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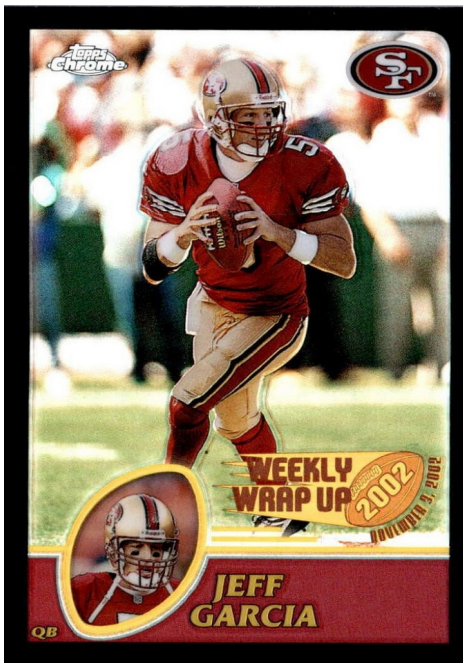
Jeff Garcia

This article was written by David Hegler.

Although they are often wonderful, childhood dreams are rarely obtainable as life tends to buckle our expectations back to reality. But there are a select few that refuse to take “no” for an answer. They are the ones that ignore reality and set out on their own to realize their dreams.

As a child in Gilroy, California, Jeffrey Jason Garcia dreamed of the day that he would line up under center amidst the windy conditions of Candlestick Park for his beloved San Francisco 49ers. After his birth on February 24, 1970, his parents added two more children to the growing brood, but tragedy would soon follow the Garcia family as both children tragically died in two separately brutal incidents. Understandably, the Garcia family was inconsolable.

It was around this time that Jeff turned to football as an outlet for his own grief. He had already lost so much and at the time it seemed that football was the only thing that he could hold on to. Soon, his parents immersed themselves in the sport almost as much as their son. It helped that Jeff’s dad was already a football coach at nearby Gavilan College and was able to pass on his personal knowledge of the game to his precocious son.





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Playing for a losing team is never easy on anyone, let alone a quarterback. In two years as the varsity starter, Jeff never led Gilroy High School to the Central Coast Section playoffs. However, despite the lack of postseason exposure, he attracted the attention of the Charlie Wedemeyer All-Star Game committee, a local all-star game named after a local coaching legend that was suffering from ALS. After playing in the game and still lacking scholarship offers, Jeff went to Gavilan College, his father's stomping grounds.

In his lone year as a Ram, Garcia earned Community College All-America honorable mention honors after throwing for 2,038 yards and 18 touchdowns. His performance garnered the attention of nearby San Jose State which promptly offered him a scholarship that he gladly took.

Having always been a small fish in a large pond, the SJSU Spartans have never been viewed as real contenders for national prominence. Still, they've boasted of a few names that may ring a bell in NFL circles. Bill Walsh tried and failed as a quarterback there back in the 1950s and two decades later one of his pupils, Steve DeBerg, would do just enough to be drafted by the Dallas Cowboys. Upon failing short in training camp, DeBerg would find his way to San Francisco where a couple of years later Walsh would join him, start a quarterback controversy with a scrawny but accurate quarterback from Notre Dame (Joe Montana) and ultimately trade DeBerg to the Broncos before the 1981 season began, unknowingly birthing young Garcia's obsession with the team as the 49ers would go on to win four Super Bowls that decade.

After sitting out the 1990 season due to transfer rules, Garcia led the Spartans to a 6-4-1 record in 1991 while completing 61.9% of his passes for 1,519 yards and 12 touchdowns as the team relied more on a strong running attack. The team switched coaches the following year, going from Terry Shea to Ron Turner who led the squad to a 7-4 record while employing more passes in the Spartans' gameplan.

Of course, with more passes comes more opportunities to both hit and miss. In 1992, Garcia's completion percentage went down to 56.38%, but he threw for 2,418 yards and 15 touchdowns. After losing the final game of the season to New Mexico State 34-24, Turner left for Chicago, finally earning the opportunity that he had long craved, to join his brother Norv and coach in the NFL.

In stepped college coaching legend John Ralston. Having won a Rose Bowl two decades earlier and having been inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame, Ralston didn't have much else to prove in his profession. Still, the coaching bug is hard to squash, and Ralston set out for another chance at glory.



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Unfortunately for him, college football can be a fickle beast as each year brings its own headaches of locker room drama, tougher schedules and rosters either brimming with confidence over a great recruiting class or weighed down by a poor one. Whatever the case may be, San Jose State went 2-9 in Garcia's senior year.

