

John Mara
October 28, 2005
Eulogy To His Father Wellington Mara
St. Patrick's Cathedral

On behalf of my mother and my entire family, I want to thank everyone here to celebrate my father's life. Many of you came from deep distances and we are very appreciative. Thank you also to all of you who called, wrote, or visited over the past several weeks. The outpouring of love and affection displayed to my father has been overwhelming and a source of comfort to my family. Also, I want to thank Cardinal Egan for his frequent visits and comforting words; Bishop McCormick who visited my father every day and brought him communion; Frank Gifford who was a constant visitor and who has been a true friend to my family for so many years. Thank you also to Sloan Kettering, who took such good care of my father the last six weeks. They treated him like they were his own father. When he finally decided that he wanted to go home and he was being taken out of the hospital, the nurses and the staff were all in tears. That is how close a bond they formed during that stay. There is one person who deserves special thanks, Ronnie Barnes, who my mother refers to as her 12th child, spent night after night and many days in my father's hospital room taking care of him night after night. 'Is Ronnie coming tonight?' My father would ask. Of course, the answer was always 'yes' and my father's face would light up when Ronnie's face walked into the room. We joked with Ronnie that one of the reasons he did this was because so many of the nurses kept trying to slip him their phone numbers at the hospital, but that really wasn't the reason. My father asked him one night, 'Ronnie why are you so good to me?' 'Because Mr. Mara you've been so good to me,' Ronnie replied. Nobody took better care of him and there was no one that he trusted more. Ronnie, my family can never thank you enough.

As we made our way over here from the funeral home this morning I couldn't help but think he would have been so embarrassed by all this. The police escort, the traffic being stopped, the bag pipes; he would have just shook his head and tried to hide somewhere. As painful as it is to say goodbye to someone you love so much, to someone who has been such an important part of your life, I could not help but think when I sat down to try and prepare this how fortunate I am and all my brothers and sisters are to have Wellington Mara as our father. He was the finest man they we have ever known or hope to know and he was our Dad.

Many years ago his good friend Tim Rooney said something to me that I have reflected on many times since. 'You realize, don't you, that your father is the best example of how we should all live our lives. You will never find anyone better to emulate.' Over the years as I have watched my father live his life, I have come to realize how true those words were and what a role model he really was.

'What can you expect from an Irishman named Wellington, whose father was a bookmaker?' A local sports writer derisively wrote those words about 30 years ago during a time when we were going through some pretty awful seasons. My father usually didn't let criticism from the media affect him very much, but those words stung him in a very personal way. 'I'll tell you what you can expect,' he said at our kickoff luncheon just a few days later. 'You can expect anything he says or writes may be repeated aloud in your own home in front of your own children. You can believe that he was taught to

love and respect all mankind, but to fear no man. And you could believe that his abiding ambitions were to pass onto his family the true richness of the inheritance he received from his father, the bookmaker: The knowledge and love and fear of God and second to give you (our fans and our coach) a Super Bowl winner.'

My father's faith was his strength. It never wavered no matter what happened in his life, no matter how sick he was. He and my mother went to mass everyday and made sure that we went on every Sunday and holy day long after we were married with children of our own, he would still call to remind us about an upcoming holy day of obligation. Each year at Christmas time, the confession schedule of our parish was hung on the refrigerator door with a little handwritten note: *No confession, no Santa (Claus)*, he wrote.

As sick as he was, he still received communion everyday in the hospital, his rosary beads never left his hands. His family of course was his pride and joy. He was married to my mother for more than 51 years and they had as wonderful a marriage as I have ever seen. I can't even remember raising their voices to one another. They met of course in church when a woman fainted and they both went to assist her. My father later claimed that the whole thing was staged by my mother's Aunt Lil in order to get his attention. Well after 51 years of marriage, 11 children, 40 grandchildren soon to be 42, I would say that she got his attention. When my parents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary about a year-and-a-half-ago right here in St. Patrick's, my mother asked him if they could renew their vows. He was very reluctant at first. 'The original ones haven't expired yet have they,' he said. Of course, he went along with it, but when Cardinal Egan asked him during the ceremony, 'Will you accept children lovingly from God?' The look on his face seemed to say, 'Your eminence I think that ship sailed a long time ago.'

If there was a category in the Guinness Book of (World) Records for most christenings attended or first communions or graduations, school plays, little league games, my father would surely hold the record. He loved watching his grandchildren compete or act on stage. He always sat or stood in the background never wanting to draw attention to himself, always positive, always supportive, setting yet another example for all of us.

