

A BANTAM STARFIRE BOOK

The heartwarming true
story of courage and love
between John Cappelletti
and his brother Joey

Something for Joey

Story and Teleplay by Jerry McNeely

Novelization by Richard E. Peck



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AN UNFORGETTABLE STORY OF COURAGE AND LOVE

Something for Joey is based on actual events in the lives of John Cappelletti, the football player, and his kid brother Joey, a victim of leukemia.

As a rising football star at Pennsylvania State, and as a naturally warm and generous person, John became Joey's idol. The kid brother lived for football weekends when he could see his big brother star on the field. But the older brother was in turn inspired by Joey's courage in dealing with pain every moment of his life. In accepting the 1973 Heisman Trophy, awarded annually to the best college player, John Cappelletti startled an audience of dignitaries and celebrities with a tear-filled and moving tribute to Joey, who died in April 1976. This book tells the true, courageous story of the football hero and his heroic young brother.

PROLOGUE

Two brothers. A family. A public ceremony at which years of love and concern culminated in a sharp, shining moment. During the days that followed that ceremony millions shared in the moment through newspaper and television reports. Many told the story to one another and briefly relived the glow of it. But when had the story begun?

Start where you like. Begin with John Cappelletti's arrival in America, four years old at the time, clutching the hands of his immigrant parents. Or on a Saturday afternoon nineteen years later, when the grown John Cappelletti married Anne Bianco in Philadelphia's St. Mary Magdalene Church, at the same altar where Anne's mother had been married thirty-five years before.

With the arrival of Martin, John and Anne's first-born, the young couple became a family. John Jr. followed, then Michael, and Jean, and Joey. And though the word "family" doesn't change over the years, the meaning of it, and the sense of what that family is, grew and deepened with each new child.

During those years the children learned from their parents, and from one another, and became individuals: Martin, bright and studious, more mercurial than the others; John and Michael, each in his own way a fine athlete; Jean, the dark-eyed replica of her mother; and Joey. No one can guess what they might have be-

come without the experiences they shared. What they are—what they have together—is the story.

On December 13th, 1973, John Cappelletti, Jr., stood before nearly four thousand well-wishers in the Grand Ballroom of the New York Hilton Hotel and shocked that sophisticated crowd into stunned, tear-filled silence, by presenting his younger brother Joey with a gift. He dedicated to Joey a trophy he had just won.

The trophy itself wasn't the gift, only the symbol of a richer gift that can't be photographed, or weighed, or physically handled.

This is a true story, about a remarkable family. A story about two brothers, John and Joey: the first a superbly-conditioned athlete of twenty-one; the other, half that age and suffering from leukemia.

This is a love story.



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FALL 1971

A college football weekend is special. At Pennsylvania State University, it usually begins early on Friday afternoon. Local fans stroll to the practice fields located beside the large dormitory complex called East Halls. Alumni, parents and friends of the team begin arriving, parking their cars in one of the large, open grass fields nearby. Carrying cameras on bright days, on rainy days huddled under brightly colored golf umbrellas or hunched over in yellow slickers, they gather to watch the Friday afternoon drills. For many, it's their only chance to see the team close up, to get a pre-game look at who's healthy and ready for Saturday's action. It's a chance to start building the heady, exhilarating tension that reaches its climax on Saturday afternoon. This September Friday was no different. Many attentive fans nodded to one another. The regulars were there.

Seated in temporary bleachers near the practice field, wearing light jackets, sweaters, shirtsleeves, thirty or thirty-five people watched together in the cool autumn air. Nearer the field, leaning against the rust-red pickets of a snowfence that separated the actual playing surface from the spectators, stood two local football fans in their forties. One wore a gray windbreaker, the other a checked jacket and an orange hunting cap perched askew on top of his bald head. Watching the drill, they paid no attention to the dark-haired boy of eight who stood nearby.

On the field, the Nittany Lions clapped and shouted encouragement to one another as they ran through the light, day-before-the-game workout. They wore sweatpants, numbered jerseys and helmets but no pads. It was a no-contact drill, a two-thirds speed imitation of a real game, a rehearsal of various offensive and de-

fensive formations. At one end of the field, two punters alternated sending spirals lofting high against the blue September sky, while pairs of offensive ends and special-team linesmen sprinted downfield under those punts to tag the back who caught the ball.

Meanwhile, nearer the two local fans, the Penn State offensive backfield ran through plays, brushing up already well-drilled and nearly automatic moves. But there was no real contact. Linesmen pulled their blocks and lunged up off their three-point stances into a high crouch, their folded arms extended in front of them to ward off the defensive linesmen charging at them.

Offensive and defensive coaches, all specialists, worked with different units. At the west end of the field a place-kicker practiced field goals from some twenty yards out. One after another, balls popped from the holder's grip to tumble end-over-end between the white-painted uprights.