Despite the losing, Garcia never lost sight of his childhood dream. While biding his time in a local bar, he bumped into Jerry Rice, his hero. Emboldened with braggadocio and probably his fair share of alcohol, Jeff went up to the game's greatest receiver and boldly told him that he would be throwing passes to him in the near future. This statement hardly fazed the living legend, he had probably heard that many times before, but Garcia was serious.

With his eyes on the NFL, Jeff threw for 2,608 yards and 21 touchdowns in his senior year while nearly pulling off an upset at tenth ranked Stanford, losing by a field goal. Standing on the opposing sideline was none other than Bill Walsh, deep into his second stint with the Cardinal. Walsh came away from that game impressed with the young gunslinger and promised himself that if he was ever in position to do so, that he would sign Garcia to an NFL team.

The NFL disagreed with Walsh's assessment, scared by his 6'1" height. So, he traveled north and landed in Canada. While often overlooked, the CFL had produced a number of excellent players for the NFL in the past decade with future Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon leading the way. When Garcia moved to Calgary, Doug Flutie was still very much the Stampeders' franchise quarterback, having already led the squad to a Grey Cup victory. While Garcia waited for his shot in 1994, he studied the veteran signal caller, learning how he conducted himself while leading his squad to victory after victory. By the time Flutie got hurt early in 1995, Jeff was ready.

After taking over the reins, Garcia threw for 3,358 yards and 25 touchdowns against just seven interceptions. He led them all the way to the Grey Cup where they lost to the Baltimore Stallions 37-20. The next two years ended similarly as Calgary failed to reach the Grey Cup while Garcia continued to blossom as a passer and as a leader.

Things felt different in 1998. While Garcia threw for 4,276 yards and 28 touchdowns, he led the team past the Edmonton Eskimos in the West final, setting up a battle with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats for the Grey Cup. Calgary prevailed on a last second field goal, winning 26-24.

As the Stampeders celebrated their triumph, Bill Walsh watched from afar. Now the general manager of the 49ers, the legendary coach was looking to add depth to his roster and remembered the ginger-haired young man that had nearly upset his Stanford squad



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five years earlier. He signed Garcia and Walsh had no idea how prophetic his stance would be. Garcia finished his CFL career as a four-time West Division All Star and was the Grey Cup Most Valuable Player.

In the third game of the season, the 49ers were on their way to a loss to the lowly Arizona Cardinals when disaster struck the iconic franchise. Troubled running back Lawrence Phillips missed his block and watched as cornerback Aeneas Williams clobbered franchise quarterback Steve Young. As Young lay there on the turf, Garcia buckled his chinstrap. Although he was new to the NFL and Steve Mariucci's complicated playbook, he felt that he was ready.

In terms of opening acts, Garcia's went well. Against a terrific Tennessee Titans team at Candlestick Park, Garcia completed 21 of 33 for 243 yards and two touchdowns, even rushing for one early in the contest as he led the 49ers to a two-point victory over the eventual AFC champions.

The good times didn't last as the 49ers were blown out by the Rams 42-20. While he had a clean pocket all day, the St. Louis defense made Garcia look like a rookie, forcing three interceptions.

The rest of the season was a nightmare for him and the rest of his teammates. While the team tumbled to a 4-12 record, Garcia failed to win another game, going 1-9 for the season. Not all was lost, however, as he completed a respectable 60% of his passes for 2,544 yards and 11 touchdowns.

Siting concussions, Young retired that offseason, sending the franchise into a minor tailspin. Knowing that the job was his to lose, Garcia set out to prove to everyone that he belonged in the National Football League.

The 49ers struggled that year, going 6-10 and watched Jerry Rice walk out the door for the final time as the season came to a close. While he was sad to see him go, Jeff took comfort in knowing that he had lived up to his barroom statement years earlier, having connected with Rice for 11 touchdowns in their two years together. Starting every game that year, Garcia completed 63.3% of his passes for 4,278 yards and 31 touchdowns while earning a Pro Bowl invitation. Since then, no 49ers quarterback has thrown for 4,000 yards in a season.

The 2001 season was a time of transition for the 49ers as the last of the old guard, Rice, left for greener pastures in Oakland. Even though his departure was a gut punch, the franchise didn't skip a beat, instead focusing on a young receiver that had not so quietly



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been making a name for himself the past few years: Terrell Owens. He had joined the team in 1996, quietly making plays while Rice was still in his prime.

But after scoring the game-winning touchdown against Green Bay in the 1998 Wild Card game, Owens began to let his voice be heard. Of course, voices are often loudest when they are backed up behind a winning team and the 49ers weren't winning a whole lot of games in either 1999 or 2000. But by 2001, with Rice gone and Garcia having come into his own, Owens took off as the catalyst of the Niners's offense.

