

Fields of Success

Raised Expectations

Dr. Joseph Profit

With
Matthew T. Nebel

Foreword by Joe R. Reeder

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FOREWORD

by Joe R. Reeder

As an avid, life-long college and professional football fan, I knew Joe Profit's name long before he ever knew mine. I had heard his name in the news and seen him on TV. I had learned his story of adversity, and seen how he grew into the man he is today. It wasn't until after his days in the NFL that I finally got the privilege to meet Joe, who by then was a prominent Atlanta businessman. But I quickly learned that the person I had seen on TV was only a thin layer of the real Joe Profit.

Following his days as a professional football running back and his short detour through Hollywood, for me, getting to know the "Coach" as a friend, as a father, as my client, and as the inspirational leader he has become has truly been a remarkable experience. I am both honored and delighted to introduce the readers to Joe's autobiography, as each reader is in for a great experience. Joe's indomitable personality and his force of will have allowed him to prevail over countless formidable adversaries and obstacles. Joe redefines the word "perseverance." When I first met him, Joe had taken on one of the world's corporate icons, Southwest Bell, by going after a contract with the United States Army at Sunny Point, North Carolina, one of the world's premier military ammunitions depots. The contracting officers, comforted by working for decades with a corporate icon, did everything in their powers to bypass this determined minority contractor, who was

persistent in seeking to “break in” with the big boys. Joe ultimately prevailed; not only did he win the contract; he won the profound respect of Army officials as well. Sometime later, I again saw this same persistence and ultimate success in La Jolla, California with one of the nation’s largest VA research hospitals, and yet again with the General Services Administration (GSA) in Dallas, Texas, the agency that oversaw the wiring and overall communications throughout the Federal courthouse in Stillwater, Oklahoma. In each of these instances, Joe’s competence, teamwork, perseverance, infectious goodwill and refusal to ever give up overcame obstacles that, to most others, would have been insurmountable.

Every young person reading this book will enjoy Joe’s “mind over matter” philosophy. No matter what the mission, Joe never entertained any excuse for coming up short of success. I saw him hold his own with President Reagan, whom Joe supported for president, and also with top government presidential appointees. Just a few years back, Joe and I, along with a two others traveled to New Orleans four days after Hurricane Katrina hit. We stayed there for two hard days—one with an 82nd Air Borne Division squad patrolling New Orleans Sixth Ward, helping human (and animal) victims in the boiling sun and stench in the aftermath of that devastating disaster. For an entire stinking, scorching day, I witnessed Joe first hand, inspiring the entire squad of 82nd Airborne soldiers, and uplifting the devastated Katrina victims—those whom Joe called, “My People.”

Reminiscing over my years with Joe also reminds me of sobering days I spent with him in a weight room, where Joe consistently showed indefatigable patience and perseverance with those of us lesser endowed (and there were many of us, as Joe was runner up in the Mr. Universe 40-and-over bodybuilding competition).

Joe's broad circle of family and friends, his sheer physicality, his spiritual and mental strength, his confidence, his extraordinary sense of humor, and his stubborn refusal to quit have always carried him far. This force of nature, as I refer to him, has also carried those of us who have been privileged enough to be around him in battle, or to be on his team. Joe Profit's sheer goodness is infectious, and I think that will be true even for those of you fortunate enough to read this book.

Very few who read this life story, and experience Joe's formula for success, can lay claim to the strength of character that has helped Joe surmount the burdens he has faced and overcome literally from birth. Many readers will never get to know Joe personally, but in reading this book he will lift up every reader by some of the experiences that have come with his remarkable and blessed life.

Enjoy!

Joe R. Reeder
Managing Shareholder, Greenberg Traurig, LLP
United States Under Secretary of the Army (1993-1997)

INTRODUCTION

Landing Hard on the Field

With a quiet thump that nobody else in the stadium could hear, the ball sunk deep into my arms. I had been waiting for it my entire life. I had been waiting for things to get better. In that instant, I simultaneously did three things. I kicked up my right leg and started running forward. I shifted the ball into a snug pocket between my chest and my forearm. Lastly, I began to think. A long road had gotten me to where I was in that instant. It was the result of so many lessons and so much continual progress—so many triumphs and failures. The thought of it all was captivating, but I had no more than a flashing moment to let it grace my mind. As I accelerated further down the field, it seemed to wash away in the wake of my footsteps.