To someone unfamiliar with football—to a European, say, used to watching the clean, open sweep of a soccer line—the scene might have appeared chaotic. Too much activity, perhaps, in too many places, of too many kinds. But circling through the workout was the head coach, Joe Paterno. A slight, dark-haired man in glasses, he was obviously in charge. Though the players shouted, he spoke quietly—in a voice that carried the authority earned in twenty-two years as a fixture at Penn State. Joe Paterno was one of America's most successful college coaches.

With a dozen different drills simultaneously underway on different parts of the field, it didn't seem possible that one man could keep his eye on them all, but Joe Paterno did. From time to time he shouted. "Stay with your block, Pete! You came off too soon!" Or he walked over to one of the halfbacks, bent his knees slightly to lean forward and pantomime a position he wanted the back to try. Instructions over, he passed on to the next group.

The two fans at the fence were watching the coach, each trying to impress the other with his inside knowl-

edge of what was going on. The man in the orange cap said, "I had a nice chat with Coach Paterno the other day."

"Sure you did."

The short boy now kneeling beside them, and peering between pickets in the snowfence, looked up.

"Well, I did."

"And you told him what's what, didn't you?"

"No," said Orange-cap. "I only meant, I ran into him in the drugstore. We stood there and talked a long time."

"What about?"

The boy glanced from one man to the other.

"Huh?"

"I said, what did you talk about?" The man turned from the field and fixed his friend with a stare. "Come on, let me have the whole story."

"Oh, you know—how the team was doing, like that. We just talked about . . . well, you know."

Paterno, watching the drill, moved closer to the sidelines. The second man looked at his boasting friend expectantly and with a small gesture pointed out that the coach was standing within earshot. Still the boy watched with interested eyes. Finally the braggart, challenged by his friend's stare, gathered his determination and said, "How's it going, Coach?"

Puzzled, Paterno looked around for a moment before locating the source of the greeting. "We're working on it," he said. Then Paterno noticed the boy. He grinned. He turned away from the players and walked over to the fence. "Joey," he said. "How you doing, buddy?"

"Hi, Coach."

Paterno reached over the fence to shake Joey's hand. "See you in the locker room tomorrow?"

"You bet!"

The two men stared at Joey and the coach.

"Thataboy," Paterno said. Then he turned back to the drilling players.

"You're a friend of his?" Orange-cap said to the boy, pointing at Paterno.

"Yes, sir."

"He lets you in the locker room and everything, huh?"

"Yes, he does."

The other man said, "Well. The kid's a regular celebrity."

"Not me," Joey told him. "But my brother is. He's on the team."

"Yeah?" said the boaster. "What's his name?"

"John Cappelletti. He plays defensive back."

The man thought a moment, then said, "I don't think I've heard of him."

Joey's answer was quiet but confident. "You will. There he is now."

A pass play was developing in front of them. One of the defensive backs back-pedaled toward the sidelines, his eyes on the flanker who'd faked inside and was now sprinting a deep-out pattern. The ball was in the air; the back cut left to tighten his coverage on the flanker but his feet crossed with the move and he slammed to the turf a few feet away from his embarrassed little brother. Muttering, he lay on his back while the grinning flanker cradled the ball in his huge hands and slowed to a trot in the clear.

Joey glanced up uneasily at the two men, then spoke quietly. "Nice try, Yo-yo."

John Cappelletti lay on the ground a second longer, a wry grin on his face as he looked at Joey. "I'll get it together one of these days, Hoss." Then he sprang to his feet and trotted back to the defensive huddle.

Slight, slender, Joey Cappelletti no longer looked like the sort of boy you nickname "Hoss," though he had as a very young child, when his stocky build had earned him the nickname taken from TV's *Bonanza*, and "Hoss" Cartwright. He watched his brother until he couldn't pretend not to hear any more: his mother was calling him from the stands and he knew he'd better respond. But first he waved to her, hoping that would be enough.

"Don't you bother Johnny," she called. "Come back here."

Joey looked up once more at the two men and their approving smiles, then ran to the bleachers.

The rest of his family was watching from there. His father, John Cappelletti, Sr.—a tall, slender man in his forties—had a warm smile on his face as Joey approached. Beside John Sr. sat Anne Cappelletti, a pretty, dark-haired woman a bit younger than her husband. Joey's sister Jean, a sophomore in high school, and Michael—a broad-shouldered high school athlete—were next. And at the end of the wooden bench sat Marty, the oldest of the Cappelletti children, out of college for a year and a reporter on a local newspaper. Beside Marty, holding his hand, was his wife Joyce. Striking enough in any setting, Joyce really stood out now—a blue-eyed blonde among the dark-haired Cappellettis.

Joyce and Marty slid to one side and Joyce patted the bench, inviting Joey to join them.

He pointed toward the field. "Mom, I can see better over there. Can't I go back?"

His father nodded.

"Don't get in the way," Anne said.

But Joey had already bolted off, his eyes on his brother, who was drifting back to cover a pass receiver angling downfield into his zone. Both John and the receiver leaped at the same instant, a flurry of scrambling arms in mid-air. When they hit the turf it was John who clutched the ball to his chest.