Owens had already made the Pro Bowl and was named All-Pro in 2000, but he upped the ante in 2001, leading the league with 16 touchdown catches, half of the touchdowns that Garcia threw all year. Together, the two led the 49ers to a 12-4 record, losing the division to the St. Louis Rams and their Greatest Show on Turf offense. The 49ers memorable bounce back season ended in the Wild Card round in frigid Green Bay.

The 2002 season seemed ripe for the picking as the Rams began to stumble as all great teams eventually do, succumbing to injuries and locker room discord. Meanwhile, Garcia and Owens picked up right where they left off a year earlier, with both earning their third consecutive Pro Bowl invitations and connecting on 13 touchdowns while Garcia completed more than 62% of his passes and threw for more than 3,300 yards for the third straight year.

But a troubling trend was beginning to boil to the surface. While Owens led the league again with 13 touchdown catches, Garcia only threw 21 touchdown passes all season. While having an all-world receiver is often the envy of many NFL offenses, sometimes a team can put too much emphasis on one player and can suffer for it in the loss column. Even though the 49ers ultimately won their division for the first time since 2002, that's essentially what happened as they only went 10-6.

Still, the beauty of the NFL playoffs is that anyone can win the Super Bowl and when the Giants came to town for the Wild Card game, there was a sense of high expectations in the air that could be felt all the way across the Bay. For while the 49ers faced off against the Giants, Rice and his teammates across the Bay reclined in their easy chairs, knowing that they had one last mountain to climb having secured the top seed in the AFC playoffs.

The Garcia-to-Owens connection worked flawlessly in the first quarter, with Owens grabbing the ball, bouncing off a couple of defenders and taking it to the endzone 76-yards away. But their seven-point lead was quickly swallowed up by an avalanche of points from the Giants and midway through the third quarter, Garcia and his teammates found themselves facing a 38-14 deficit.



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With 2:03 left in the third quarter, Garcia connected with Owens for a 26-yard touchdown strike and followed that with another completion for the 2-point conversion to narrow the deficit to 38-22. A short while later, Jeff dashed into the endzone from 14 yards out and completed another 2-point conversion to Owens to again narrow the deficit by eight. Suddenly, the crowd at Candlestick Park could smell an improbable comeback.

After a Jeff Chandler field goal narrowed the deficit to five in the middle of the fourth quarter, Garcia led his teammates down the field for one final drive. He led his childhood team all the way to the 13-yard line with a minute left in the season. From there, he zipped a pass to Tai Streets in the endzone to give the 49ers a one-point lead. Candlestick Park was instantly filled with bedlam and was headed toward euphoria, but the game wasn't over yet.

The Giants drove down the field and got within field goal distance. A hush fell over the crowd. All game long, it had looked like the 49ers were going to lose, only for them to come back. It couldn't end like this, could it?

While the play itself lasted seconds, it was really a string of sequences, almost like a miniseries: The snap was low. The Giants' holder lofted a pass high into the crisp San Francisco air. The ball came down into a sea of hands. The ball landed on the turf, the kick never got off and the 49ers survived, 39-38.

Euphoria instantly took over the old ballpark and Owens quickly found a perch to stand on, waving his arms to encourage the crowd to shatter the sound barrier. For the day, Garcia completed 27 of 44 passes for 331 yards and accounted for four touchdowns. He put the team on his back.

The 49ers traveled to Tampa Bay the following week but lost badly to a terrific defense, one that would ultimately beat Rice's Raiders in the Super Bowl just two weeks later. After that 31-6 pasting, the 49ers fell apart due to the salary cap and began to lose valuable players left and right. But the biggest casualty was their coach, Steve Mariucci. Long maligned for his ineptitude in the playoffs, he knew that he would probably be fired if he didn't bring home the Lombardi Trophy at season's end. Soon after their season ended, Mariucci's prediction was proven correct.

In stepped Dennis Erickson. While he had had success at the University of Miami a decade earlier, Erickson had struggled to connect to players at the professional level. Things looked good for him as the 49ers opened the 2003 season destroying Chicago 49-7. But the bottom quickly fell out as the team suffered three straight losses on their way to its first losing season since 1982, going 7-9. Garcia suffered the brunt of the abuse, coughing up 18 interceptions while completing less than 60% of his passes for the first



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time in his NFL career. At the end of the season, Garcia was released by the 49ers and Owens became a free agent, ending their run in San Francisco. They were responsible for 50 touchdown connections together as well as a division title and an epic moment in the playoffs.

Garcia signed with Cleveland in 2004 and quickly discovered that the grass isn't always greener on the other side. Once again, he completed less than 60% of his passes while throwing just 10 touchdowns against nine interceptions with the 4-12 Browns. Things only got worse in Detroit the following year as he led the team to a single win in five starts while throwing twice as many interceptions as touchdowns and posting a poor 65.1 passer rating.

