

Hardest, Riskiest, Toughest, Greatest Job In Sports

That would be quarterback in the NFL, of course. So what does it take to make it? SI gathered five of the league's elite young players at the position, opened up the notebook and let them tell us

PETER KING

CARSON PALMER

Cincinnati Bengals

TONY ROMO

Dallas Cowboys

BEN ROETHLISBERGER

Pittsburgh Steelers

AARON RODGERS

Green Bay Packers

MATT RYAN

Atlanta Falcons

In the oversaturated world of NFL coverage, one thing fans *don't* often get to see is a group of star players, in an off-the-field setting, talking about their profession, telling war stories, as we imagine they do when reporters aren't around and cameras aren't rolling. So in July, with dozens of NFL stars among the celebrities teeing it up for charity at NBC's annual American Century golf tournament in Lake Tahoe, SI approached five premier quarterbacks under the age of 30 and asked them to participate in a roundtable discussion. Cincinnati's Carson Palmer and Dallas's Tony Romo (both entering their seventh season), Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger (sixth), the Packers' Aaron Rodgers (fifth) and Atlanta's Matt Ryan (second) all agreed.

What were they like? My impressions: Roethlisberger is as opinionated as a two-time Super Bowl champ should be. Palmer is thoughtful and honest. Romo is serious, smart and circumspect. Rodgers and Ryan are bright but were reserved, likely in deference to their more experienced colleagues. "This was great," Palmer said as the quarterback summit broke up. "We ought to do it more often."

Same time next year? I'm in.

JULY 17, LAKE TAHOE, NEV.

The Interview

PETER KING: O.K., you're a general manager scouting passers. What is the one trait that today's NFL quarterback has to have?

CARSON PALMER: Playing tough against the rush. Nobody gets hit in college. You get hit on every single play in the NFL. I want my quarterback to get hit in the mouth play after play after play—and be accurate while it's happening.

MATT RYAN: I agree, especially when guys are forced out of the pocket. There are always people rolling around at your knees and things like that. You've got to be accurate while getting hit.

PALMER: I also want to see a quarterback who can change his arm position when he throws. In this league you have to throw sidearm sometimes; you're going to have to drop your arm, move while shuffling your feet. You're never going to be set. I want to see a guy who can stay calm, keep his eyes on the field and be accurate.

AARON RODGERS: Good fundamentals. With a guy who's a shotgun quarterback in college, you have to figure out if he'll adjust to the NFL drop. Can he get the ball out quick? Can he throw soundly over the top and three quarters? Does he waste steps? Those are the things in a split-second game that determine whether you can do this.

TONY ROMO: Vision downfield. Presence in the pocket. Matt's one of the best I've seen in a long time at those things, the best at that since Peyton Manning.

KING: What about toughness?

BEN ROETHLISBERGER: I don't think toughness is when a quarterback says, "I'm going to run somebody over." Toughness is playing the worst game of your life but not backing down. You don't want to sit on the sideline. You want to stay in there and win. You know, down 21 points and the defense is getting through in every single way, and you throw three interceptions. Staying in that game, keeping your head up, trying to drive your team down the field when everything's going wrong—that's the kind of toughness I want in my quarterback.

PALMER: I get asked all the time, "How good is [Jets rookie] Mark Sanchez going to be?"—probably because we both went to USC. I don't know how good he's going to be, because I've never seen him get hit in the face play after play. Even if you get hit in college, it's not by a 275-pound defensive end who runs faster than you and is coming at you full speed.

KING: That brings me to fear. You're facing the Vikings, you have Jared Allen coming around the end and the two monster tackles, Pat Williams and Kevin Williams, coming up the middle. Is there ever a feeling of fear inside you?

RYAN: You just don't think about it. When you're watching [defenders] on tape, that's when you're thinking, Yeah, this guy's good. He brings pressure. But out on the field, to me, the defense is just nameless, faceless guys. You can't say to yourself, That's Brian Urlacher. That's one of the biggest issues as a rookie—you can't build up these guys to be bigger than they are. You just can't think about it, or you'll be in trouble.

PALMER: Fear of *failure* always drives me. I don't want to let my guys down. After we lose and I see my linemen, it's like I let them down. That's the feeling a quarterback has to have.

RODGERS: When you're playing quarterback, it's knowing where the stress points are in your protection. You're conscious of where you might get pressure. But fear? No.

ROETHLISBERGER: Even if I do ever feel anything like that, and I'm not saying I ever feel scared or nervous, I'll never show it. We can't. Not at our position. Everyone's looking at us.

KING: Let me put it this way—think back to big moments or big games. How does your stomach feel?

RODGERS: When I was a point guard, I wanted the ball in the last two minutes. When I was a pitcher, I wanted the ball in the last inning. That's why in the big moments in games, I'm not tight. Those moments are why you play.

ROETHLISBERGER: I love that. I want the ball. Our defense does some amazing things, but I want to have the ball, and that's the way I've always been playing sports.

KING: Like on the last drive of the Super Bowl?