Clapping and cheering wildly, Joey couldn't resist a gloating glance at the two men beside him, both still standing there. They looked from Joey to Number 22, proudly holding the ball aloft in one hand as he trotted back to the line of scrimmage. Joey stopped short of saying "I told you so," but the expression was there in his eyes.

Paterno blew a pair of shrill blasts on his whistle. "All right, that's it," he shouted. "Two laps and inside!" Then he began the long walk to the fieldhouse across the way. His assistants joined him in low-voiced conversation as they crossed the field, while the players began to circle the track. Some sprinted as if eager

to complete their two laps and head for a hot shower; others trotted, talking as they finished out the laps, reluctant to leave the field. But Joey's eyes were fixed on one figure—the number 22 in white numerals on the back of his navy blue jersey—his brother John, running with the others.

The rest of the Cappelletti family stepped down from the bleachers and began to walk along the fence toward the boy. As John neared them in his circuit of the field he reached over the low fence and seized Joey under the arms. Almost effortlessly he hoisted his brother up and onto the field.

It was one of Joey's good days. Joey spent most of the week looking forward to Saturday, when he could watch John play football. And on days like this, on those rare occasions when the entire family came up to Penn State to watch Friday practice as well as the Saturday game, Joey's personal sky was brightest of all. *His* week had a three-day weekend.

John took his hand, and they crossed the nearly empty practice field toward the locker room. Even without pads, John was fully twice Joey's size. No one could misunderstand the implication of strength present in his broad shoulders. But when he shortened his stride to match Joey's and draped an arm around the younger boy, an observer would have noticed the tenderness there as well. They crossed the field, John's head canted and a soft smile on his lips as he listened to Joey's excited chatter.

2

Upper Darby is a suburb of Philadelphia, a community of two- and three-story homes of stone, stucco and frame construction. The Cappelletti house stands behind a low privet hedge that separates the lawn from the sidewalk. A pair of bay windows filled with potted

house plants swells from the front of the house, one on either side of the central door. On this late November afternoon, the street unseasonably warm even under the shade of the large elms that bordered it, the front door stood ajar. A young boy's laughter drifted out into the street.

"You may be a big-deal football player, but as a wrestler, you're the pits!" It was Joey speaking, between bouts of laughter.

Joey and his older brother John were wrestling on the living room floor. John lay pinned to the mat—a floral-patterned carpet. Joey straddled him victoriously, his knees resting on John's spread-eagled arms.

"Let me tell you something, pal," John said. "You're all wind and no muscle." He grunted heavily, seized Joey's shoulders and flipped the boy over onto the floor with a loud thud.

"What are you two up to in there?" Anne Capelletti called from the kitchen, on her way to find out.

"Try that again and see how far you get," Joey said.

"Johnny, now stop it!" Anne entered, still dusting her hands on her apron.

Joey said, "I'm all right, Mom."

"Just getting a lesson in humility," John said, grinning.

"It's almost time to leave for the hospital. Go change your clothes, Joey."

"Okay." Joey clambered to his feet. Walking past John, laid back on the floor again, Joey nudged him with his toe. "I'll get you next time."

"Boy, are you lucky she came in," John said. "Talk about next time! Next time I'll splatter you against the wall."

Joey only laughed and trotted up the stairs.

Their mother shook her head, then returned to the kitchen.

John lay on the floor watching her go. Frowning, he pondered for a moment. Then he followed her.

The kitchen was light and airy, its warmth a reflection of Anne's own. Paneled cabinets, installed by John Sr., hung above the counter tops. The win-

dow over the sink looked into the back yard, where a small, above-ground swimming pool was visible, drained now for the winter and covered with a plastic sheet. Anne was putting the finishing touches to a casserole. She crumbled bread crumbs in her hand to top it.

John hesitated in the doorway. Then, casually, he walked over and picked a sliver of onion from the casserole to chew on. He swung around to lean against the counter. "You all right, Mom?"

"What kind of question is that?" Turning away from John, she fussed with the casserole.

"You seem kind of edgy, that's all. I mean, you're the one who's always wandering around this kitchen like you own the place, singing and—"

"Not today." She still wouldn't meet his concerned eyes.

"I'm sorry. Just a question."

"I guess I didn't hear it." Anne smiled wryly. "What did you ask me?"

"Why are you so down today?" He pulled out a chair and sat at the table to face her, chin propped in cupped hands.

"Because I work under such tension."

"You?" John laughed.

Anne took the Pyrex dish and slid it into the oven. "Sure. If I don't get this in the oven in time, supper's late and I get yelled at."

John smiled but he wasn't ready to be so easily put off. There was an edginess about her he couldn't define. "Joey's okay, isn't he?"

Anne twisted the dish around on the oven rack, keeping her face averted. "He's fine, as far as I can tell."

The front door slammed. "Anybody home?" John Sr. called out.

Rolling her eyes for John's benefit, Anne answered the familiar voice. "No. We all left for Bermuda!"

"Why didn't you take me along?" John Senior—Dad Cappelletti—entered the kitchen with his jacket in one hand, a lunch bucket in the other. He was