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SUPER SPORTS

BACKFIELD BRIGADE

FEATURE NOVEL

by T. W. Ford

BLOOD FOR GOALS

FEATURE NOVEL

by John Wilson



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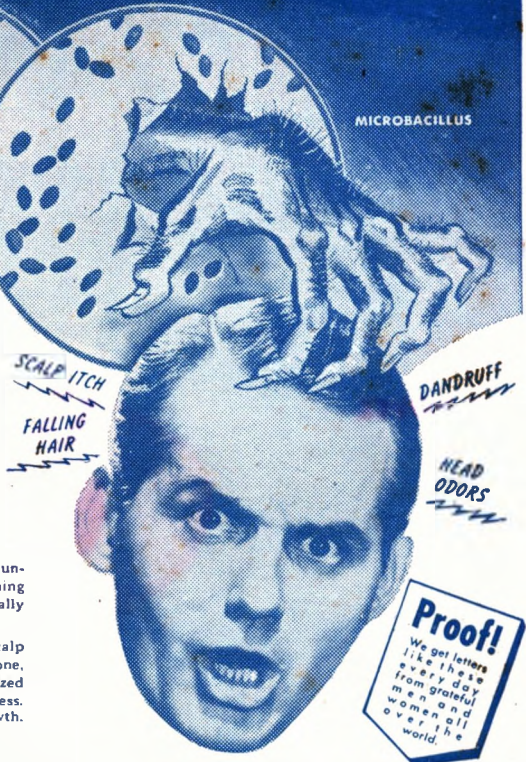
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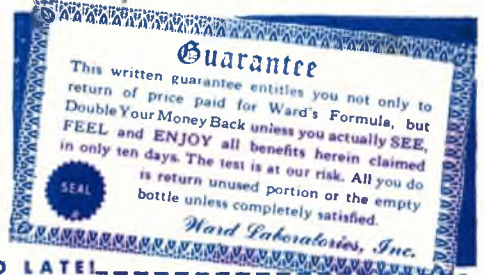
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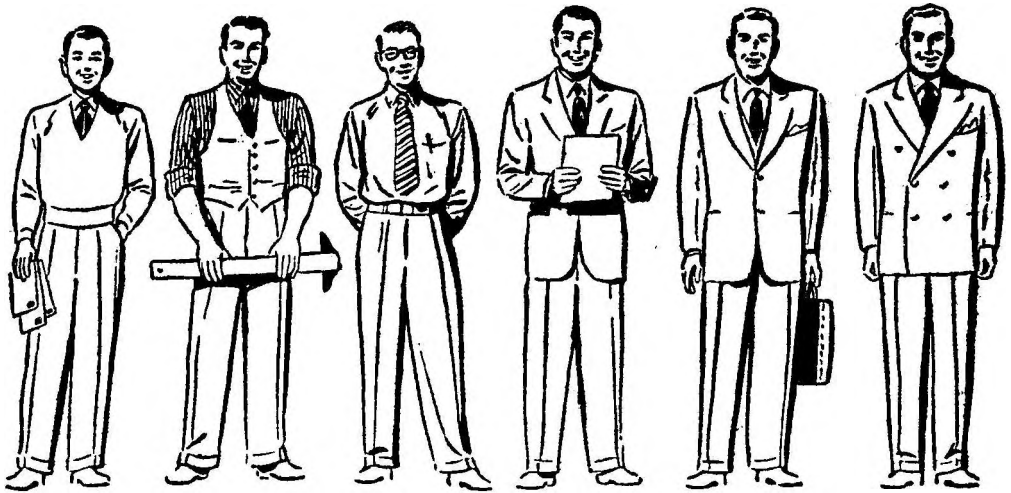


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SUPER SPORTS

Volume 7

Number 6

January, 1950

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

Feature Novels

BACKFIELD BRIGADE (football) T. W. Ford 8

The Flipper couldn't afford any mistakes, playing against his brother.

BLOOD FOR GOALS (hockey) John Wilson 22

Punch Wallard wasn't afraid to work, but they wouldn't support him . .

Short Stories

BUCK THE BIG FOUR (football) Mat Rand 42

Lawlor thought Bucko White would be a friend, but when he met White . .

HALFWAY HURLER (baseball) D. A. Kyle 55

Lank Branan had a reputation for falding when the game was half-through.

QUARTER MILE SLUGGER (fight) Lester del Rey 65

Sometimes a combination of leather-work and track-work can do things.

GRIDIRON OUTCAST (football) Cliff Campbell 88

There was a mystery behind "Bony" Bowen until he showed a streak.

HI LI — HI LOW! (humor) Tom Thursday 80

Misdemeanor Murphy tries to work angles on a jal-alal player.

I DIVED FOR YOU! (fight) Mal Kent 85

There's no foul like a blow to a leather-pusher's morale!

Features

ELIXIR (poem) Sid Press 54

DOPE FROM THE DUGOUT Wilcey Earle 78

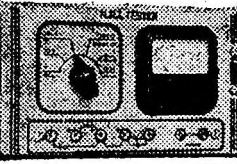
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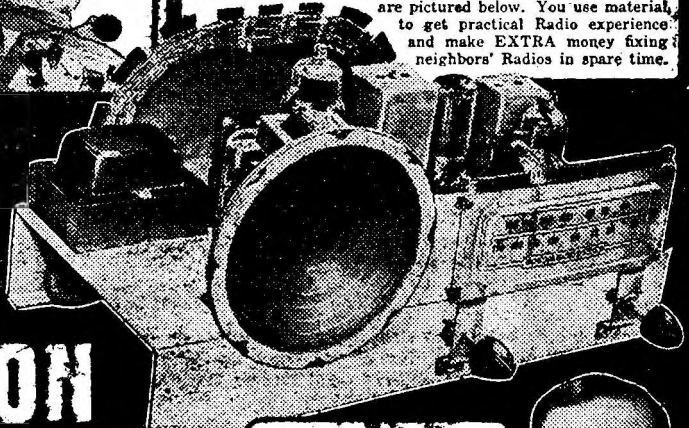


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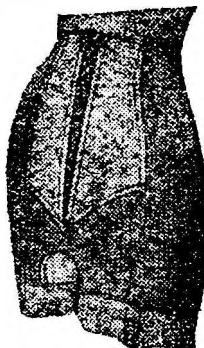
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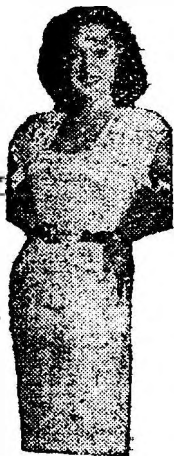


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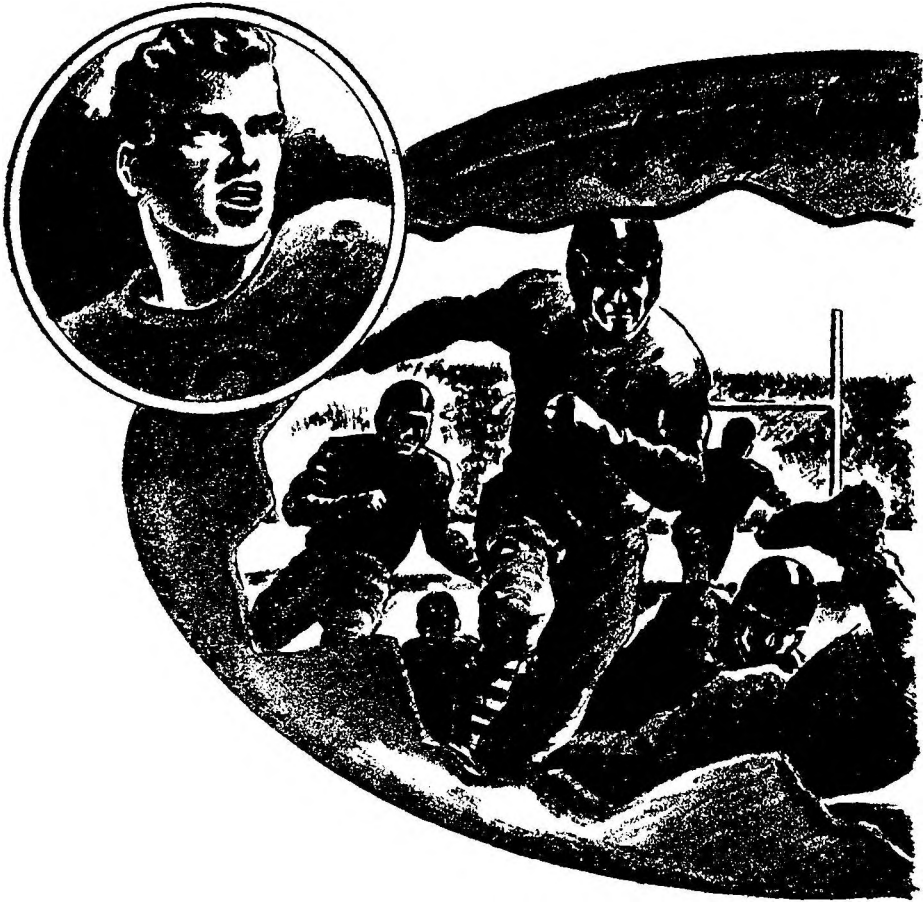
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Backfield Brigade

FEATURE GRIDIRON NOVEL

by T. W. Ford

(author of "Foul Him, Sister, Foul Him!")

