

TEN QUESTIONS

Joe Bellino

ACG interviews the U.S. Naval Academy's 1960 Heisman Trophy winner.

Editor's Note: Our January 2014 issue featured an interview with Pete Dawkins, West Point's soldier-scholar-athlete who won the 1958 Heisman Trophy. This issue we give the Naval Academy "equal time" by interviewing Joe Bellino, Navy's superb halfback who won the 1960 Heisman.

Joe Bellino has lived the American Dream with *three* successful careers: athletics, the military and business. His seminal moment was winning the 1960 Heisman Trophy as a U.S. Naval Academy college football star. He served on active duty in the U.S. Navy with tours in Cuba and Vietnam, played pro football for three years with the Boston Patriots, and today is the director of national accounts for one of the world's largest auto auction companies. Along the way, Bellino served 29 years in the U.S. Naval Reserve, retiring as a captain.

ACG How has college football changed from when you won the 1960 Heisman Trophy? In college, you were a running back, you caught and threw passes, punted, returned kicks and played defense.

BELLINO: When I played at Navy, we were always in the top 10 in the country, as was Army. That was because the rules then included single-platoon football, and now it's

two-platoon football – offense and defense. We only dressed about 33 players in any game; maybe 20 guys were on the field most of the time, so I very seldom left the field. Also, we only needed then about 15 blue-chip [top-rated] athletes at the Naval Academy, and now colleges need about 50 blue-chip athletes to compete.

ACG What are your memories of playing in Army-Navy games, college football's 114-year-old rivalry?

BELLINO: I was fortunate to win two of the three games [in which I played], and the one we lost was to Army's Pete Dawkins in his Heisman Trophy year [1958], when [Army was] ranked number one in the country. They were always great games.

A memory was intercepting a pass at the end zone near the end of my senior year's game, when we were ahead 17-12, to solidify the win. John Cox, our publicity director, said after the game, "Hey, Joe, that interception won you the Heisman Trophy."

I smiled and said, "John, that interception prevented me from being the goat of the game," because just prior to that interception, I had fumbled the ball at our own 17-yard line, and Army was going in for a score.

ACG The 2012 Army-Navy game produced the midshipmen's 11th straight win and a heart-breaking loss for the cadets. What are your thoughts on that game?

BELLINO: At times I feel like maybe it's time for Army to win a game. It's really not a good way to end a college sports career, not having defeated the other Service Academy. I know for me, having won my last game against Army, it's something that keeps bouncing back year after year when you meet other graduates of West Point, so it's one-upmanship. All I can say is good for Navy, bad for Army. I was on the field [after the 2012 game] and witnessed the sadness in the Army players' eyes.

ACG After graduating from Annapolis, where were you assigned?

BELLINO: I was on active duty for four years, spending two years on a destroyer out of Norfolk, Va. I was also very active in the [1962] Cuban Missile Crisis, with my ship being down there in one of the fortifications of our Guantanamo Bay facilities.

After two years aboard the destroyer, I went to minesweeping school and became executive officer of a minesweeper that was homeported in Japan, and during the next two years we had three deployments to Vietnam. It was there, when I was bouncing around the South China Sea, that I got a telegram from the Patriots offering me a chance to go to pro football camp.

ACG What can you tell us about playing pro football with the Boston Patriots?

BELLINO: That was the summer of '65, and I accepted a contract at Patriot camp, resigned my active commission from the Navy, but stayed in the Reserves.



1960. Joe Bellino wins the Heisman Trophy after sweeping the field with 436 first-place votes.

“The Navy is shrinking in size, so it is not a matter of how many ships and how many men you have in the field; [rather,] it’s the equipment they have and the intelligence.”

I played with the Patriots for three years; but unfortunately, the first two years I had a broken ankle. My last year, I was healthy and did very well on punt returns and was also a wide receiver and running back. In my third year, I was picked up by the Cincinnati Bengals in the expansion draft, but at age 30 I was not keen on moving my young family to Cincinnati.

ACG You share Boston and U.S. Navy backgrounds with President John F. Kennedy. What was your relationship with JFK?

BELLINO: My relationship with him started the day I was notified at the Naval Academy that I had won the Heisman Trophy. A sportswriter said, “Joe, you just won the Heisman Trophy to go with the Maxwell, Associated Press, and Chevrolet Player of the Year awards. Is there anything else you would like to accomplish this year?”

I said, “Another guy from Massachusetts did pretty well this year, President-elect Kennedy, so I would like to meet him.” The next day, *The Washington Post* headline was “Bellino wins Heisman Trophy; now wants to meet President-elect Kennedy.”