I cut left. Going back toward the center of the field, I saw my blockers had spread open a hole just big enough for me to slide through. With a kick of my left leg, I leapt over one of my blockers' legs. A defender reached out and grabbed my shoulder pads, but I shrugged him off and burst past the wall of linemen.

Now my sights were on the field ahead. There were only a few more defenders to beat, and I knew I had more will to win than they had to take me down. I started lifting my legs faster, and I came into a full sprint. The world

brushed past me like the wind, and everything around me whirled into a painted blur. The only things that stayed in place were the stretch of green in front of me, and the pay dirt of the end zone.

Then I felt a blow like thunder on my back. My feet became cinder blocks, and I struggled aimlessly to drag myself forward. I knew a defender had broken free from his blocker and latched onto me. He was pulling me down to the same green grass that had looked so promising only a moment earlier. My knee collided with the earth first. As the rest of my body tumbled to the ground, I still had the ball snug in my hand, and I was buried under a pile. The play was over but the pain was yet to come. Before I could get up off the ground, my tackler grabbed my left leg and extended it backward. It was the worst kind of cheap shot a defensive player could take. A jolt of pain shot haywire through the nerves in my knee, and I cried in pain.

It all took an instant—only a speck of a moment in time—but to me it was my biggest turning point. I looked across the field of my life, and the grass before me started to wither away. It was the moment when I knew everything I had learned, everything I had done and everything I stood for in every field of my life would be tested. In the instant that I was knocked to the ground, I began again to think of the future. I wondered if I would ever get up. I wondered if I would ever play another game. I wondered what lay ahead for me in that yet unknown field.

It was in the fourth game of my career that I tore my ACL. Only a

few months earlier, the Atlanta Falcons had selected me seventh overall in the 1971 NFL draft. I wasn't greeted with Southern hospitality in Atlanta. As soon as their selection was made public, a lot of the fans and media in Atlanta began to ask the same question, "Joe *who?*" Not a lot of people had heard of the running back from Northeast Louisiana University, and even fewer people suggested that I would be drafted as early as I was. The widespread skepticism fell like rain pouring down from me from all sides, and all I had done to earn it was play the best football that I could. It didn't seem fair that my rookie season had to be cut so short, but any amount of complaining wouldn't change a thing.

The statistics indicate that over three quarters of professional athletes become financially stressed or bankrupt just two years after retirement. When I got injured and I lay on the turf clutching my knee, I was presented with two options: push forward and overcome adversity one more time and remain significant, or become a part of that grueling statistic. For many, it wouldn't be such a simple decision. For me, it wasn't a decision at all. I had faced adversity in many forms, all throughout my life, and I had come out a better person every time. By that time in my life, the only thing I knew how to do was push forward.

I believe anyone can achieve success in their own life if they learn to persevere through adversity. I can understand if you don't believe me yet, but all you have to do flip through the following pages and you'll see that it is true.

I'll show you the way I've progressed through the three most challenging fields of my life—the cotton field, the football field and the business field—and the way I've grown, learned lessons and achieved success in each one.

In this book, you'll experience the things that molded my life leading up to and through my career-ending NFL injury on the gridiron. I'll take you from my beginnings in the cotton fields of Louisiana, to my overmatched struggles against the racially segregated world of the Jim Crow South, all the way up to my feats of success in business, in the community, and in life. You will see the way Louisiana's color barrier was broken, paving the way for countless African-American athletes who are now playing on the biggest stages in the world. You will learn through my stories that you truly can prevail if you stay strong and focused through adversity. You will learn that success is an endless battle that involves long-term goals with little successes along the way. You'll also learn why I consider that moment lying injured on the football field to be not only the biggest turning point of my life, but also one of the best things that ever happened to me.