Crawling within Flipping Sam Fullen was the knowledge that Big Jim Henders was his brother and that they'd bench Sam for the game with Henders' team if they knew. And yet, the Flipper had to play that game . . . but if there were the slightest accident benefitting the opposition the cry of "fix" would go up . . .

A TITAN END was ripping in from the left like a blood-thirsty Apache on the war-path. Another rival had cracked through and smashed aside his protecting halfback. Little lithe Flip-

ping Sam Fullen darted to his right, faked a heave with the poised pig-skin, then doubled around. He went back the other way, fading deeper, seeking, seeking a receiver. Dodging like a jackrabbit on hot coals. Duck-

It was too
late to catch
the runner
now



ing under a pair of grappling arms. Pivoting on the date-mark of a dime to shoot forward past a man as if he would run with it. The crowd ranted, torn between crucial suspense and delight at his tactics.

Bolting to his left, Flipping Sam's gray slash eyes, jerking and cutting in the tiny face, checked downfield. Dorfman in the center alley was covered. Racing down the right sideline, his right end was being escorted by a couple of Titan pass protectors. Chick Hare, the Number Three back, was shooting across field midway in enemy secondary, but under Titan escort too. The Flipper went up into

the air as if to ferry a short one to the man out in the right flap, but it was a fake; that man was guarded as well. Flipping Sam gave more ground, did a neat dance step away from another would-be tackler, and drifted back to his right, ball still cocked in his oversized hand.

"No interception, no interception," he was muttering as he floated and ghosted. "They'll say there was a fix in after all. They'll say..." The thought sent a chill power-diving down his spine; there had been a story broken about the gamblers associating with players.

Then he saw Chick Hare pull up

short, cut down field, tricking the pass defender. The diminutive Sam Fullen pitched between two leaping men, his pass leading Hare nicely. And then the bow-legged Number Three back down there half stumbled as he glanced over his shoulder; by the time he regained stride, the ball had passed over, inches beyond reach of his straining fingers. An incomplete pass.

They came back into the huddle, those scarlet-sweated Red Hawks, a haunted-eyed strained-mouthed bunch. Sam Fullen was saying a prayer of thanks silently. The pass had failed, yes; but at least it had not been intercepted at that crucial point in the game. Had it, the scandal mongers would have had their tongues wagging in jive-beat time.

"How about an end-around? Their wingmen are coming in on tracks—and straight in?" asked Hi Berg the quarterback hesitantly. Under the terrific tension, he'd lost his sense of command.

It was more than the state of the game. Hawks trailing by three points, 24-21. Fourth quarter. Third down and five. Ball on the Titan twenty seven yard line; and the minutes left in the game running thin as the purple shadows lapped out from the west stands. But it was more than that; it was that near-scandal, that story of the gamblers having an "in" with certain players that had broken during the week. If they dropped this one, people would never believe the players involved had clean hands.

Captain Nick Miller, "Parson" as he was called, the four left end, shook his head. "Maybe we better let The Flipper peg another."

But The Flipper, palms running with cold sweat, vetoed that, shaking his head. "They're expecting the air stuff. How about the C-85?"

Berg picked that, a pass fake; he took it in the T formation, faked to one man, shovelled back to the feather-footed Flipping Sam. He cut to the right, arm cocked. Then he suddenly shovelled it forward to

Hare hunched right behind his own right tackle, and Hare rammed inside him for a precious three and a half. Again the huddle, the indecision brought on by the tremendous unnatural strain, eleven men fighting two battles.

Berg wanted to risk all on a pass again. Again The Flipper shook him off; maybe it was because he was afraid of the responsibility, he told himself. They decided on a double reverse. But Augie Pasco, the right halfback fumbled; The Flipper leaped out of his tracks, pounced on it and ran to his right as defending forwards poured in. He went into the air, arm cocked. They went up with him and little Sam was around them. He skidded out wide, then went down the sideline like a tight-rope walker. He only picked up three; but it was enough for a first down. Titan players were swearing at him from the corners of their mouths.

"The damn little brat, he ain't supposed to be nothing but a passer!" one of them spat.

THEN IT WAS a huddle again.

A cutback for a waste play off the strong side. A yard or two but it drew secondary up a step tighter. And The Flipper had to pitch again. He flashed to the left, then knifed inside the charging end as if to slide off tackle. He was counting as he went. "—nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thir—" He jumped straight up just behind the forward wall. The up-raised arm jerking like a lever. A final flip of the wrist like rubber, and the pigskin was whistling through the air to right end "Dago" Dwyer, the red-haired Irishman who'd whipped across toward the far coffin corner. Dago climbed a couple of steps on the ladder, hugged it to his bosom.

And then he was smacked by an orange-jerseyed defender. Afterward Dago said it felt as if the goal posts had fallen on him. The ball popped from his grasp, and another Titan, coming over fast, plucked it out of the air. He came back five before he was dropped. It looked as if the last

chance of the Red Hawks had been throttled. But The Flipper expelled a big breath of relief. A Titan had ended up with his pass, but it couldn't be called an interception; an interception that might be translated as no accident on his part after the gambling stink.

The Titans played it safe, stalling for time, bucking the line twice; then they kicked. But Captain Parson Miller had crashed in like a madman, torpedoing a protector to almost block the kick. Hurried, it glanced off sideward, went out on the Titan's own forty.

The Hawks were all talking it up. Miller picked up eight on an end around, taking the last five with two tacklers attached to him like barnacles. Hare took a backward lateral from The Flipper as the latter cut wide and knifed over tackle for a first. Then it was The Flipper to pitch again. He cut and doubled, elusive as a minnow back there, while the defensive secondary spread and chased wide after potential pass receivers. And The Flipper suddenly side-armed a little peg to Dago Dwyer who'd gone down then cut back to stand there out in the right flat. Dago threshed his way through the open field down to the eight, and it was The Flipper again.

Hi Berg faking on what looked like a reverse, then The Flipper with the ball, shooting up in the air. Snapping it quick as a pistol shot right over the center. And the Parson, cutting across, picked it off the line, turned, and drove like a rocket straight across the double-barred goal-line into the pay dirt of the end zone for the winning touchdown. But as the great throng smashed the heavens with their delighted roars, Flipping Sam Fullen took wavering steps in small circles back there, so nauseated he was almost sick to his stomach. For a Titan backer-up had just missed intercepting by a split second.

IT WAS THE game. A minute and a half of play following the kick-off with the battered Titans taking wild chances to try to pull it out. But the tough veteran Scarlet line smoth-

ered them. And then they were trotting off, capering, slapping each others' backs, yelling senselessly.

This had been more than just another game in the pro grid circuit of which they were a member; more than just another victory to insure their first-place tenantry; this was the answer to those wild charges of tampering by the wise-money gambling boys,

They staged a small riot in the dressing quarters, rough-housing, throwing wet towels, chucking the trainer under the showers. Even roughing up a little the pudgy dignified George Murtha, the coach. All but The Flipper. Stripped to the waist, one hand nervously mauling the shoulder harness on the bench beside him, he sat with tow head bowed, the little hollow-cheeked face solemn. There was next week...

His lips puckered back as if he'd bitten into a lemon. But it would have been almost better if, perhaps, had, even accidentally, pitched a couple of intercepted heaves at crucial spots. Then perhaps he would have been suspended, sidelined next week for investigation by the league prexy's office. Anything would be better, almost, than having to face the Cubs next Sunday. The Cubs with Flash Henders in their lineup.

People didn't know about Flash and The Flipper yet. But if they found out, and then anything went amiss or looked suspicious in that game...