ROETHLISBERGER: On that drive I ran out and thought, This is going to be really hard. Because we had kind of struggled late in that game. Not saying I definitely couldn't do it. I just knew it would be tough regardless. When I got in the huddle, I told the guys, "I don't have any speech. Just think of all the extra work we put in, all the extra film study we did together. It'll all be for nothing if we don't do this." Then we get a holding call on the first play, and it's going bad. But here's the thing about playing quarterback in this league: Even if you don't feel [confident], you have to show you feel it, so when your teammates are looking at you, they believe it.

ROMO: In an individual sport it's much easier. In tennis you serve and lose, and you look at yourself and say, O.K., I'll get the next one. In the NFL, it's so much about other people.

RYAN: You don't want to let the guys down. As for nerves, I always find myself more nervous before the game, before the kickoff, before the first snap. Then when you're in it and you take a couple of hits, you get into the flow of the game. Honestly, when the game's on the line, I feel calmer than on the first series because I'm into the game. I'm not thinking about how big the moment is.

PALMER: That's the thing about the big moment or the last drive. You have so much stuff going on in your head—What's the play? Where's your protection? Who's the hot [receiver]? Where's the safety?—and all you think is, Read. Just read the play.

KING: Would you guys be better quarterbacks if you called your own plays?

ROMO: We would be the best players ever. *[All laugh.]* There's a time and a place for it. I think the coach trusts me.

PALMER: I would much rather have a play called [by a coach] because—during a no-huddle series, for instance—I don't know the defense's tendencies based on field position and distance, like the offensive coordinator does. He knows the data from six weeks in a row. Having a bird's-eye view from the coaches' box, seeing everything unfold up top, knowing what to expect in certain game situations ... I'd rather have his input, as opposed to calling what I feel like calling.

KING: Ben, would you want to call your own?

ROETHLISBERGER: I do.

KING: How much?

ROETHLISBERGER: About 40 percent. Would I call it all? No. I'm the most untraditional guy here. I'm the one who wants to go just play backyard.

KING: That last series in the Super Bowl, did you make up stuff during that?

ROETHLISBERGER: Yeah. The last two [plays]. My coordinator, Bruce Arians, and I have such a good relationship that he knows what I'm thinking. Every once in a while if he sees something, he'll say, "Hey, don't forget this play." He'll tell me to run the ball if I'm throwing too much.

KING: Are the college spread and the Wildcat part of a revolution or just the normal evolution of the game?

ROETHLISBERGER: I think the game will spread out a little bit, but I don't think you're going to have running backs and receivers taking snaps all the time. You go with your personnel. When I got to Pittsburgh we had a formation where Antwaan Randle El came in from wide receiver and [took some snaps]. There's nothing wrong with doing it a couple plays, because it's a changeup.

KING: You don't think everybody's going to do it for 10 snaps a game now?

PALMER: No. It's a fad. I think you'll see it for eight more weeks, and once some defensive coordinator comes up with a way to stop it, a certain blitz to control it, offenses will get back to the stuff that's worked for decades.

RYAN: I think it's a fad.

RODGERS: It'll stay. Defensive players are getting bigger, faster, more hybrid. The days of straight pocket passers are gone. In the next 15 years you'll see them less and less.

KING: Now, your favorite topic: diva receivers. It seems a lot of wideouts are on their own planet and play by their own rules. How do you handle them?

PALMER: The thing with diva receivers is, they're productive. It's not like they're the third-string receiver who catches 40 balls for 612 yards a year. The guy who leads the NFC or the AFC in receiving can get away with more. You've got to put up with it, but in my circumstance [with Ochocinco] the main thing is communication. As long as you have good communication, you can keep everything under control.

KING: Tony, how did you handle Terrell Owens? Two years ago when you and Jason Witten were going to be on a magazine cover, you said, "No. T.O. has to be in it," and the cover shoot ended up with all three guys. But still things went sour.

ROMO: Every team has a receiver, I promise you, who wants the ball more than everyone else. Some guys are just more vocal about it, and I think T.O. just wears his emotions on his sleeve. So sometimes after games he'd say things that obviously you wished were different, but we actually were O.K. together.

KING: What's the one thing about your job that you hate?

RODGERS: The week after a loss. The media stuff you have to do, watching film when you know what went wrong, watching it by yourself. We just put the mistakes up there and then go through a whole week with the loss hanging on us.

KING: Ben, what do you hate about the job?

ROETHLISBERGER: The Bengals. *[All laugh.]* No. It's the scrutiny. We know the craziness of the fans. You know, we get too much credit when we win, too much blame when we lose. After a loss it can be tough. Living your life under a microscope. I mean every little thing. People don't treat you like a human. They don't think you eat normal food. They think you just float instead of walk. I'm a private person, so people always form a judgment when they meet me for 30 seconds or five minutes. And they never go tell 20 people when you're the greatest guy in the world. They go tell 20 people when you're the worst. So that scrutiny—people driving by your house to take pictures, people bothering you at dinner—that to me is the worst part.

[Editor's note: Shortly after this interview Roethlisberger was sued by an employee of Harrah's hotel in Lake Tahoe, who claimed he had sexually assaulted her. Roethlisberger has denied the claim.]