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GROWING UP A PROFIT

Growing Up a Profit with Honor

“Dinner is served!” I heard my mom yell into the hallway. The words shook the house as they blasted through the cracks of our rickety old walls. The trembling power of her voice when she announced dinnertime each night was only ever rivaled by the stampede that would ensue soon after. As soon as the call was heard throughout the house, ten pairs of feet—twenty in all—would storm out their doors and into the hallway, ready to trample anything that stood in their path. The fact that there were so many of us in the family meant that there was no lack of competition. We grew up big and strong not because of how we ate, but rather because we were forced to earn what we ate.

“You’ve gotta be quick!” My mom would say, “Cause there’s eleven of us, but there’s only enough food for ten!”

That was her little joke. It was her way of dealing with the poverty that encased our entire community. She always said you need to make light of the situations—even the worst ones—because if you don’t, they’re never going to get any better. I always admired that, and I learned from it, but at

that time it was hard to envision things getting any better than they were.

The Profit family consisted of my mom, Ethel, my dad, Simon, my four brothers James, Simon Jr., Leroy and David, my four sisters Prudis, Pearl, Barbara and Annie, and me. I was the fifth child overall, born on August 13, 1949. On that day in history, President Harry Truman and his wife appeared on the cover of LOOK Magazine under the headline “The Negro Problem”. The Ku Klux Klan had infiltrated the government in the south, and many minorities from the South had migrated north in hopes of a better life. The “problem” was that the rapid migration led to widespread unemployment, famine and malnutrition in the north. Very few of the migrants were successful. In response, President Truman and his wife did their best to provide for the minorities of the country, but it was too daunting a problem to overcome.

In the long run, it turned out that there wasn't a place in the whole country where a black person was better off, so my family and I kept ourselves in the great south where the lawless Klansmen ran the world. It was in the great south that we had our people and our heritage to lean on—we could turn to each other for support. We all loved each other, because family was all we had. In that time, the only way to survive was to rely on the person who was seated beside you. You needed their help, because there was no way to change the lawless.

We grew up on a sharecropping farm in Lake Providence, Louisiana,

in a home that was built by my dad. It was here that the cotton industry reigned supreme. The few white farm owners made a living, and the countless black and brown workers were left with little more to their names than their ramshackle homes.

You could argue very easily that Lake Providence was a misleading name for the town. Everywhere you looked, there was poverty, pain and hunger and there seemed to be little hope for divine providence. It was, and still is, one of the poorest parishes in the country, with well over half of its families living below the poverty line. Many of those families were either like us, with many children to feed, or they were headed by single parents trying to raise families all on their own. Sometimes they were both. The best you could ever hope for in those days was a good sowing season in the field, so you could earn your share and survive for one more day. After that, all you needed was a little grace from God.

We lived there for the first six years of my life before we moved to Monroe, Louisiana, but we still went back there each summer to pick cotton—the whole family. Even through the years, when one sibling would grow up and move out of the house, they would still come back to the cotton field in the summer. It was a place of meeting—a place that brought us all together as one. It was a very poor, desolate place to live, and sometimes the soil was so dry and cracked that it looked as though there was no hope for the future. But up through those cracks in the dirt, a family was able to grow firm

and strong, ready to beat all odds.

Lessons in the Cotton Field

The first lessons I learned in life all came from the cotton field. The cotton field was where I got my hands dirty for the first time. It was where I learned to be a strong, hard worker. It was where I learned to be a team member. It is where I learned to be persistent.