~ 2 ~

AFTER HE got finished answering the queries of the sport reporters, he pulled on a worn camel coat, climbed into his little coupe, and drove to the apartment in the suburbs of the city. Once he drove through a red light at an intersection and almost collided with a delivery truck. After that he slowed down and tried to rivet his concentration on traffic. But he couldn't keep his mind off that gambler-player connection expose that had almost exploded into a scandal.

It was through Clipper Braden, the

brilliant hipper-dipper swivel-hipped halfback, that the other members of the club involved had met Jim Fotte. Braden was a former campus idol, a big good-looking brute who liked to play around the hot spots at night. He'd been fined more than once for infringement of the training rules, especially the curfew one. Popular, attractive to women, he had a flock of acquaintances along the Main Stem. And Jim Fotte society-sportsman, was one of them. Fotte, son of an old family in the city's history, apparently wealthy, used to give big dinner parties in his penthouse apartment—parties at which some of the leaders in the sports field were guests.

Sam Fullen had been flattered when Braden had taken him along the first time. You rubbed elbows with the big shots in the sports world when you were at Fotte's place, and the middle-aged handsome Jim Fotte himself seemed to delight in being around athletes and those who controlled their destinies. Then had come that revelation of a fixed fight at the big city arena. A probe, and some underling, a mere hanger-on of the big-shot gambling crowd, had sung. He stated that Jim Fotte was broke, was supported by the gamblers, that he had acted as their go-between with the fighters in the fixed bout. Fotte had acted for them in like manner, and as contact man, on many occasions before; it was Fotte's act to serve as a front to entertain the athletic stars and soften them up for propositions. And that brought in the members of Red Hawk professional grid club.

An enterprising member of the press had dug up some photos of Fotte dinner parties showing five members of the Hawks, including Sam himself, in Fotte's company. This was beside Clipper Braden. They'd been promptly hauled on the carpet; all had been cleared but Braden. Certain evidence had been produced to show that some of the bookies and big gamblers had consulted him, on the eve of games, to get the inside dope on other clubs in the league. He had immediately been

suspended; but there seemed nothing criminal in his action. The sports fans had cried, "Whitewash!" and the ugly rumors persisted, the hints and innuendos, that perhaps certain members of the club had been fixed during the season. All that had been early in the week.

That was why today's game had been so terribly important, why Flipping Sam Fullen himself had been sweating blood lest there be a game-turning interception of one of his numerous aerial heaves.

HE PULLED up in front of the modest apartment house, took the self service elevator up. Now the answer, today's win by the Red Hawks, was in. All talk of a gambling scandal, of a fix, would die a natural death. Next Sunday, at least, fraught with personal threat to him as it might be, there would not be the betting coup-fix angle anyway. Things would probably be all right, he told himself as he arranged on a smile on his face before putting the key in the door.

Priscilla swung it open from the inside before he could turn the knob. "Oh, Sam, honey, you were perfectly wonderful out there!" And her slim arms were around his neck, the pert face with the bee-stung lips pressed hard against his bruised cheek. "They were saying all around me in the stands that you couldn't do it again, that you *couldn't* do it. But I knew my Sam, honey."

"Stop that man!" cried little seven-year old Sam, Jr. He came scooting down the apartment hall in that football-uniform play suit, complete with helmet and the shoulder pads, that they had trouble getting off him even when he went to bed. He flung himself at one of his father's slim legs and clung like a leech as The Flipper feigned futile efforts to break loose.

"What did you think of your Old Man today, Buster?" Sam asked, swinging him up in his arms.

Sam, Jr., grinned, then became very solemn. "Daddy, a man in the stands behind us was talking about gambling on the games. He said.."

"Buster, your father doesn't want to listen to grand-stand gossip now," Priscilla put in quickly.

Sam looked at his son, nodded for him to go on. The boy said, "The man in the stands said that if he wanted to have a game thrown *you* were the man he'd try to fix. What did he mean by that, Daddy?"

"I guess he must've meant something about my throwing footballs—you know, like I pass, son," Sam said quickly. But he didn't have much for an appetite for the two-inch steak Pris put on the table that night. If that gambler-player connection thing hadn't broken, he wouldn't be so worried about next week. Watching his wife and son in the living room after dinner, brought it home the harder. If anything suspicious-looking occurred in that next game and his connection with Flash Henders of the Cubs came out, he would doubtlessly be blackballed from organized professional football.

He would make some kind of a living, of course. But it would be a far smaller income than the game provided him now. It would mean a change in the living standard of his wife and the boy. His mouth clamped hard.

YOU KEPT tossing and mumbling in your sleep all night, honey," Pris said as she gave him his four eggs and double portion of ham in the breakfast nook the next morning. "Is something bothering you?"

"Nothing," he said curtly, eyeing the food with distaste. For a small man, The Flipper had a tremendous appetite; it was the talk of the club when they were on the road. But this morning all he wanted was some coffee. "Sorry," he added, "I didn't mean to brush you off. I bruised my knee a little in the third quarter. Guess it was bothering me, baby." He opened the morning paper to the sports section. The banner head was good for his ego. *Flipper Fullen Tames Titans with Aerial Sharp-shooting*, it read.

Then his eyes jumped, next lidded guardedly. Across the page was the picture of a gridiron gladiator, standing akimbo, helmet swinging

from one hand. The caption said, *Jim Benders, the White Flash, playing-manager of the Cubs, Whom Hawks Will Have to Bottle Up Next Week.*

"Why, Sam, he's got tow hair like yours," Pris said, studying the picture over his shoulder while she poured his coffee. "And why—" She frowned. "He doesn't look like you—exactly-y. But still, well—there's a certain—a certain peculiar resemblance as if he might be a relative or—"

"Or my brother?" Sam finished it for her. "Well, he is!"

The Flipper didn't know exactly why he'd never told her before; it hadn't seemed important, somehow.

"But his name is Henders, not Fullen, Sam."

"I know, honey. When I was just a youngster, my mother and father were divorced." He fired up a cigaret, head bent thoughtfully. He'd been too young to understand what was going on then. Jim, several years older, had favored his father in the unpleasant situation. By mutual agreement of the parents, Jim had gone with his father. And the mother had taken Sam home to her own family. When she'd resumed her maiden name, Fullen, it had become his, too; it was the only surname he'd ever remembered.

"I was taken to visit my father a number of times before he died, Pris." He let the smoke filter from his narrow nostrils. "I don't remember him very well, though. I used to see Jim, too, on those occasions. We always squabbled." Then, when he was in college, they'd met again, gotten into a fierce argument over their divorced parents. It had developed into a savage fist fight. "Jim beat my ears off; that was the last time I saw him."

He sat silent for almost a whole minute, cigaret ash dropping onto his checkered slacks. He said Jim was a powerful guy, stockily built, had been a great gridiron man at State years back.

"It'll be sort of—well, sort of odd playing against him, won't it?" Priscilla said after a while.

"Yeah," Sam agreed. He toyed with

the bacon and eggs, then went out for the usual long dog-trot he took across country to keep his all-important leg muscles the steel springs that they were. Those legs were half the thing that made him the passing sensation he was, legs that could keep him darting and cutting and dancing from danger till he saw a chance to hang it on the line for a pass receiver. He tried not to think; driving down to the stadium in the afternoon for the non-scrimmage skull drill that featured Monday's practise, he knew he had to make a decision some time, though.

3

WHEN THE Red Hawks had purchased him and brought him up to this league this season, he'd known all right that Jim Henders, his blood brother, was manager of the Cubs. But the White Flash had hung up his cleats, announced his retirement as an active player last year, so the fact didn't seem too important that Jim was in the same league. However, a few weeks ago, when his club had begun to wobble, Jim Henders had put himself back on the active list and returned to the gridiron wars, a dangerous hard-running back who could wham a line too. And he was a bulwark on the defense, a veritable hawk against passes. Passes, Sam's specialty. And Jim was leading his fast Cubs in Sunday, with the two clubs tied for the league lead.

That was the picture, and The Flipper didn't know the answer. He was still fumbling for it in his mind after putting in a shaky wild-pitching performance in Tuesday's contact drill. He was hardly aware at first that Manager Murtha, leonine head thrown back, was addressing the club gravely when they got back to the locker room.

"Boys, there's been some new stuff on that gambler-player angle. The newspapers are scratching around again," he said in his slow basso. "I want to ask you fellas just one thing. Is there any player in this room here now who was mixed up with the

bookies and gamblers in any way he hasn't already admitted?"

You could have heard a dry sponge squeezed in that silence. Murtha broke it with slow speech. "You, each and every one, would sign a written statement to that effect?" Heads nodded up and down the room. A few men said, "Sure." Silence again. George Murtha's regretful sigh was plainly audible. He turned toward his office. "Hasley," he called over a massive shoulder to the regular center, "mind stepping inside a moment." Hasley hadn't reappeared when the last man left.