PALMER: Not being able to be normal, to just go to dinner and a movie. It takes a toll. That's why I live in California, because people there don't care about football players. They're worried about Brad Pitt or Jennifer Aniston. You do what you want. You can walk down the street with a beer in your hand, but if you're in Green Bay....

RODGERS: Anytime I'm recognized and can't just walk around, I remind myself I haven't had a job in my life.

RYAN: I've only been doing this for a year, and the toughest part is after a loss. All the preparation that goes into just one game, and maybe one play at the end loses it.... It's devastating.

ROMO: I've kind of trained myself not to care about the off-the-field stuff, so now all the attention just seems stupidly normal. For me, I can't stand the execution side [of the job]—being crappy one day and good the next. It would be awesome to play at the same high level and execute as an offensive unit day in and day out, but that's just the nature of the game. In training camp sometimes I'm like, Gosh, we should score on every single possession. And when the game starts, it's like, Oh, that [teammate] got beat. Oh, I threw it a little high. It's what drives you crazy about the game. But it's also what you love about the game—when it goes right.

KING: Is there ever a time when you guys are completely honest with the media and the public? The things you say after the game—are they 70 percent true, 50 percent true?

RYAN: Let me be completely honest here. *[All laugh.]* I've always been told, starting in high school, to say very little. My offensive coordinator at Boston College, Dana Bible, told me before my first start, "Listen, the less you say, the less you have to take back." It remains true. I don't think we're dishonest, but you might not always get entirely everything.

KING: There must be somebody or some team you really hate. Fess up.

PALMER: I'm a fan of everybody at the table....

RYAN: Here comes one of those 70 percent answers.

PALMER: Since I've been in the league, the Steelers have been at the top of our division. We just happen to be in the same division. You always want what you don't have. You're always jealous because you all want the same thing. *[Palmer turns to Roethlisberger.]* He's got two Super Bowl rings, and we all want one. You're jealous, you're envious, you want what they have. Ben, don't take this the wrong way, but when the Steelers were in the playoffs, after I got hurt [against Pittsburgh in January 2006], I was watching in California, Jon Kitna was back in Cincinnati, and we were talking during every playoff game. It was like, "I just can't watch. I can't believe they're winning." And I'm just pissed off and mad, throwing bottles against the walls because [the Steelers] just kept going. It's nothing personal; it's about pride. Everybody at this table wants to win Super Bowls, and when you don't win it, you're mad.

ROETHLISBERGER: I don't hate anybody. I dislike certain teams because of their defense. I don't like playing the Ravens because they're so complicated, they do so many different things. They've got great players, and [safety] Ed Reed is back there. Everyone hates the Steelers because we're the Steelers.

PALMER: No. We hate the Steelers because you're on top.

KING: What do you say about the criticism that the league is too protective of quarterbacks?

ROETHLISBERGER: Nobody wants to see a Colts game without Peyton [Manning]. Nobody wants to watch the Patriots without Tom [Brady]. Or the Bengals without Carson. No one wants to see that. Overprotective? No. You have to protect us because we're not looking at the rush. If we're stepping into the throw and guys are diving at our legs, we don't necessarily see them every time. So, yes, maybe sometimes we get protected a little more. But nobody wants to see a game without the stars.

RODGERS: You've got to keep the faces of the game intact. Like Ben says, the quarterbacks, like it or not, sell the games. When they show a promo for *Sunday Night Football* or *Monday Night Football*, it's the two quarterbacks: Tony Romo against Eli Manning. They're not going to show Flozell Adams against I don't even know who for the Giants.

PALMER: The truth of the matter is, somebody is going to die in the NFL. It's going to happen. Guys are getting so big, so fast, so explosive. The game's so violent. I hope it's not anyone at this table, and I hope it doesn't happen, obviously.

Everyone talks about the good old days when guys were tough and quarterbacks got crushed all the time, but back in the day there weren't defensive ends like Mario Williams—6'7", 300 pounds, 10 percent body fat, running a 4.7 40. The game is getting bigger, faster, stronger, and there needs to be *more* protection. If I weren't a quarterback, I would be mad about the rules. If I were a defensive back, I would be mad about the new rule [banning helmet, forearm and shoulder hits to the head of a defenseless receiver], because it does take some of the ferociousness out of the game. But the rules need to be adjusted because [the violence] is getting a little out of control.

KING: What's the one job you'd like to have if you weren't an NFL quarterback?

ROETHLISBERGER: A relief pitcher, like Mariano Rivera, coming in every once in a while, making lots of money; or a fighter pilot, like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*.

RODGERS: Situational relief pitcher. You work maybe an inning, throw 20 pitches, get paid a lot of money.

PALMER: Golfer. You can play forever. Walking down the fairway with somebody carrying my bag and a guy doing the scoreboard, I just feel like Tiger Woods.

RYAN: I'm going to go with [Lakers forward] Luke Walton's job. Play eight minutes a game, win an NBA ring. He's got it going on.

ROMO: I'd say coach if you didn't have to do it 24 hours a day. Those guys are ridiculous with the time and effort they put in. It would be fun to call plays, be a part of that. But I kind of like the job I have.

PALMER: We'd be stupid not to.