When I think of my dad's legacy, I always think of him working hard and earning a living out in the cotton field. That is where I picture him because that is where he spent most of his time, whether he liked it or not. He had to stay in the field to support his family. He would come home at the end of the day with cracked and blistered hands; his sore back and grime-filled face that made it look like the cotton had siphoned all the energy from his body. But it was in those cracks and blisters, along with the sweat, grime and pain that graced our home each evening, that I learned what it meant to have a work ethic. I would watch my dad each evening come home each evening after enduring the ruthless beating of fieldwork, and each morning he would get back up and do it again, despite the awareness that it was slowly bringing him to the ground. If it hadn't been for his wife and nine kids, there would have been no reason for him to do this, but he knew right away that the value

in his work transcended his own personal gain. He knew that he was working for all of us—to provide a better life for all of us. That is how I see my dad’s legacy. He sacrificed himself so that my brothers, sisters and I could go on and make the world exponentially better.

I remember the day that my dad “hired” me to help him in the field. I was just nine years old, but it had gotten to the point where he just couldn’t support us all on his own, so he called on the entire family for help—me, my brothers, sisters and even my mom. Among us, there was no hesitation or questioning. We all had seen dad suffer in the field for us, and we knew it was our turn to return the favor. Even though I was only a small boy and I might not have been the best suited for the job at the time, I was excited that I finally had the opportunity to help my dad.

I remember walking out into the field, trailing behind my dad, trying to keep a handle on the tools as they slid around in my small, nine-year-old hands. It was around five thirty in the morning—well before the sun was up and well before anyone else was out there. My eyes were droopy and I yawned with every step I took. But dad looked wide awake.

“We have to be the first ones in the field each morning,” he said, “because that’s when you can get the most work done. That’s when the cotton is still wet. It makes it easier to handle.”

He assigned us each to our own row in the field. To pass the time, we would sing songs that went to the beat of our work. First, we would hear a

woman start singing somewhere off in the distance, “This little light of mine . . .” and you would shout back, “. . . I’m gonna let it shine!” After a few verses, you would have the whole field singing along. It was a beautiful sight to see and melodious to hear. There was nothing more magical than a field full of people—poor, blue collar people—coming together as one body and singing, “Let it shine, let it shine, let it shiiiiine!” We always sang songs of grace, songs of praise and songs of hope. That was the only way we kept ourselves working. It was for hope of a better tomorrow.

We wouldn’t stop working until the sun was down below the western horizon, and for all that work, I only made four dollars a day. Four dollars. But the amount of the money was not the most important thing to me at all, rather it was the virtue that I was carrying my weight. I was giving back to my family and most importantly my dad—someone who had given me more than I could ever repay. I consider those four dollars as a down payment toward developing my work ethic. For that reason, I still consider those four dollars to be the best money I ever earned.

In an average day, the best workers in the field could pick about 200 pounds of what we called “seed cotton”, the real guts of the product. In a really good day, someone would get close to 300 pounds all by himself. But the average adult man picked about 100 pounds per day, and that was all that was ever expected. I remember the day that I first reached that benchmark. I felt so happy, as a nine-year-old being able to work with the big boys. It was

the first time I had seen anything but anguish on my dad's face while we were out in that field. He was so proud of what I had done. I remember smiling back, and realizing that, despite the dirt, grime and sweat that veiled our faces, both of us were beaming like the sun. Just seeing that bit of happiness from him made me want to go back and do it again.

I returned to the field the next day, and my older brother Simon was there waiting for me. His face was covered in grime, too, but there was no light to be found beneath it. "What are you so happy about?" He said.

I kept smiling and said, "Didn't you hear what happened yesterday? I picked my first hundred pounds of cotton."

"Yeah? Well you're the biggest fool in town." "What do you mean?"

He waved his hand over the rest of the field, "You just showed them you can pick a hundred pounds of cotton. Now they'll expect you to keep it up. Every. Single. Day. You just made a big mistake."

I didn't like that he saw it that way. To me, it was the greatest honor to be considered a hard worker like my dad. I longed for that to be a part of my own legacy. I just looked my brother in the eye and said, "You're damn right, I'm gonna keep it up! I just picked a hundred pounds, and I'm about to pick a hundred pounds more!" I stormed past him and went on my way.

Out in the cotton field, I learned what it truly meant to have a work ethic, and my dad was the foundation of it all. There was no room for slacking off and no room for complaints. We did our work because it had to be done.