* * *

That night, sitting in the little apartment with Pris, with Sam, Jr., in bed, The Flipper's answer came to him. Pris had just been telling how little Sam that day had broken a neighbor's window with his football. And how he'd marched up to the woman's front door, rung the bell, and told her he was the one who'd done it.

"I'm so proud of him," she said. "He made a clean breast of it, Sam. He—"

The Flipper wheeled out of his chair like a back breaking on the starting signal. Came over to grab her hands, his eyes a-light. "Baby, that's the answer for me too! Sure. Tomorrow I'll tell George Murtha that the White Flash, Jim Henders, is my brother. Then I'll give out a statement to the papers; that'll put me in the clear, all above-board!"

He really slept that night. Came into the breakfast alcove singing, then remembered the paper and went to the door to get it. All the song was gone out of him when he returned with it. The answer was a two-column head on the front page. "*D.A.'s Office Uncarths More on Grid Gambling Scandal.*" It ran. The subhead said, "*Ebon 'Punch' Hasley, Crack Red Hawk Center, Charged with Having Bet on Games.*" And, "*Authorities Hint Gamblers Were Trying to Reach Players to Throw Hawk-Cubs Battle.*"

The Flipper had a clammy feeling around his heart as he read the story. Hasley's crime was not actually serious; he had done nothing crooked.

It had simply been uncovered that he had bet on his own club in several games. But that was against a league ruling; he was indefinitely suspended, automatically. And he admitted he had been approached indirectly with a vague proposition about "doing business" on the Hawk-Cub battle.

Sam Fullen sat a long time the while his food got cold. And then he came to his decision, a grim one. He would say nothing about the fact he and Jim Benders were brothers. If he did, he knew now that at the least, under the pall of hinted scandal overhanging the game, Murtha would have no choice but to keep him benched throughout the contest.

There were two angles to that. With Braden, the break-away running back out of the picture, and now with their star center, Hasley, lost too, the Hawks were badly weakened as it was. With him out too... No, he couldn't do that to those teammates of his, men who'd sweated and fought along-side him all season. And there was a second reason, and he'd barely suspected the existence of before but that galvanized in him now. This thing was a show-down battle between him and Jim, the same Jim who'd beaten him half to a pulp a few years ago. Sam wanted this show-down.

"No, honey, tell them," Priscilla pleaded. "Then they can't accuse you of anything afterward. Tell them!"

"No," Sam said stubbornly, under jaw pushed out the way it got when he started to pitch when his own club was behind.

"Sam..." She put her arms around his neck. "If anything does go wrong—just accidental... If your brother should make an interception that led to the winning touchdown... Think, honey! Then if it came out afterward he was your brother, that you'd apparently tried to keep it a secret—oh, honey, they'd never believe anything you said then! Never!"

The Flipper stood up. "Jim isn't going to intercept for any *winning* touchdown, at least... I got a score to settle with him. And there's the club, my teammates... I'm going through with it as it stands now...

4

THE LAST thing Murtha said before they took the field that Sunday afternoon was directed at his wingmen. "Whatever you do, when that Rocket Viner is in the lineup," he told them, naming the great little Cub scatback, "keep him to the inside. Don't let him get around you. See? Don't worry about tackling him, but keep him penned inside—and the line and the secondary will handle him! About Henders, there isn't much to say. Rush him hard—but he's going to be tough; he is a grid man from the cleats up."

Then they were trotting down the runaway. It was a sharp December afternoon with the sunlight like spangles shot from the light blue heavens. But there was an invisible pall over the stadium as far as the Red Hawks were concerned. Dago Dwyer expressed it as a cheer greeted them. He said: "Well, they seem to like us crooks, anyway. When are you going to throw the game, Berg?" To the quarterback. "I do my underhanded work in the third quarter."

The quiet Sam Fullen got it. They were going to be waging two battles again: one against the cocky tough Cubs; the other against all the breaks that could make the vague charges of "gambling" and "fix" look genuine. And he himself was going to have to fight the toughest battle. He saw Captain Parson Miller go out to flip the coin. Everything was in a sort of haze for The Flipper after that till they were in position to take the kickoff and the pigskin was turning over slowly against the sky. It came to him. He flashed forward seven or eight, skittered off, reversed his field, then lateralled to the husky Chick Hare. Hare was whacked down on the thirty.

The Red Hawk offense back-fired right off. The line was offside on the first play. Something went wrong in the backfield on the second and Pasco shovelled sideward to the little man who wasn't there. Berg fell on it and they kicked. Back in

the safety spot on a 2-2-1 secondary defense, The Flipper watched his brother, play caller as well as running halfback of the Cubs, turn it on. The black-and-white jerseyed warriors came roaring up the field. Plenty of hipper dipper out of a modified T. Mixing up quick openers and running plays with short stabbing passes. Then the White Flash himself, Jim Henders, was flung loose on the flank on the end of a dazzling lateral.

A blocker bumped off Hare long enough. Through, Henders, those short piano legs thrashing, reversed his field, cut down one tackler by sheer power. A blocker came around the other wing and took him in convoy. They came through Hi Berg at midfield, veered toward the sideline to draw away from another tackler. And there was just The Flipper himself between them and the goal-line.

He managed to crowd them over against the side border, giving ground with them. Jim's square face was an iron mask with a streak of white where his lips peeled back. By fast footwork, The Flipper evaded the blocker's charged, dived over him, and nailed Jim with a head tackle that threw him over the sideline, out of bounds.

"Be careful, little boy," Jim said after the whistle with a scornful impersonal look. "We're going to play rough. You oughta take your bean-bag stuff into another league."

"Nice to have metten you," Sam quipped. That was all between them, but they both knew; it was to be a test of strength.

DEEP IN Red Hawk territory, the Hawk line finally throttled the sweeping blazing Cub attack. The Hawks began to move. On second down, on the sixteen, Berg gambled and had Sam rifle a spot pass. Dago Dwyer hooked it over near the sideline for a twenty yard gain. Then an official's horn. The play was nullified; illegal man in motion in the Scarlet backfield.

That first quarter was tough and fast. The Cubs held a distinct edge

with most of play being in the Hawk half of the field. Henders the White Flash, so named because of his tow head like Sam's, kept spear-heading raids into the danger zone. Several times it was just The Flipper's dazzling passes for substantial gains that took the Hawks up field before they kicked. Then it was the second quarter and they were swapping goals.

"Gee, that Henders," said Hare as they walked up toward the other end. "He ain't a ball of fire—he's atomic stuff! And tough. When you tackle him you wish you had on a girdle, a cast-iron one."

Charlie Dracos, the left guard nodded agreement. "Say, Sam, his hair's just as white as yours."

The Flipper made no answer. Play was resumed with the Hawks carrying. Hare legged it for a first down on a cutback, simply battling his way through the backers-up. On a fake delayed buck, Berg jump passed over the line to Sam who'd sneaked around behind the enemy flank. He got five more and they snowed him under. When he rose, he was shaky for a moment. Somebody had clipped him on the back of the neck going down. He shook his head and there was the burly Henders standing off with a crooked grin.

An offside and an end-around with Parson Miller going like a locomotive gave them another first. But the Parson had to leave the game for a breather after a couple of Cubs double-teamed him on that one. It was The Flipper feinting for the flank and pitching one on the run. He was hit as he fired it. But Hi Berg made a great one-handed catch to put the ball on the Cub thirty two. The Hawk backers were chanting, "Go! Go! Go!" Sam again on what looked like a pass, darting and faking a pitch again and again. And then a sudden shovel shot to Hare waiting behind the line. And the halfback rammed ahead for eight. The Cubs took time out.

Play. Berg on a waste play as he took it on an in-and-out himself. The

team talking it up. "We're going all the way, all the way," the Dago kept saying. Berg looked at little Sam in the huddle. Berg faking to Hare, darting to the right with the leather, then feeding it back to The Flipper. The Flipper swept to the left, going back, back. Always the threat of him breaking wider on a run. He wheeled back to the inside, ducked under arms. The heavy hand of a would-be tackler swiped him across the eyes. His vision blurred a moment as he faded sideward as fleetingly and gracefully as a ballet dancer.

THERE WAS that figure fifteen yards down in the enemy secondary, arms lifted. Right where Dago Dwyer was supposed to cut across on that play. Through the grayish blur before his smacked eyes, The Flipper pulled the trigger and laid the pitch right in the guy's vest pocket. Then the blur cleared and the "guy" was Jim Henders. Dago pounced on him from behind before he could take a stride, but the Hawk touchdown threat was killed, a heart-cracking break.