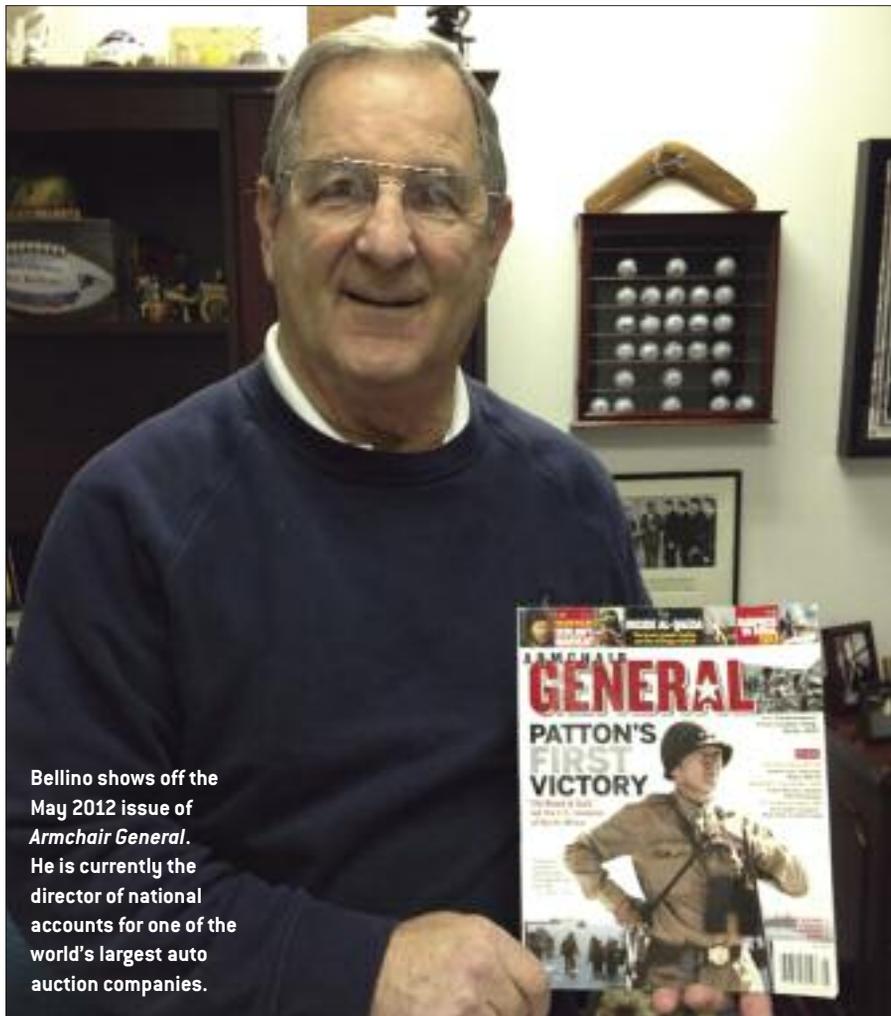
A day later, I got a telegram from JFK saying, “Congratulations, I will send a limousine to the Naval Academy next Saturday, and I want you and all the other boys from Massachusetts to come and have lunch with me at my residence in Georgetown.” So we did, and I have a treasured picture from that day.

The next time I met [JFK] was that summer when, as an ensign at the Naval Academy on special duty, they designated me to deliver our class of 1961 yearbook to the president as commander in chief. I went to the White House and presented him our yearbook, and spent an hour with him in the Oval Office.

ACG Didn’t you also have a friendship with Bob Hope, who loved the military?

BELLINO: At the end of my Naval Academy career, Bob had a show called the “Bob Hope Sports Spectacular” where he awarded “The Outstanding College Football Player” and other sports awards. After the rehearsal, he invited me to his home, and there he asked me to call his son to wish him a happy birthday.

That was the beginning of the relationship that lasted years, where I always got invited to his golf tournament and he always called me



Bellino shows off the May 2012 issue of *Armchair General*. He is currently the director of national accounts for one of the world’s largest auto auction companies.

when he came to Boston. He was my friend, and yes, he was partial to the military.

ACG What are the traits that make great leaders?

BELLINO: Preparation, understanding the mission and your job, knowing your people and making sure that they are trained well.

ACG Besides JFK, what other great leaders have you encountered?

BELLINO: Bill Belichick, whom I have known since he was 5 years old when his dad, Steve, was my assistant coach at the Naval Academy, falls into that category. By knowing the weaknesses and strengths of his own team – and accentuating the strengths – Bill changes his game plan depending on who he is playing. The key is making people believe their leader will help them win the game by

being prepared, having a plan and executing the plan.

ACG Are you interested in military history?

BELLINO: Not so much history as the changing technical aspects. The Navy is shrinking in size, so it is not a matter of how many ships and how many men you have in the field; [rather,] it’s the equipment they have and the intelligence, which has become such an important part of fighting a battle now, making sure that you know where the enemies are. It is no longer about the most men and the most weapons. ★

John Ingoldsby conducted this interview. He is a leading writer on the intersection of sports and the military and is president of IIR Sports & Entertainment Inc. (IIRsports.com), a public relations and media firm in Boston.