If it didn't get done, we would fail as a family. It was as simple as that.

I learned more from him in that field than anywhere else and from anybody else. He taught me to be responsible. He taught me to keep working until the job gets done, and then go back to your elder and ask what more you can do. Most of all, he taught me that you have to work more for less before you can ever start working less for more. I learned you need to put in the long hours early and often, and even though you won't see any gain from it in the short-term, the payoff will surely come further down the road.

I like to think of my dad as the driving force behind the great things I've been able to accomplish in my life. In that respect, his legacy is alive and strong today. I know he would be proud to see not only the way I've handled myself, but the way that I've given back to the world just as he taught me to do in the cotton field.

My dad's legacy is only multiplied when I factor in my brothers and sisters. They've gone and done great things as well, and it was all because of him. I've tried to emulate him as much as possible, because I've learned that when you devote yourself to making the world better for others—without expecting anything in return—your legacy will shine and multiply forever.

The Influence of My Mom

A lot of my values in life are based on the principles my dad taught me, mainly because I was with him so often after I started working in the fields. But if my dad was the bricks that built our home, then my mom was the mortar that held it all together. She was a small woman, about five feet five, but she was strong in spirit, and she had a backhand that could floor a 200-pound running back.

But even though she had a stern side, it was sweetness and kindness that my mother really brought to the home. She gave us a sense of hope, even in the hardest of hard times, even when it seemed like there was only enough food for ten. I think that kind of hope is crucial to establishing the expectations of a household. When times are rough, it's easy to do two things. The first is to give in—to accept that things are bad and refuse to do anything to change that. It's easy to get in that cycle when our expectations are low, but if we have high expectations then we'll see that the cycle is inconsequential. The second thing we do is blame someone else. *I didn't do anything to deserve this.* This is a detrimental attitude even if there really is someone else to blame. It does nothing to solve the problem, and does everything to perpetuate the idea that you can't do anything to change it all.

My mother made sure that we never fell into these traps, and she lived it by example as well. She would tell us every morning to get up and work hard, no matter what we had to do. She said if we got up and faced our obstacles, things would be better at the end of the day. And we took her at her word. We didn't question it, because as a black female living in the Deep South at that time, we figured she knew a thing or two about oppression. For her sake, we kept fighting, and while it was hard on everyone, things eventually did get better.

Mom made sure that we never fell into these traps, and she lived it as well. She would tell us every morning to get up and get busy, she would say, "Today is going to be a good day!" She said if we got up and faced our obstacles, things would be better at the end of the day. I remember one early Saturday morning, my mother woke me up that same way, but I refused to get out of bed. I said, "No, today is *not* going to be a good day. I work six days a week. If I go out into the field again I'll probably keel over and die."

To my complete surprise, my mother said, "Okay, whatever you want, dear," and left me home while she and the rest of the family went to work. At the end of the day, they all returned home and my mother prepared dinner as she did every day after work. It wasn't long before the smell of the food wafted through the hallway and into my nose. I went out to join my family at the dinner table, but when I took my seat, I saw there were only ten dishes at the table. When I reached for another, my mom batted my hand

with the serving spoon and said, “Boy, put your butt in that seat. You’re going to sit there and watch us, and you’re going to learn a lesson: You don’t work, you don’t eat.”

I went to bed without dinner that night, and the next morning when I woke up, my stomach was grumbling. I thought I was going to be sick. But when my mom came in and asked me if I was ready to face the day, I didn’t waver. I said, “Yes, Mama,” and got my butt out of bed. From that day forward, I never thought to question her word. She had seen a lot of bad days in her life. If she could say it was going to be a good day, I figured I could too.