Murtha pulled Sam out again for a breather. Late in the quarter, when Berg got his machine rolling again, The Flipper was sent back in. He was brilliant, and as dangerous as a little package of dynamite. Those big Cub forwards were breaking through his protectors more frequently. But he jumped high once to pitch between upflung arms for a first down right over the center of the line. Two plays later, trapped with no receiver uncovered, he ran it and picked up eleven, scooting and scuttling and doubling in his tracks. He hung out another for Parson Miller. Then Hare fumbled and the Cubs recovered. Brought in Rocket Viner, their scatback. And he and Henders went to town, the old "Mr. Inside" and "Mr. Outside" stuff. They went for the game's first touchdown as the half ended.

"We'll get 'em next half. Sammy had a tough break that time," was the team's consensus of opinion as they piled into the locker room. And

the leonine Murtha, though always tense during a contest, didn't look too unhappy. He stepped to the big portable blackboard, prepared to diagnose some of the action of the half. An aide hurried up, spoke earnestly. Murtha scowled, then nodded. A moment later a lank gray-haired man in a floppy topcoat came in.

From the nearby rubbing table, Sam recognized him though he didn't know him personally. Higbie Bird, sports editor of the city's biggest sheet. Sam heard Murtha grunt, "What-t?" Then, "Are you certain?" and something else.

Bird snapped, "Never mind where my office got the dope. We know it's on the level. And considering the charges of a gambling coup on this game, I thought you should know. That's all." He yanked at his snapbrim and left.

Murtha put down his chalk, lifted his triple chin from his chest and turned directly to Sam Fullen. "Sam, is Jim Henders your brother?"

~ 5 ~

THE DRESSING quarters were shocked into stillness. And in it, propped on an elbow, The Flipper nodded. "Yeah, he is, Mr. Murtha."

There was just the *slap-slap* of an assistant trainer's hands on another player's body. Hi Berg had popped off a bench to stare at Sam. Then, like an echo, from the rear came a man's voice, "That pass..." Sam knew they were all thinking that, that pass into his brother's arms at the apex of the Hawk's big drive. Before it had simply seemed like one of those things that can happen. Now...

Murtha said, "Why didn't you tell me before, Sam?"

The Flipper licked lips that felt like curls of old parchment. "I was afraid you'd bench me for the game."

George Murtha nodded. He was an understanding man, but this threat of a gambling scandal over-

hanging the club made things different. "I'm afraid that's what I'll have to do—now," he said deep in his throat.

When they returned to the field for the second half, the veteran Starnowski, already frosted at the temples, was in the Number Four, deep slot for the Red Hawks. The Flipper was a slump-shouldered bitter-hearted little figure on the bench. And what added to the hurt was that not one of his teammates had had a word for him; that pass into his brother's arms was suspect now.

He watched Henders and the Cubs move after the kickoff. Cross mid-field. There, swarthy Hl Berg, turning on the game of his life, smashed two plays single-handedly. The Cubs went into the air and Pasco intercepted on the Hawk nineteen. Play seesawed. Once the Hawks drove deep but the Cubs smothered them when they swung to a seven-man line with the Hawk pass threat gone.

The swaggering Henders was driving his gang, talking all the time, taunting the battling beleaguered strength-sapped Hawks. Sometimes his voice carried even to the bench. A holding penalty by a desperate Hawk lineman brought the ball, in Cub possession, to midfield.

"Time we really put these bums in their place," Henders bawled to his own team. And the next moment he was away himself on a perfectly executed double reverse, streaking loose behind brush-blocking that was a coach's dream. He went all the way for the second Cub touchdown. Score, Cubs—14, Hawks—0. And it might as well have been double that, the way things stood.

The kickoff as the third period neared a close. Berg unable to get his machine moving. A punt. Two running plays and a quick kick by the Cubs who could now afford to sit back and wait for the breaks. And Chick Hare made the break against them that time. Wheeling, back-tracking like mad, he made an over-the-shoulder catch. Then he swept around the in-cruising end

and started back. Chick came all the way back, all the way and into the Cub end zone for a score in one of the doggedest scrappingest pieces of broken field running seen on that field. Seven points for the Hawks. Sam was up howling with the rest of the bench.

He saw Parson Miller signalling he wanted to come out, Parson who, more than once, when knocked out of his head, had to be half hand-cuffed before he came out. Murtha sent in a sub and the captain jogged across the sideline.

"We want The Flipper in there, Georget!" he barked. "Fast."

"What?"

Miller was talking loudly in his excitement. "Sure, his hands are as clean as can be! We know now. That Henders, his brother, has been taunting us out there, boasting how he'd scared Sam out of the game. How the going was too tough for the kid. And Henders means it, George; we know now."

The portly Murtha actually leaped around. The Flipper was already shedding his parka and scooping up his helmet. Then he was going back in on the play after the kickoff with teammates yapping to him, smeared faces turning grins his way.

"Here comes the beanbag expert, boys," Henders called to his club. "Handle him gently now when you hit him phuleeze!"

THE CUBS started a drive, Henders himself slashing off those tackles, swinging short off the wings, powering his way for gains by pure brute strength. But the Dago trapped him behind the line once. And the big Irish end almost plowed him under the sod. Henders was slowed down. An end-around failed. Sam, lynx-eyed, kept creeping in shorter and shorter from the safety spot. An offside penalty and a short flip over center gave them a new first down. A quarterback sneak gained over the middle. But the Cub quarter had to leave the field, limping, after Pasco hit him. And then Sam's hunch came true.

The Cubs went into the air for a long heave.

They threw two men into Chick Hare's zone, one slicing across in front of him, the other coming straight down as if to pass and to get behind him. Hare elected to stay with the latter. The arching true flip to the first man, trailed futilely by Berg. And the swift Sam, closing fast, leaped in front of that first man to pluck the ball practically off his finger tips. Sam weaved and skittered his way back to the mid-field before they crashed him. Just after he kissed the dirt, a knee knocked his helmet almost off his head. When he stood up it seemed that somebody had invented the novel idea of putting the stands on a merry-go-round.

He slapped his own face a couple of times and joined the huddle. The Hawks were gabbing wildly, hell-bent for a touchdown. A whistle and the game moved into the fourth quarter with them swapping goals on the windless field. "The hell quarter" as a vivid sports writer so aptly described it afterward.

Hare, badly battered, stumbled and lost ground on a single reverse. The Flipper to pass. But two black-and-white shirted Cubs came through his protectors and smothered him. Nine more lost. Then Berg carried the mail on an end sweep and got back that nine plus two. Fourth and twelve. They should kick but they were trailing. And Berg was a gambler. He looked at Sam, then called the D-H 14 pass play.

IT WAS beautiful the way the little pass genius worked it. Running at top speed to his right, sweeping out. Receivers were fanning downfield. Then he leaped up, twisted in mid-air, pulled the trigger. And Berg—who slid through the line belatedly—could have yawned and caught it in his mouth. Berg took it and went away from there. Henders cracked him from the side. But old Hi had a new motto that day, "It takes two." Two men to stop him. He went right to the

eighteen before two did. And then the Hawks were turning on the climax kick. Short stabs. A flip into the flat by Berg, of all people. Always the aerial threat of The Flipper back there. Down to the nine. And then The Flipper put the key in the hole with a side-arm flip from a crouched position to the Dago over in the coffin corner. The Dago stepped daintily over the double-barred line into the end zone for the tying touchdown. Trying, at least when Dracos came back and toed over the try for the extra point.

"Now, you gotta lick us, ya dogs!" he flung at the Cubs after he did it.

The Cubs had that very idea in mind. It was bang-bang-bang as they struck back following the kickoff. But Murtha's line, which had gotten the knack of shifting, of playing it fluid against that Cub attack, halted them at the forty. Henders kicked. One play and Hare was helped off with an injured ankle. Pasco fumbled. Berg had to boot it back. A purplish haze, presaging twilight, crept over the cleat-cut field now.

The Cubs started. Six yards on a cutback. An end-around for seven more. Then Henders coming off the left side like the hammers of hell out of a daring triple reverse. And he fumbled as he ripped free of a tackler. It was Parson Miller who recovered. Afterward an official swore he saw the Parson kiss that leather after he'd gathered it in.

"Flipper," was all Berg croaked in the huddle before naming the play. But the one word, the name, was like a prayer the way he said it.

