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To the rescue; **Joe Montana** returns to South Bend to warn about high blood pressure

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SOUTH BEND -- They reminisced Tuesday morning about old college pranks and pratfalls from 30 years ago, with the subject of football just being peripherally grazed.

"I think he gets enough of that from me after the losses," former Notre Dame quarterback great **Joe Montana** said of his old school acquaintance, Irish head football coach Charlie Weis.

"And I do call him after every loss. I never call him when he wins. Charlie said, 'Why do you do that?' I said, 'Everybody calls you when you win. I'm not going to give you sympathy. I'm just going to see how you're doing.' "

Montana's main motivation for being in South Bend, though, was to raise awareness about high blood pressure -- totally independent of ND's 0-5 record and its 21-point underdog status against UCLA (4-1) in the Rose Bowl Saturday night.

Montana has been traveling the country intermittently with cardiologist Dr. James M. Rippe since 2002, the year Montana was diagnosed with high blood pressure.

"There is a link to stress," Rippe said, "but it's not what you think. There's a difference between tension and hypertension. And one of the great messages that comes out of this campaign is if **Joe Montana** can have high blood pressure, anybody can."

Actually it is estimated that 72 million people in this country, or nearly one in three adult Americans, suffer from high blood pressure, according to Rippe. Sixty-seven percent of the people who have high blood pressure do not have it under control, and a third of the people with high blood pressure don't even know they have it.

"They call it 'The Silent Killer' for a reason, because there are no symptoms

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with this" said Montana, now 51. "When I was diagnosed with it back in 2002, I knew I had a family history of it, but I just never thought it would affect me. Luckily for me, my wife sternly suggested that I go to the doctor once a year since I retired (from pro football). Had it not been for that, I would have never known, because it was from one year to the next that I was diagnosed."

The four-time Super Bowl champ, who also helped lead Notre Dame to the 1977 national title, is trying to educate people through a program called BP Success Zone (bpsuccesszone.com).

Among the threads the Montana and Rippe discussed Tuesday:

If you don't take care of your blood pressure and manage it, it will ultimately kill you.

It's not just getting your blood pressure measured, it's staying with your doctor, because half the people who have high blood pressure will require two or more medicines. "That's exactly what Joe requires," Rippe said.

Young people tend to underestimate their risk. There's a 20 percent chance in your 20s you'll have high blood pressure, and it increases 10 percent in each decade (30 percent in your 30s, 40 percent in your 40s, etc.)

"If we could move the needle 1 percent, that's saving 20 times more people than who die every year of AIDS in this country," Rippe said. "So this is a huge opportunity, and Joe is a big part of it, because he opens a lot of doors.

"We're not looking for a cure. We have a cure, a lot of cures, good cures. If we could get people to do what Joe did, we could save a lot of lives."

Montana admitted he's much less concerned about the state of the Notre Dame football program, these days. He feels it is in good hands.

He sees some parallels between where the Irish are this season and Montana's first year in the pros under legendary NFL coach Bill Walsh, in which the San Francisco 49ers went 2-14 in 1979. They followed that season with a 6-10 campaign in 1980 and then won the Super Bowl in 1981.

"The thing you looked at and the way you could see Bill Walsh knew what he was doing was you could see the attitude change," said Montana, a backup on the '79 team who then took over as the starter midway through 1980. "You could see young guys moving in, and guys who weren't productive were pushed out. That allowed the team to play at a different level for a longer period of time. You could just see the confidence level changing in the guys that were there.

"On the 2-14 team, you'd see guys laughing on the sidelines. But on the 6-10 teams, guys were starting to get mad we were losing, which is a big difference. Let's face it, you're having a down year at Notre Dame and you're playing the schedule you're playing. And it's not getting any easier at this point. I think Charlie's looking at who's playing hard and not giving up.

"You've got to figure out who really wants to be here next year, because realistically this has become the preseason for next year."

Montana says in freshman quarterback Jimmy Clausen is a nice building block toward 2008.

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"I couldn't have done what he's doing as a freshman," Montana said. "If I had to play as a true freshman, I would have had lunch and dinner served to me. I wasn't even close to being ready.

"Jimmy's accurate, he's strong-armed and he's tough-willed. You can't rattle his confidence. He's got that air about him. I think Jimmy's got a pretty good future."

Personnel matters

Weis asserted that freshman Jimmy Clausen will start at quarterback Saturday night at UCLA -- if he is healthy. The question is how healthy is he?

Clausen was pulled in the third quarter of Saturday's loss at Purdue with a hip injury. Backup Evan Sharpley threw for more yards in less than a half (208) than Notre Dame had amassed in total offense in any of its first four games. He also threw two TD passes and an interception.

"(Clausen) is supposed to be set and ready to go," Weis said. "I have to see that. Some guys are (supposedly) set and ready to go, and they don't play for two weeks. Other guys are set and ready to go, and they're ready to go that day."

Weis said Clausen has been the more accurate passer in practice consistently, and that's largely what makes it an easy decision to keep the freshman No. 1, provided he is healthy.

"Evaluation is based on a whole bunch of things, not just one game," Weis said.

Weis gives ND's leading receiver, junior David Grimes, a 50-50 chance of playing Saturday night. Grimes suffered an ankle injury against Purdue.

The status of injured starters Dan Wenger (offensive guard) and Justin Brown (defensive end) will be determined later in the week.

Alive and kicking

To better gauge how his kickers might handle pressure in game situations, Weis had sophomore Nate Whitaker and freshman Brandon Walker have a little competition during the media window at Tuesday's practice.

Both kickers had to deal with a live rush, meaning there was no holding back when it came to blocking the kicks. The ball was hiked from the same spot on the field for each of the kickers, but each had a different holder and Whitaker tended to set up a half-yard or yard deeper than Walker.

The results? Walker was 4-of-5, missing wide right from 37, while making good for 27, 32, 40 and 43 yards. Whitaker was 2-of-5. His makes were from 27 and 33. He was wide right at 37, wide left at 40 and 44 yards.

Both struggled Saturday in the Irish 33-19 loss to Purdue. Each missed an extra point. Walker also had a 35-yard field goal blocked. Whitaker did finally convert an extra point in the fourth quarter, but missed earlier in that sequence when Purdue was flagged for an offsides penalty.

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GRAPHIC: Pro Hall of Famer and former Notre Dame quarterback **Joe Montana** talks about high blood pressure Tuesday morning in South Bend and the need for all to take steps to keep it in check. Tribune Photo/GREG SWIERCZ Irish vs. Bruins
Who: Notre Dame (0-5) vs. UCLA (4-1) When: Saturday, 8 p.m. EDT Where: Rose Bowl; Pasadena, Calif. (92,542) TV: ABC (regional) Radio: WNDV-FM (92.9), WDND-AM (1490) Quotable: "You're going to make mistakes. You have to be willing to risk mistakes or you won't move the team. The quarterback can't be afraid to throw the ball." Former ND standout **Joe Montana** On the evolution of a young quarterback

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