My Monroe: Two sides of the tracks

In 1955, my dad got a job as a construction worker in Monroe, Louisiana, 75 miles west of Lake Providence. There are approximately 115 Townships, Counties, Cities, towns and Villages that call Monroe home. The city itself was home to about 35,000 people at the time, making it one of the largest city in the state (historically French: Poste-du-Onachita^{LA}) the parish seat of Ouachita Parish, Louisiana, United States. But even with the larger population, it still felt like a very small, tightly-knit neighborhood because you could only associate with your own part of the town. What I mean by that is that you had to stay with your color. People like to use the metaphor of “the other side of the tracks”. Well, that is literally how it was in Monroe. The black population was concentrated and isolated on the south side of town, and the train tracks that ran past the neighborhood turned the metaphorical racial lines into a reality. Crossing over that line was like venturing into uncharted territory—only scarier, because you knew what danger lay ahead. The blacks and whites did not get along at all, and the danger of crossing over was mutual. I guess that’s about the only thing we had in common.

There were only two exceptions of black people who would safely cross over the line. One of them, my then future teacher, Mr. Patrick H.

Robinson, would later inspire me to be a pioneer of integration. He was not only brave enough to talk to white men, but he was respected by them as well. He was a man before his time—but I'll get to that a bit later. The only other people who crossed over were male construction workers and female maids for white families. Sometimes that was the only place to find work, so some, including my dad, were forced to take the risk. All the other people were advised to “Stay over here in the black neighborhood. If you stay here, you'll be alright.”

Of course, it was hard to be alright under our conditions. Much like Lake Providence, most of the families which did have work were still single mothers or single fathers who were trying to raise their children all on their own. Those families earned an average of \$800-\$1000 each month—not nearly enough to support a healthy family. The streets were laden with broken-down houses and broken-down families. It was in times like these that my mother's words gave me the comfort I needed. She often said, “You make light of the situation, and things will get better.”

Through the financial struggles, people seemed to find strength in the structure of their community. Monroe was good in that sense—powerful, even. The black neighborhood was small, but individuals supported each other personally and socially; it was this interdependence that allowed us to survive. There were many advantages the white community had over us, but I truly think this sense of community is one advantage we had over them.

Growing up in Monroe

Though it wasn't much to look at to an outsider, Monroe was a breeding ground for successful athletes. Actually, I take that back. The city as a whole had brought about its fair share of successful athletes, but the real breeding ground was more specific. It was isolated into a small, eight-block neighborhood called Bryant's Addition, a truly special place in America. Over the course of history, more than one hundred athletes from Bryant's Addition have signed contracts with the NFL, the NBA or the Harlem Globetrotters. People from the outside claim that there must be something in the water—something that gives the people a magical ability—but in reality there is nothing more than high expectations and the guiding hand of God.

Bryant's addition, as luck would have it, is where my family lived.

I attended a school named Swayze Jr. High. Swayze was one of the five schools in Monroe that served black children at the primary level, but it was unique, because it was the only one that had a football team. Looking back, I realize how blessed I was that I was able to go there. The founder of the athletic program was someone I mentioned earlier, Mr. Patrick Robinson.

Mr. Robinson, put simply, was a man well ahead of his time in Monroe. Although he was black, he was respected and loved by both blacks and whites in a time where blacks were conditioned to submit to whites and stay out of the way whenever possible. Despite these rules, he stood tall, looked every man square in the eye and spoke exactly what was on his mind.

He truly was a hero for our school and for us children. On the field and off the field, he instilled in us a sense of pride and self-respect. He taught us the value of a good education, and the importance of pursuing knowledge all throughout our lives. He told us to go to college—a concept that was just as foreign to us as crossing over into the white community.

Mr. Robinson became a powerful influence in my life, specifically. When I saw the way that he would approach a white businessman, for example, and saw the way he spoke as though they were equals—it blew my mind. I had never before been exposed to that kind of paradigm. I didn't even think it was possible, and neither did most of the people in my neighborhood. But Mr. Robinson loved it. Every once in a while, when we were curious enough, he would teach us a lesson on change. He would say, "You kids are the ones that will help change the culture in this city. You are the ones that will make a difference." I loved that idea. I pictured myself all grown up, standing tall in a nice suit, side-by-side with the most respected people in town. It ignited a fire in me, one that inspired me to push the boundaries of my society, and even cross them. Later down the line, I would take these lessons and put them into practice.