A pass. Precision work like a master craftsman in action. The Flipper rifled it down to the five, practically into the speeding Dago's ear. And the Irishman dropped it. A line stab. Then The Flipper going back again, pitching. The crowd screamed. The Dago had it in the center alley, in the clear. And then Henders, the defense ace, materialized out of nowhere. Took it away from the Dago. Swung wide and

came off the right end like a locomotive high-balling it on a clear track.

The Flipper had wheeled over. A passer must always cover the lane down which he shoots. He drove in for the tackle. And it looked as if he'd missed badly on his dive. What the stands couldn't see was that low hook from the hip thrown to his jaw. Henders brushed by him, almost. Not quite because the groggy falling Sam managed to hook a single hand in the waistband of his brother's pants.

Henders dragged him. Went into a spin once to try to throw him free. But The Flipper hung on like a terrier. Slowed his brother enough so that two Hawk tacklers overtook him at the forty.

GROGGY AND ashen-faced, Sam went back to his safety spot. He was more than hurt. He was scared inside. Now, with that gambling charge in the air, when it came out he and Jim were brothers, they'd suspect that pass interception that had almost been converted into a touchdown, too. Wonder about his apparent failure to make a cleancut tackle.

Henders was ranting at his men. This was their last big chance, the clock on the stands said. They rolled for one first down. Then Parson Miller, who'd caught that slugging act, smashed two Cub plays. Henders elected to try the air on a short flip down the center. It was even short of the receiver. But Pasco, coming in from the side, dived on his shoulder and snagged it inches from the ground.

"We're going all the way back there," the Parson solemnly told his team. "All-the-way!"

They started. They tried. But Hare was gone. The great Braden had never been in. They were weak in the middle with Hasley out. Pasco could do little more than crawl. It had to be The Flipper. It was.

And was one of the greatest one-man aerial circuses ever seen in action. Ducking, dodging, feinting

again and again, he pitched short and long, into the flat, behind-the-line pegs. The Flipper took over that game. Missed one. Completed a short snap throw. Had one dropped. Hit the Dago in the eye to put it on the enemy thirty. But they piled on the Dago as if he were a grab-bag and he had to be carried from the field.

A running play for a couple. The Flipper flashed at the line, shot into the air at the last moment, and cannonaded one to the Parson. But they'd assigned two men to cover him. Sam's own brother punched that one down.

The Flipper fading and weaving back again, a hollow-cheeked little guy with big murder in that wing of his. And he was smothered as Cubs hammered through his protectors. Three of them tried to bury him without the formality of digging a hole. He bounced up. The next moment he grabbed at his arm, face twisted by a spasm of pain. He tried to bring up the passing arm. And then he knew they'd done it, they'd really gotten him as Henders had ordered.

The crowd sat weighed down in overcoats of thick gloom. Something was wrong with The Flipper, they sensed. They saw him walk over to Berg and say something. But they knew now even his genius couldn't do it. Not with The Dago gone. And Paron Miller covered like a tent. And Pasco almost useless in his condition. Berg limping, too. No protection for a passer, either, now. And but seconds left.

They saw the snapback. Berg faking a handoff once to Pasco. Then the flip back to Sam. And The Flipper flashing at the line. The jump-pass try once again, of course. And that Cub secondary was spread for it.

No jump pass. No pass! Instead, the little Flipper kept right on going. Eeled inside his own tackle and through. Through to fly by backers-up who stood rooted, stunned with astonishment. He was zigzagging, wheeling away from a tackler at a right-angle cut like something fluid.

A man racing back from the line behind him on his right side.

THE FLIPPER was lifted clear of the ground. But he'd already been drifting away from the tackler, like a boxer rolling with a blow, when the latter hit. He went into a spin, leaped on toward the sideline, then turned downfield again. Another wild Cub grappling for him. It was like trying to spank a cat. The Flipper had the timing of a mon-goose. It was what had made him such a passing star, the fact that he could weave and duck and wait till he was ready to make his pitch.

The ten-yard stripe fleeing behind his cleats. He wobbled. He was grog-gier than he'd thought. And then there was Jim, his brother, over, blocking the road. Jim and the Cub safety man converging from the left. And the sideline like an invisible wall inches away on his right. The throng groaned.

The Flipper pulled up short feet from his brother. "Hi!" he yapped. Made a motion as if to lateral to his left, as if Hi Berg were coming over. Henders' bloodshot eyes flicked that way for a split second. It was enough. The diminutive figure with the million-dollar arm, who'd thrown the Cubs into turmoil by failing to use the arm for once, slid by his brother's left, between him and the sideline, like a wraith. The next moment he was over and into the end zone with the touchdown that meant the game. Even as Parson Miller ran down to grab him in a wild bear-hug, the gun ending the game spat

on the cold December air...

It took a cordon of police to save him from half-crazed fans and move him toward the locker room. The Parson and Chick Hare had him under either arm. Portly George Murtha marched just in front of him, glaring around with a magnificent belligerence.

"Anybody here want to make any remarks about a fixed game or gambling now," he challenged in a proud roar several times.

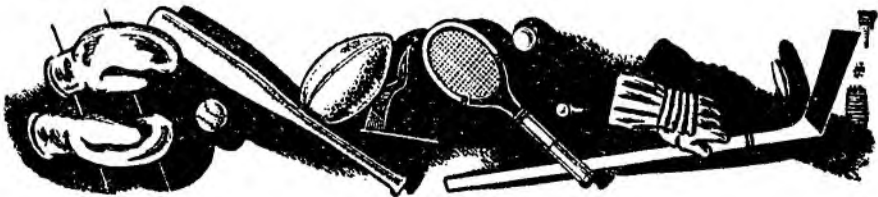
Then a figure in a sweat-soaked jersey seeped through the police line. The black-and-white jersey of the beaten Cubs. And Jim Henders, the White Flash, stood before his brother, The Flipper, for a brief moment. Henders stuck out his hand in a jerky motion.

"Sonny, I've seen worse football players," he said.

Sam took the hand. "Thanks. You were a headache yourself more than once today, Jim." Their hands parted. Henders ducked away. Maybe that was all that would ever happen between them. Sam didn't know. But he did know he had earned his brother's respect. And there was satisfaction in that.

He knew another thing. Up there in the stadium stands behind sat his wife and child. And they weren't going to have to worry if every morning sheet in town headlined the fact that he and Henders were brothers.

"Anybody here got anything to say about fixed games or gambling players now, huh?" boomed George Murtha again...





Blood For Goals

Feature Novel

by John Wilson

(author of "Blades of Fury")

They all
had it in
for
Punch,
now.



Punch Wallard wanted to win, and he'd work like a demon on ice, only to see everything go to pieces around him. And not only did his team-mates hate him, but everyone began to whisper that Punch's reputation was a phony . . .

THERE HADN'T been even a large-sized ripple in Punch Wallard's rink career till he suddenly found himself traded to the Wolves. He'd come upon the big time, touted as solid front-line stuff, and more than lived up to the hilt of his minor league rep. A swift and shifty wingman, owning an explosive stick, Punch wasted little time carving his name on the loop's various trophies. He was a hunk of puckster, the love of the game singing in his heart, and a willingness to swap blood for goals. From humble rink-rat to the top of the pro pack, had come this Punch Wallard.

The curve in the rainbow brought an eyeful of surprise when Punch hooked up with the league's humpty-dumpty outfit—the Wolves. The ice itself seemed to crack and splinter under him, and everything was suddenly mixed up and out of focus. He'd been shocked when the news hit the wires that the Cougars had broken up their famous "Punch" line, dealing him from the top to the bottom of the deck. To get him, the Wolves had given up a slew of icers, and one of the biggest chunks of cash ever handed over the hockey counter. Then overnight, it seemed, Punch was a changed player, and the Wolves were screaming that they'd been swindled. Punch's presence in the Wolves' forward line didn't help a bit, and the team was stuck in the same old familiar ruck. Punch himself couldn't buy an assist, much less a goal, it seemed; for the first time in his career, he was tasting jeers and the crowd's anger.

Even now, as Punch closed in on the Hawk wicket, he could feel a sudden, impulsive tension gathering in him. The pass-in had not been gauged to the breakaway maneuver, and he'd pulled some fancy stick work, making the snare. But that would be forgotten with the moment and all the chips would be down on the next move of the rubber. Already he'd missed a half-dozen clutch shots, and the crowd was riding him harder than any rival backliner.

Punch got a glimpse of his crimson-shirted wingmate, Rad Harner, squeezing the other prong of the attack. Harner had deftly slipped his check and was driving from the opposite angle. A backliner, though, was stepping into that vacuum, and sizing up Harner for the hoist. There was just that shaving of a fraction to make a decision and Punch didn't hesitate about picking up the challenge. He threw a feint, shoulder and stick blending into the motion, then unloaded a blistering drive aimed at the lower corner of the webbing.