One of my father's greatest attributes was his loyalty. It was so much a part of his life whether it was his friends, former players, coaches, he was always concerned about their well being. He considered Giants players, coaches, employees both past and present as part of his extended family. If a member of that family was in need, he or she didn't stay that way for very long whether it was money, a job, or just a call from a friendly voice as he'd like to say. There was a time years ago when he was criticized for that loyalty and for it clouding his judgment. 'If that's the worst thing they can say about you, he would say, 'Then you must be doing something right.' I remember going on countless road trips with him over the years and he would always make it a habit to call a former player or coach in the town that we were playing in. Many of these guys were long forgotten by many of these people, but not by him. He never forgot them and he knew how much it meant to them that he was still thinking about them.

Next to his faith and his family, the thing my father loved most was his team, the team that he spent 80 years of his life around. His father wanted him to go to law school after his graduation from Fordham in 1937. 'Just give me one year with the team,' he

pleaded. My grandfather agreed and that number turned into 68. He never went to law school, he went to spend the rest of his life, with the exception of four years that he served in the Navy during World War II, around the team and the sport he loved so much. He attended nearly every practice from mini camp right through the end of the season. It didn't matter if we were 10-2 or 2-10, he was there wearing that old floppy hat, carrying that ridiculous stool, and usually wearing a shirt or a jacket that was almost as old as he was. Each year our equipment manager would give him the new apparel for the season and it would always wind up in the same place, stuck in the back of his closet and out would come the same old and battered outfits. When we changed our logo several years ago back to the traditional lower case, **n y**, he actually started wearing some of the shirts that he had worn the last time we had used that logo more than 25 years before. 'I knew they would come back,' he said.

He loved participating in the draft meetings. It was his favorite time of year. Day after day, he would sit there as reports were read on every prospect. No matter how remote they were, he didn't want to miss anything and he loved interacting with our scouts. He identified with them because he had been one himself for so many years.

One of the visions I will always have of him is sitting on the equipment truck prior to Super Bowl XXXV alone in his thoughts, a scene I had witnessed so many times over the years. No pregame parties or festivities for him, he was where he wanted to be, with his players and coaches, but off to the background so as not to interfere. During our road games, he always sat in the press box, never one for a fancy suite or entertaining people during a game, his focus was on the game. He always maintained his composure and often tried with mixed results to calm his family down, more so his daughters than his sons. I remember one game years ago when a particular player was having a tough day and some of us became a little exasperated with him. At one point I yelled out, 'What is he doing out there?' My father put his hand on my shoulder rather firmly and said, 'What he's doing is the best that he can.'

My father had a special relationship with Giants fans. It amazed me that he answered nearly every letter a fan wrote to him no matter how derogatory they got. 'They are our customers,' he would say. 'They're just demonstrating how much they care about the team and they deserve a response.' For years it was a joke around our office that if someone wanted to have their season tickets improved all they had to do was write my father a letter that they had some physical ailment that made it difficult to climb the stairs or see from such a distance. The tickets were always improved; the fans knew who the soft touch was.

My father was very proud of his contributions and his long time associations with the National Football League. He believed so deeply in the principles upon which it was founded and has flourished. He served virtually on every committee imaginable and he valued all of them. None of those committees mattered more to him than a little known one called the NFL Alumni Dire Need Fund, which was established to take care of former players, who had fallen on hard times.

There were so many lessons that my father taught us over the years, maybe none more important than in the last few weeks of his life. He never gave up his will to live. He tried so hard to get out of bed and walk. He fought until the very end and he never complained. His faith never waned. On his last day in the hospital, when he came to the realization that the doctors could no longer treat him, he summoned me to his bedside, he

could barely talk. I held his hand and he looked at me and smiled and said, 'I'll be there when you get there.' It was his way of telling us that he was going to be okay. He was going to a better place. He was always concerned with how his family was dealing with his condition. 'I don't want to be a burden' he said just days before his death, 'Go home and take care of your own families.' Of course we had to be there with him. He had always been there for us and when he took his last breath, he was surrounded by the family he loved so much and taught so well.

There's a scene from the movie "Saving Private Ryan" that is worth recounting here. A then elderly Private Ryan visits the gravesites of some of the men who died trying to save his life. Overcome with emotion, he turns to his wife and asks her, 'Have I been a good husband, a good father, a good person?' Questions I suppose we will all have to answer at some point. In the case of Wellington Mara, the answers were so clear. Yes you were a wonderful husband, you were the best father and grandfather that anyone could ever have, and you were the best example of how we should all live our lives. That is what we came to expect from the Irishman named Wellington, whose father was a bookmaker.

