

## No Ordinary Joe

### Remembering a heroic act that ended in tragedy.

Why in creation did Joe Delaney jump into that pit full of water that day?

Why in the world would the AFC's best young running back try to save three drowning boys when he himself couldn't swim?



Nobody -- not his wife, not his mother -- had ever seen him so much as dog-paddle. A year and a half earlier, when he went to the Pro Bowl in Hawaii as the AFC's starting halfback and Rookie of the Year, he never set even a pinkie toe in the ocean or the pool. "Never had," says his wife, Carolyn, who'd known Joe since they were both seven. "In all my years, I never had seen him swim."

So why? Why did the 24-year-old Kansas City Chief try to save three boys he didn't know with a skill he didn't have?

He'd been sitting in the cool shade of a tree on a tar-bubbling afternoon at Chennault Park, a public recreation area in Monroe, La., when he heard voices calling, "Help! Help!" He popped up like a Bobo doll and sprinted toward the pit.

What made Delaney that kind of person? Why did he mow that lonely woman's lawn when he was back home in Haughton, La., rich as he was? Why did he check in on that old man every day he was in town? Why did he show up on the Haughton streets one day with a bag full of new shoes and clothes for kids whose names he'd never heard?

Why could he never think of anything that he wanted for himself? Why didn't he even make a Christmas list? The man never cashed a paycheck in his life. He would throw his checks on top of the TV for his wife. "Don't you want *nothing* for yourself?" Carolyn would ask Joe.

"Nah," he'd say. "You just take care of you and the girls."

"Nothing?"

"Well, if you could give me a little pocket change for the week, I'd appreciate it."

Why didn't he ask somebody else to help those three kids that day? After all, there were hundreds of people at the park, and not another soul dived into that pit. Nobody but Delaney, one guy who *shouldn't* have.

The boys in that pit were struggling to stay afloat. They were two brothers -- Harry and LeMarkits Holland, 11 and 10, respectively -- and a cousin, Lancer Perkins, 11. Of course, LeMarkits was always with Harry. He idolized his big brother. A water park adjacent to Chennault was staging a big promotion with free admission that day, and the boys had wandered over to the pit and waded into the water. Like Delaney, they couldn't swim.

So much of it doesn't make sense. Why hadn't the pit -- a huge rain-filled hole that was left after the dirt had been dug out and used to build a water slide -- been fenced off from the public? Who knew that four feet from the edge of the water the hole dropped off like a cliff to about 20 feet deep?

LeMarkits has said that he remembers the water filling his lungs, the sensation of being pulled to the cold bottom, when all of a sudden a huge hand grabbed his shoulder and heaved him out of the deep water. Delaney dived for the other two boys, sinking below the surface. Folks along the bank waited for him to come up, but he never did. Harry and Lancer drowned with him.

As much as you might hope that LeMarkits has done something with the gift Delaney gave him, so far he hasn't. In an interview with the *Philadelphia Daily News* two years ago, LeMarkits said he has been tortured by the thought that he got to live and Harry didn't. He said he made his mom sell Harry's bike, bed and toys. He even burned Harry's clothes, as if fire could burn his brother from his heart. But it never did. Thirty years old now, LeMarkits got out of jail in May after serving time for distribution of cocaine. There's still time for him to do something wonderful with the life Delaney gave him. After all, Delaney was doing wonderful things with the one he gave up.

He was buried on the Fourth of July, 20 years ago. A telegram from President Reagan was read at the memorial service. The Presidential Citizens Medal was awarded posthumously. Three thousand people came to his funeral. A park in Houghton was named after him. No Chiefs player has worn number 37 since. The 37 Forever Foundation, a nonprofit group in Kansas City, honors him to this day by providing free swimming lessons to inner-city kids.

"I wish they'd had that for Joe and me when we were kids," Carolyn says glumly. She thinks of her Joe every day. She can't help it. Their three daughters and four grandkids remind her of him constantly. There is a pause. "I never thought we wouldn't grow old together."

She's only been on two dates since Joe died. Twenty years, two dates. "Why should I?" she says. "I just keep comparing them to Joe, and they can't stand up. Nobody in the world is like my Joe."

Anyway, the point is, next time you're reading the sports section and you're about half-sick of DUIs and beaten wives, put it down for a second and remember Joe Delaney, who, in that splinter of a moment, when a hero was needed, didn't stop to ask why.