He'd really spanked that one, Punch knew, and the rubber streaked directly toward the spot he'd picked. But, as it left his stick, that familiar wave of bewilderment was beginning to claw deep inside of him. Somehow the Hawk goalie managed to anticipate the shot, and had shifted into the path of daylight. Punch swore softly as the crowd's roar changed abruptly to a bitter groan.

A hunk of larceny, that blocking of an almost certain red-lighter. Punch put on the brakes, and plunged into the open warfare in front of the Hawk cage. He couldn't for the life of him figure what was ailing his game since stepping into the Wolves line-up. His shooting seemed as explosive as ever, and he was pushing himself for all he was worth. But the net-tenders kept finding the answers to his thrusts. Miserable though his luck appeared to be, it couldn't account for everything; somewhere in the wheel, a spoke was broken, and Punch simply couldn't put a finger on it.

He was desperate to sink a tally. There were less than five minutes remaining, and the fans were in an ugly mood. The Hawks held a one-goal jump in the score, leading, 3-2. More the pity, the Wolves were engaging in their sixth straight winless game, having done no better than a tie during those contests. The fans were not interested in hard luck or past reps; they were victory-

starved, and their disappointment, in the Wolves--and he himself, in particular--too bitter a thing to simply shrug away.

Hadn't the fans been led to expect big things of him? Miracles, they wanted and he did not own such stuff. But neither could he entirely blame them for their rage, the Wolves having sacrificed plenty of puck-and-carry talent to get him. Perhaps it was Stocky Dolphin, the Wolves manager, who was really caught in the middle of the whole explosive situation. It was Stocky who'd pushed that deal, and in doing so, gambled his life as manager of the club. And if ever the skids were being greased under a man, Stocky Dolphin was that gent.

IT WAS give and take, that mix-up for possession of the puck, and for a moment Punch thought he'd been caught in a buzz-saw. A careless stick slapped against his jaw; elbows dug into him, and a hot rush of anger spread through him. Somewhere in that dizzy, whirling fracas, he spotted Rad Harner and vaguely wondered why the wing didn't move in and take some of the pressure off him. Harner was in position to ram through and work over the Hawk from the other side, allowing one of them to poke-check the disc. But Harner seemed satisfied to let the scrap boil to a finish. The Hawk corralled the puck, swung in a half-pivot that would take him into clear ice. Punch was with him all the way, then using a hip and flashing stroke to steal the biscuit.

He spun, and blasted at the Hawk goal. It wasn't till he'd let the shot fly that he saw Rad Harner in the clear. The Hawk net-tender batted that one down, and Punch was suddenly thinking more about the sneering grin on Rad Harner's face than the missed goal. Sometimes he couldn't help but get the impression that Rad Harner and the other Wolves found an odd satisfaction in his futility. They seemed almost glad to see him getting his lumps, and the edge chipped off his rep.

The Hawks swung into the offensive, the formation swelling into a three-man wave and carrying over the blue line. They baited the center alley, and then screened the defenseman on the left. Punch whirled, covering, and the Hawk forward dropped the puck on the blade of a mate following-in. Then it was Punch, checking, and not quite making it good. He wheeled frantically, realizing the gap on the other side of the cage was wide open. He almost bumped into Rad Harner, and collected an earful of harsh syllables.

"...Cover your own man, damnit."

Punch figured Rene Prevost, the right-side defenseman, would plug the hole. The burly Wolfe defenseman, however, was all tied up, and his last-chance bodycheck hardly put a dent into the Hawk's momentum. He went in alone, and Crab Dillard, tending the Wolves net, saw another red light chalked up against him. The Hawks deepened the scoring gap, going ahead, 4-2.

The goal bent and broke the backs of the Wolves. Punch bit down hard on his lip as the jeers stormed at his ears. It didn't matter to these Wolves fans that he'd covered up for Red Harner, figuring Rene Prevost would do the same for him. But Prevost was a vet and the fuse in his game was burning low; he hadn't been equal to the job. The Wolves fans didn't see that part of the act at all. What their eyes saw was his man slip into the clear and racking up a counter. And Rad Harner, instead of being half-way grateful, had yelped about him messing up the assignment.

When the face-off tangle ripped apart, blood was dripping from the side of Punch's mouth. He had the puck, though, and his anger was hotter than a branding iron. He teamed up with Lefty Tremaine, and flashed deep into the Hawk zone. It was dazzling stuff, the exchange of passes, the swift, saber-like thrust that pried open the defense. The centerman splintered in the opposite direction, and then arrowed in. He fed to Lefty, and the rubber came

right back to him as he piled in on the cage. He got hit, jolted, and his shot was a weak effort. He never did get back into position, and the Hawks tore to the attack. A few moments later, they'd sprung a double-pass, and tallied again.

The game itself was sealed in the Hawk's win column, but Punch didn't call it quits till Stocky Dolphin sent on a spare. He threw himself at the Hawk defense, seeming at times to bust through on sheer power. He was taking a bad beating, and in spite of the fury packed into his play, gradually grew more ragged in his passing and shooting.

"The great Punch Wallard," a leather-lunged fan shouted, as he came off the ice, "the biggest bum of 'em all."

They really let him have it, the full blast of their anger, spilling down on him. It stung and it hurt. He asked himself just what they expected of him. But he knew the answer; they wanted to see him register that red-light, and pay-off in victories. Well, he'd thrown every ounce of savvy and sweat he owned into the mill. *I can't give it any more*, he thought bitterly. *They want a magician, not a hockey player.*

HE SLOUCHED down on the bench, wishing the gong would sound and end it. Those crazy Hawks were really pouring it on. They were coming down again, slashing the defense to pieces, and breaking them three strong. They hit again, and the game had turned into a complete rout. The Hawks were in front. 6-2.

At Punch's shoulder, a voice said suddenly. "This ain't hockey, Punch; it's plain hell."

Punch kept his eyes straight ahead. He didn't want to look into Stocky Dolphin's face, sensing the bitterness he'd find in it. It was enough, the heaviness of the voice.

"I donno," Punch said slowly. "It just isn't working out, Stocky; something is all wrong, and I can't figure the angle."

"You're still the best wing in the

business for my dough," the Wolves manager said. "But I'm not so sure you're the best thing for the Wolves." He paused slightly, working up a slight grin. "And besides, it isn't my dough, Punch."

"You're saying I'm lousy with pretty words. Is that it, Stocky?"

The Wolves manager shook his head. "No, you're putting out a good brand of wing. Not much luck at the cashier window, but those spells happen. The thing is, though, you're just not the kind of medicine I thought you'd be for this gang."

Punch gave him a startled glance. "What makes it bad medicine, Stocky?"

"You're a star—much too big a star for the Wolves, Punch. Just what can be done about that, I donno."

That was a strange remark, and Punch's laugh carried a hollow ring. The fans were calling him anything except a star, and here was Stocky Dolphin telling him he had too much of the sparkling stuff. How to make sense out of that, Punch didn't quite know; at the moment, it didn't seem to matter, what with the drubbing Wolves were taking and him sitting out the last couple of minutes.

He took a deep, troubled breath, and thought how different the surroundings, and even the feel of the Wolves togs from what he'd known as a Cougar. The Wolves following was small in number, and ten times as critical as the Cougar fans. But emphasis was on the victory, and the Cougars gave their rooters a goodly ration of it. Season in and season out, they were either on top of the pack or sitting on a high rung. The Wolves, though, considered it a great victory to make the play-offs. Defeat itself seemed to be a member of the Wolves. It was everywhere, clinging to them on the ice, and the dressing room, and in the newspaper columns. It was a depressing thing, this awful shadow of defeat that covered the team. Like walking in the sun one moment, and then staring into a strange blackness. And Punch was aware that he himself was strain-

ing harder with each game to stop that defeatism from getting inside of him.

The gong stopped the carnage, and the Hawks had themselves a banquet at the Wolves cage, winning 7-2. Punch clumped down the cork-matted runway with the others. The Wolves were in an ugly mood, and Rad Harner didn't even wait to get to the dressing room before unloading his mind.

"A little different—playing on this outfit—ain't it, Wallard?" he snorted. "You gotta dig for your goals instead of having 'em all creamed and waiting for you to knock home."

