

Niners' Hall of Fame finally fixes biggest omission -- DeBartolo

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A couple of weeks ago the San Francisco 49ers made an announcement that got buried beneath the tidal wave of Michael Vick and Brett Favre bulletins, which is unfortunate because what they had to say was significant. And what they had to say was that Eddie DeBartolo Jr. will be the first official inductee to the team's Hall of Fame, with the former owner honored at halftime of this season's home opener.

So what? So it marks an end to the cold war. If you don't know what I'm talking about you weren't around when DeBartolo surrendered control of one of the league's most prestigious franchises. That was back in the late 1990s, when he was forced to pass the team on to his sister, Denise DeBartolo York, and her husband, John -- a deal that didn't become official until all signed off on it in 2000.

To say DeBartolo and John York didn't get along is like saying Al Davis and Pete Rozelle had differences of opinion, and the Yorks' acquisition of DeBartolo's prized ballclub only deepened the fissure that existed between the two.

But that was then, this is now ... and now the Yorks have done the smart thing by reaching out to DeBartolo to honor the owner who hired Bill Walsh, drafted Joe Montana and delivered San Francisco five Lombardi Trophies. It is a move that not only is long overdue; it brings to a close one of the most public family feuds in pro sports.

"I got goose bumps when I heard about it," said former star tight end Brent Jones. "First of all, here's a guy who's done everything for the 49ers and the Bay Area. But then you look at the NFL, and if he's not a legitimate Hall of Famer I don't know who is. It's one of the most egregious deletions of a person who is deserving of that recognition."

Let's forget about that for a moment and concentrate on the 49ers. DeBartolo is the man who put together the organization that dominated the NFL for 20 years -- winning five Super Bowls, 13 division titles and 16 playoff berths from 1981-2000. It is one of the most remarkable runs of an NFL franchise, and it happened on his watch.

"We had fun," DeBartolo said this week. "Everyone misconstrues things because I even had fun when we lost. I didn't like losing, but it allowed us to set a course that gave us an opportunity to learn from our missteps and to set an agenda to straighten things out."

Nowhere was that more apparent than in 1994 when, following two consecutive NFC Championship Game defeats to Dallas, the 49ers signed high-profile free agents like Deion Sanders, Gary Plummer, Ken Norton Jr., Charles Mann, Rickey Jackson, Bart Oates and Richard Dent to close the gap between them and the Cowboys. The 49ers not

only beat Dallas twice that season, including the championship game, they won their fifth Super Bowl.

But with DeBartolo's departure the 49ers moved in a different direction -- veering as far away from the former owner as possible. Players close to the popular "Mr. D" said they no longer felt welcome at the team's Santa Clara headquarters. Club employees hired by DeBartolo left or were forced out. Even DeBartolo himself was forgotten, with his photos removed from the team lobby until it was noticed by reporters. They reappeared after club officials explained they had to be cleaned.

"It was as if [the 49ers] wanted nothing to do with anyone who was close to DeBartolo," said one former employee, "and it didn't matter if they punched a computer or threw a football."

The Yankees and Red Sox are soul mates compared to DeBartolo and John York, and that's what makes the 49ers' announcement so noteworthy. The Yorks did what they should do, which is to recognize and celebrate the man who gave their team its best years. Club president Jed York, one of Denise and John's four children, said the decision was made by his family "with no debate," but those close to the situation believe it would not -- and could not -- have happened without Jed's push.

"I give Jed York a lot of credit," Jones said. "I think his head is in the right place, and I think he's responsible for 90 percent of this. But I also have to give a lot to John York. I think he's mellowed with age and understands the challenges of running an organization. This doesn't happen without his approval."

I give all the Yorks credit for the move. As Jones put it, "this is not just about building a bridge; it's the right thing to do. And it needed to be done." So the Yorks did it, and they should be applauded. If you're going to build a Hall of Fame to the San Francisco 49ers you better damn well start with the guy who put the team on the map -- Eddie DeBartolo.

"Without my grandfather and without my uncle there is no way the 49ers would be where they are," said Jed York. "We talked about the Hall of Fame as a family, and there really was no discussion. My uncle was the first person we thought of. He just made sense as the first choice."

The 49ers already have 16 automatic enshrinees in their Hall, named after Edward DeBartolo Sr. Persons whose jerseys are retired (like Montana) or who were named to the Pro Football Hall of Fame (like Walsh, Montana, Steve Young and Ronnie Lott). But they wanted to expand the roll call, and they started with a telephone call by Jed York to the individual who made all of this possible

"I was thrilled, and I think it is great," said DeBartolo, who has not been back to the team's facility since moving to Florida more than 10 years ago. "I know the type of kid Jed is. He is [a] hard-working and dedicated young man who is very bright. I know it

comes from his heart, and I know he pushed it. It means a great deal to me, and I'm humbled by it.

"But I also know it will be emotional as I stand with my family in front of all my friends in the stands. We had 70,000 people who were part of the organization, part of the family, and that's the way I wanted it. There is no question it's significant, but I think it tells you that John has stepped back from the daily operations and put them in Jed's hands.

"This isn't about a feud. That ended a long time ago. John and I have been very cordial to one another when we see each other. You don't have to be kissin' cousins to be cordial to people. It is what it is. He has his way of doing things, and I have my way of doing things, and it doesn't mean either of us is right. I just know I'm very honored by all of this."

The Yorks' decision has been applauded by those who were once part of the club, including former coach Steve Mariucci, whom DeBartolo hired to replace George Seifert in 1997. Mariucci hadn't heard of the move until I telephoned him. Like others, he was grateful the 49ers finally took the plunge.

"It's well deserved," he said. "But this is the first step. The next step is the ultimate prize, and that's the Hall of Fame in Canton because he deserves to be there, too. I just hope at some point Eddie ends up owning a team again because the league needs him. He's good for the league."

The 49ers need him first, and I can't say this enough: Let's hear it for the Yorks doing what is right. They ended one of the longest and most public family spats in professional sports, and they did it by making the first gesture toward reconciliation with the most popular and most successful owner in 49ers history. Eddie DeBartolo Jr. made the 49ers something special; now it's the 49ers' turn to give something special back.

"It's a very big step," said former team president Carmen Policy, "because it's a smart step. And it's one of the smartest steps since the Yorks took over."

Hang the bunting. Tune the band. Start up the parade. Eddie DeBartolo returns to the San Francisco 49ers, and hallelujah. It's about time he was recognized. So it took the 49ers a decade to wake up. They did it, and let's hear it for wise choices.