While his performances over the previous two years suggested that he seek retirement, playing for the poorer teams of the NFL is not always the best environment to showcase your skills. However, it can be an excellent place to forge your leadership skills amidst the fire of enemy defenses that routinely pummel you while all your inept offensive line is of little help. Garcia never lost his composure in either Cleveland or Detroit and when the Eagles Andy Reid called looking for a backup, Jeff was all too eager to join one of the game's most eclectic offensive minds.

He sat idly by on the bench, absorbing a winning atmosphere for the first time since 2002 while studying the Eagles' voluminous playbook, preparing himself for the day that his number may be called. Garcia's opportunity in the city of Brotherly Love came when star quarterback Donovan McNabb hurt his knee in mid-November, ending his season.

Garcia's first game did not go well as the Eagles were vanquished by the eventual Super Bowl champion Colts 45-21, bringing their record to under .500. Sportscasters from across America instantly wrote off the Eagles. It was a feeling that Garcia knew all too well and one that the city had embraced long ago: the underdog. Something happens in an athlete's mind when they hear that word; it invigorates them, and they seem to play better.

That's exactly what happened to Garcia and the Eagles. He began by throwing for 304 yards and three touchdowns in a 27-24 win over the Panthers and followed that up with three straight road wins over divisional rivals, beating the Redskins (21-19), the Giants (36-22) and the surging Cowboys in old Texas Stadium (23-7). By the time the Eagles returned home to beat the Falcons 24-17, Garcia had led the Eagles to the East Division title. In that span, he had thrown for 1,309 yards and 10 touchdowns while giving up just two interceptions while posting a 95.8 passer rating. Clearly, Garcia had found his mojo again.



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Philadelphia's win over the Giants in the Wild Card round was everything that the storied NFC East is known for, tough and gritty. Garcia was good enough, completing 17 of 31 passes for 138 yards and a touchdown in the Eagles' 23-20 win over their bitter rivals. The Eagles' surprising season did not have a storybook finish, losing to the Saints in the Divisional round 27-24. For his part, Garcia completed half of his passes for 232 yards and a touchdown.

Garcia used that new-found mojo to take over the starter's job in Tampa Bay, after signing with the Bucs in the offseason, to start the 2007 season. Despite coach Jon Gruden's widely known offensive mind, Garcia only threw two touchdowns in the first four weeks of the season while the Buccaneers went 3-1. It was very much a ball-control offense while Jeff passed no more than 27 times in any of the first four games. But that changed after an ugly 33-14 loss to the Colts as Gruden opened up his offense and let Garcia fling the football all over the field.

Although he missed three games due to either injury or rest, he managed to go to his fourth Pro Bowl after completing 63.9% of his passes for 2,440 yards and 13 touchdowns. Garcia's final regular season appearance was Week 15 in San Francisco against the 49ers, a squad that hungered to beat a playoff-bound opponent.

Since the Bucs had clinched the NFC South Division title Tampa Bay's starters played only the first half. Garcia and the Bucs starters played well, with him giving Tampa Bay a lead 13-7 heading into the half with a 24-yard strike to Jerramy Stevens. But Tampa's backups couldn't hold on to the lead and Garcia was forced to watch from the sidelines as his childhood team won the game 21-19.

Two weeks later, Garcia and the Buccaneers fell short in the Wild Card round, losing to the Giants in Tampa 24-14. In his final postseason appearance, Jeff completed 23 of 39 passes for 207 yards, one touchdown and two interceptions. On a positive note, the same pass rush that would terrorize Tom Brady and the undefeated Patriots in that year's Super Bowl only sacked Garcia once.

Garcia played just one more full season, leading the Bucs to a 6-5 record while throwing for 2,712 yards and 12 touchdowns, but couldn't quite lead them to the playoffs. He finished his career in 2009, appearing in one game for the Eagles and he announced his retirement after the season. Garcia left the playing field with 25,537 yards passing, 161 touchdowns and completed 61.1% of his passes.

Since his retirement, Garcia has stayed around the game, serving as an offensive assistant in Montreal (with the CFL's Alouettes) and the St. Louis Rams. He even tried his hand in an office, serving on an advisory board for the newly formed USFL in 2012. But despite



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these various jobs, Garcia is more widely known for tutoring quarterbacks, gaining short-lived fame as JaMarcus Russell's personal coach when the former first overall pick in the 2007 NFL Draft was trying to make a comeback which ultimately failed.

If you look back on it, Garcia lived the life that many sports fans could only dream of living. While he never won the Super Bowl, he accomplished so much of what he set out to do. From throwing touchdown passes to his hero Jerry Rice to leading his beloved 49ers to victory in that memorable Wild Card game against the Giants, it was truly a tale of grit and determination sprinkled with the boyish wonder of living a childhood dream.

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