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The Man Who Could Catch

Joe Senser made his name catching a football, but his life story goes much deeper than that.

BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER

JOE AND I HAVE BEEN FRIENDS FOR 25 YEARS, but through writing this column, I learned some surprising new things about his incredible story. We all know Joe was a star for the Minnesota Vikings, an investment broker, and maybe even that he is currently a restaurateur, a family man and a radio announcer. However, you might not know that Joe was an orphan, is on the board of managers for the Milton Hershey School and is an ordained minister. What I wanted to know was how he transformed his initial football talents into the fodder for being the renaissance man he is today.

>> On life after his father's death

I grew up at the Milton Hershey School in Pennsylvania. It was an orphanage for fatherless boys and has since morphed into serving girls as well. They don't call them orphanages anymore, it's a stigma to use that term. It's now referred to as "residential education." The school takes care of needy children and opens new doors for children whose families couldn't otherwise afford it.

I was asked to come back and serve on the board of managers for the school and The Hershey Trust. The school is a major shareholder in the Hershey Chocolate Company. The value of the trust is

[quite large] and it's a lot of responsibility because the board helps oversee how the school is run. I learned a lot growing up in the school—it saved my life.

>> On his NFL career lessons

I always had the ability to run and catch. People were amazed by it when I was a little kid. There was a point in high school when one of the coaches told me I wasn't good enough to play. I knew in my heart that I had the ability and I didn't want to waste it, so I started working hard on my gift. Since then, I've always concentrated on what I'm good at.

I owe so much to Bud Grant; more than he will ever know. Bud had some business principles he lived by and what I learned from him was to focus on my gifts and to do what I do best. One of my weaknesses was blocking. I told him I needed to be the best tight-end in football and that I was working on my weakness; my blocking. I'll never forget it, it's something that I hold on to to this day, Bud said, "Joe, if I want someone to block, I'll put them in there to block. You do what you do best. Use your gifts and those are to run and catch." That advice shifted how I viewed everything in my life. I never ask anyone to do something they aren't capable of doing.

I took that principle from Bud and when I left the Vikings I went into bonds because I always wanted to be in the finance business. I was always good with numbers and then I had a restaurant opportunity I couldn't pass up, but one of the things that I negotiated with my partner was that I needed to be able to do the things that I do best and that is to manage people.

>> On inspirational reading

There's a book, *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, that we use with all of our managers at the Joe Senser's Restaurants and Sports Theaters. You take a timed test and you see what your gifts are. I allow the people who run our restaurants to do their job, and I always put them in positions where they will succeed and not fail.

I try to take myself out of the equation and just be around people and help them use their gifts and help them understand their strengths. I've found that when you manage people this way, they're healthier, happier and stay with you longer. The trick is to put other people first. When you do that, your life becomes so much easier. My advice to entrepreneurs is to never give up and truly believe in your heart that you have a gift. That's something no one can take away from you.

>> About Joe Senser

Joe Senser is a former Minnesota Viking who retired from football in 1984 because of a serious knee injury. He went on to become an investment broker with Dougherty-Dawkins from 1985-1987. In 1988, he founded Joe Senser's. He serves on the Board of Managers for the Milton Hershey School and the Board of Directors for The Hershey Trust. He has also done sports announcing for national radio and is an ordained minister.

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