rejoicing over Elway's departure.

For the past several days we have been reading about "the drive," of which there seem to be thousands. There were two in 1984 against San Diego, four in '85 against four different teams. There were forty game winning drives in all, as well as a host of game-tying drives. The most famous, of course, was the one in the 1987 AFC Championship game against the helpless Cleveland Browns. This one came a year after the game tying drive in the AFC Championship game against the very same Browns.

Think of all those fans in those forty games. For every Denver fan who loved Elway for his amazing feats, how many fans across the league hated him? How many people had their Sunday afternoons and evenings darkened by John Elway?

Over the years I have not come to love John Elway. I do respect his achievements and do admire him for his creativity and leadership at the quarterback position, but overall I can't say I find him loveable. In fact on most of those days I watched him work his magic in "a drive," I would rather have seen him fail. I often have wondered why this is so. What is it about Elway that doesn't allow me to rejoice in his achievements? Or what is it about me?

Well, I must say that for all the hoopla about Elway and "the drive," he was not the first to display this ability and indeed he may not be the best. Many would argue that John Unitas was the master of the drive, his most famous coming in the 1958 NFL championship overtime game, which is generally seen as the game that boosted the popularity of pro football as a television sport.
I can also remember the endless arguments about whether Norm Snead or Sonny Jergenson was the best clock manager in the NFL. I must say that for getting the ball down the field in the two-minute drill, Sonny was the best I have ever seen.

In addition there is something about the Elway style with which I am not comfortable. The line between self-confidence and cockiness is a fine one, and to a great extent it is crossed more in the eye of the beholder than by the practitioner. If I liked Elway I would see him as confident, because I don't, I find him unbearably arrogant and cocky.

The one time I liked his cockiness, or at least the outcome of it, was when he came out of Stanford and told the Baltimore Colts not to draft him, that he wouldn't play for them if they did. Then Elway took his considerable athletic skills and went to baseball forcing the Colts to trade him. I must say for as much as I loved someone putting it to a NFL owner, I was uncomfortable with the whining and smugness of this brat from Stanford.

I was uncomfortable with the power he wielded against Dan Reeves, even though Reeves had it coming for his Dallas connections and holier-than-thou demeanor. Most of the time I would have loved this kind of thing. Rebelling against authority has always captured my admiration, so why not with Elway?

In the end it may be that he reminded me too much of those kids who must have their way: the spoiled brats, the whining wonders, the kids who will simply take their ball and go home if the game is not played on their terms. It is El's Way or No Way. And what is worse, in the end he got away with it and became the star of two straight Super Bowls, which seems to have obliterated the memory of the three preceding losses.

I am also a bit put off by the fact that Elway postponed his official retirement in deference to the shootings at Columbine High School. Cynic that I am I find myself struck by two results of that decision. It has meant that we have talked about his departure for many more days than we might have, and now the front page of the newspapers, even in Denver, will be able to concentrate on Elway's Exodus and wallow in the memory of his greatness.

Finally I fear what seems likely to follow. Reports out of Denver over the past few years indicate that John Elway has been
pressing the flesh, kissing babies, and appearing in those unmistakable venues frequented only by someone running for something.

I fear that John Elway is about to give us the gift of himself as political leader. I fear we will have to listen to the babbling of another successful athlete who mistakes his achievements for the validation of the American dream, as proof that anything is possible in America, and then wonders why all people everywhere can not succeed like themselves.

So goodbye John! Thanks for the memories and yes you were a great player. But John, stay away! Please! J.C. Watts and Steve Largent are already more than I can bear.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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