He may be gone from this world and we certainly grieve over that. But, we also rejoice over our good fortune in having had him with us for so long for the extraordinary life he led and for his spirit, which will live on in his children and grandchildren for generations to come. When my father's brother died 40 years ago, Arthur Daley, the well-known sportswriter of The New York Times, wrote a column lamenting the loss of his good friend Jack Mara. My father had that column on his desk for all these years and the last line from that column is a quote from Hamlet:

"Now cracks a noble heart. Goodnight sweet prince and flights of angels sing the to thy rest."

Frank Gifford
October 28, 2005
Eulogy To His Boss and Longtime Friend Wellington Mara
St. Patrick's Cathedral

I'm honored to be able to say a few words about Wellington Mara. And they will be few because I have a feeling Well is up there looking down from the celestial skybox saying, 'Make it short Frank.' Obviously, he was an extraordinary man in every way. He and his beautiful wife, Ann, brought 11 lives into this world. They are with us today extraordinary in their own right and the 40 grandchildren and counting and a great grandchild pending to be with us this morning and I am so honored to be able to stand here and say a few words about the man that I loved so much.

I first met Well back in 1952. We were playing Army. I was with USC at the time and I think Well, who was scouting the game thought he would do a two-for because we had a defensive back who was hurt and I was playing both ways and had a good game against Army in a blizzard. That was everything Well needed to see and he proceeded to draft me with his number one pick that year. I think he thought that if I couldn't do it as running back, I would do it as defensive back. He had Kyle Rote and he was just covering his bases.

I had three stages of knowing Wellington Mara. He was my boss for many years, then he became a father figure, then as we both got a little bit older, he became my dearest friend, someone I could always count on, somebody when I was troubled that I could go to. He was that way and meant that for so many of you who are here today. We had a rather tough time in 1953, as I recall and football was not nearly what it is today. It was a tough year and at the end of the season, I thought to myself when we only finished with three wins, who needs all this? But, one of my great memories of being a Giant was after being beat up thoroughly in that last game against Detroit getting ready to go back to my home in California with these three stately men who walked into the Polo Grounds locker room where we played. One was Tim Mara, Wellington's father, and the other was his beloved brother Jack. Each of them walked around and shook our hands and I remember Wellington saying to me, 'Thank you so much.' After a few weeks had gone by, I got a phone call from Wellington. He said he would be back in touch with me. It was a couple of months later and he did. He said, 'Frank, we want you back. We've made some changes.' And indeed he did. I went back to training camp and the first change that I met was a man called Vince Lombardi. And he looked at me and said, 'You are my half back.' The second one was Tom Landry taking over as the defensive coach. From that you might say was just about – that was just about the history of it. From there on, we won the championship here in New York, played in a whole bunch of other championships, and the game grew from nothing to a nationally televised game to where it is today as the number one sport in the world.

Two years ago at the Tavern on The Green, we had a wonderful time with the help of John and members of the family and some other players. We found a lot of the former players around the league, many of them we had not heard from in a long time, and we brought them all to New York. We made a little bit of a mistake because it was September the 6th, the night before the season-opener. Ann was my co-conspirator and had convinced him that he was coming to the Tavern on the Green for something totally

different. And he was one grumpy camper. Ann, however, got him there and as she walked in she said, 'He hasn't spoken to me since we left.' But we walked into the patio on the Tavern on The Green and Well looked around and the first person he saw was Lawrence Taylor. Then he saw Sam Huff, then he saw Andy Robustelli, and then he saw Y.A. Tittle. And then he looked around and he saw the John Amberg's, and he saw the Cutter Thompson's. He had no idea what it was all about and then all of a sudden it sunk in. It was a beautiful night and a beautiful night for Wellington Mara because what I remember about that night is each of the players got up to say a few words and said that he had touched each and everyone of their lives. Many of them it was an economic way, but for many more of them, it was just being there at the right time.

What I also remember about Well – one of the most memorable times came when I went into the Hall of Fame and I had asked him to be my presenter. He was eloquent as he always was and I was so honored that he was there. As we looked out over the audience at Canton, Ohio and looked into the faces of all these people, Wellington turned to me in his address as my presenter and introduced 'a man that any father would be proud of to have as a son.' I will never forget that. And a few years later I had the opportunity to stand in the same place and say to the same audience, 'This is a man who any son would be proud to call a father.'

I know we are all still suffering from the loss of this great man. But, I know too that we can all celebrate one of the incredible lives and know too where he is. He is at the right hand of his longtime head coach in the heavens with his Lord and God. Bless you all.