Punch said, "Nobody creamed anything for me, palsy; I did some pretty good digging of my own." He hesitated, trying to quiet the anger rising in him. A sudden jump, and he couldn't hold back the words that formed in this throat. "But when you talk about the Cougars creaming things for me, you really mean they gave me some decent support."

Rad Harner stopped short, and his eyes grew hard, and the jawline tightened like something a string had jerked. He laughed, a kind of bitter amusement. "Yeah, it's tough on you, Wallard. Real tough having to travel with a bunch of punks, huh?"

Punch said nothing. He was sorry, though, he'd pulled that crack to Harner about them not backing him up to the limit. But, then again, who was Red Harner that he could beat his gums, and expect the other guy to take his nasty lip? Right from the beginning, Punch had suspected Harner of having a grudge of some sort locked up inside of him. It was becoming more and more apparent that his judgment had been accurate.

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THE LOCKER room was its usual grim and gloomy place. The silence was particularly cutting to Punch, for he was more accustomed to the rollicking shouts of

the Cougars. Even in defeat, the Cougars took their medicine with a proud defiance. But these Wolves brooded, and brooded some more. Punch wanted to get out of his togs as quickly as possible and away from the place and the players.

He was out of the showers in good time, but the moment he stepped back into the locker room section he sensed a packed-down tension. They eyed him darkly, and a bitterness that went beyond defeat was swimming in their faces. The tightness held a moment, and then the centerman, Lefty Tremaine, snapped the spell. "So you don't think you're getting the support a star of your rank deserves, huh, Wallard?" Lefty said roughly.

Punch was silent. His gaze whipped around the room, and if it was not obvious to him before, he could be certain now that they looked upon him as a separate part of the team. They resented, rather than welcomed him, as a leader. Somewhere along the string of games, this feeling had set in and spread like a poison. No matter what their personal opinion of him, they'd respected his ability and handed over the reins of the team to him. But he'd brought them no magic formula, and in fact, nothing they'd not known before—defeat. The confidence in him was a shattered thing, and they needed a scapegoat, and he certainly was a nice fat one.

Punch said: "Me and Harner tossed insults at one another, and now the pack of you want to get in on the act. Well, you're all welcome, so pitch away."

Lefty Tremaine said, "You're a funny guy, Wallard. Even funnier on the ice, if you don't mind a personal opinion." He laughed tensely, then: "Maybe I should take a big hunk of the blame. The Cougars have Cal Deland, and for setting plays in motion, he's a ringer. He practically fed you with a spoon, didn't he, palsy? Sorry but I haven't been able to chip in with the same brand of feed."

That crack had a stinger all its

own, and Punch felt it deep down inside. There were a lot of people who credited Cal Deland, the Cougar center, with making a terrific contribution to his rink glory. No doubt that Deland was a superb set-up man, and had figured prominently in clinching a couple of scoring crowns. But he himself piled up a pretty good quota of assists, and that factor spoke volumes.

But, for all the teamwork that existed between him and Cal Deland, they'd never really been close friends. In fact, the Cougar center had gotten the impression that, without his delicate touch, Punch Wallard wouldn't have scaled the same lofty heights. Punch had laughed that one off, though frank in his admission that Cal Deland was the ideal playmaker. The feeling between them at the time of Cougar-Wolves deal had leaned toward some bitterness. "You just worry about Lefty Tremaine," Punch told the Wolves center. "I'll take care of my end of things."

Rad Harner said suddenly, "Preach all you want, Wallard. But the goals don't come quite so easy for you now, and you can't find a handle. You've been a big shot where there's a dozen other big shots to pave the road for you. But, on this outfit, you're just another Joe Blow, see? Why don't you admit it?"

"The pack of you," Punch said tersely, "not only play like punks but talk like 'em too."

The lid came off then. Rad Harner half-leaped at Punch, slinging a right hand. There was plenty of fury but little aim, and Punch's own right sent Harner down. He scrambled to his feet, and a couple of others were itching to play a part in the scrap. But the knuckle stuff stopped abruptly as Stocky Dolphin stepped into the middle of things. A partition separated the manager's office from the dressing room, and Punch had an idea that Stocky had filled both his ears before making an entrance.

"Enough is enough," Stocky snapped, crowding between Punch

and Rad Harner. "This kind of stuff isn't going to help anything."

Rad Harner said, "No, and neither is Wallard helping us, Stocky. We know you're on the hook on account of him and have been trying to go along with you. But it's no dice, Stocky. The guy plays a brand of hockey all his own"—he shrugged loosely—"I donno how to explain it, but things are more messed up than ever."

"Yeah, something has got to be done," Stocky said slowly, "and I can't wait much longer to do it."

The stand the Wolves manager took surprised Punch. Rather than backing him up, Stocky appeared to have cast a reluctant vote with the others. Somehow he'd expected an impartial handling of the matter, but Stocky didn't see it that way at all.

"Okay," Punch said, his voice taut, "I've loused up the works, huh? I'm not good enough for the Wolves—"

"No," Stocky cut in, "you're too damn good, Punch; that's the trouble." He turned then, and stalked toward his office.

Punch stood there a moment, staring at the manager's back, and then began getting into his civvies. The tight, choked-up tension somehow deepened, rather than found relief. *They know they've got me pinned in a corner*, he thought. *All they needed was the go-ahead signal from Stocky, to really close in on me.*

He could not sort his feelings, for they were a mixture of hurt and bewilderment. What did they want from him, Punch asked himself over and over again. Was it some sort of crime or fault to be a star? Certainly, he'd spilled his share of blood, and taken plenty of lumps to win his notch in the game. He hadn't asked the Wolves to trade away half their club for him. But since they'd chosen to do so, he'd withheld nothing from them. He did not sleep much that night.

ONE QUICK look at the morning papers, and Punch swallowed hard. The sportswriters harped on

the goals he didn't make and generally forgot about the other sides to his game. One wrote facetiously suggested that the Wolves buy up the contract of Cal Deland, the Couga centerman.

"Apparently," the writer said. *"Punch Wallard needs his old sidekick, Cal Deland, to be effective as a scoring threat. It was Deland, through the seasons, who graciously opened the gates for Wallard, while he himself remained inconspicuous. Insiders have been aware of this situation for some time, but only with the breaking up of the combination has the importance of Deland's role been brought into the open..."*

So there it was, more claws ripping at the rep he'd built, and passing it all off as something of an accident. It was funny, Punch thought, this stuff about needing the Cougar centerman to flash the red light. Up until joining the Wolves, he'd given it no mind. But now he found himself beginning to wonder if Cal Deland wasn't responsible for a bigger chunk of his success than he'd ever realized. Where in previous seasons he'd been the top Cougar scorer, Cal Deland had now taken over as the scoring ace.

The Cougars didn't appear to miss his presence even slightly, and that fact rubbed Punch hard. They were pacing the scramble, and—what's more—were using Ed Falk in his old wing spot. Falk was one of the package of icers the Wolves had given up to get him. He'd never been more than a mediocre performer with the Wolves, but on climbing into Cougar togs, suddenly began playing a bang-up wing. On results, Punch couldn't deny that Ed Falk had given far more worth to the Cougars than he himself had shown the Wolves. So the Cougar fans were having quite a chuckle about the whole deal.

That afternoon Stocky Dolphin ordered a drill. The moment Punch dropped a skate on the ice it became obvious to him that the purpose of the session was more than

a routine work-out. Stocky pulled him off the first line, and in his place put in the veteran Hap Faurot.

"I hate like hell to do it, Punch," the Wolves manager said, "but it's just gotta be that way."

"You're the one guy I figured wouldn't climb on my back," Punch said bitterly. "But I guess you're allowed to reverse your field like everyone else seems to be doing around here."

Stocky grunted. "You think it's easy, huh? You think I just shuffle the lines a bit and it ends there. Well, how 'bout the backfire?"

"You mean that this change is an admission to the fans that you made a helluva mistake in that deal with the Cougars?"

"I could be stubborn," Stocky said. "The club goes on blowing games, and I get blown right outa my job—if I'm not already."

Punch's throat tightened. "You talk outa two sides of your mouth, and don't make much sense to me. One minute, you're giving me a lot of yap about how big a star I am. Then I look around and you're singing the same tune as the rest of the pack. How come, Stocky?"

"I haven't changed my tune," Stocky said at length. "But I'm afraid you yourself have done so."

His voice was low and tired, like the man himself seemed to be. He looked beaten and desperate, and this maneuver was going to provide the critics with a fresh supply of ammunition. Apparently, though, Stocky was willing to risk all that, to haul the team out of their slump.

As Punch was skating off the ice, following the practice, a tall, lean-jawed individual called his name. Punch looked up, saw the Wolves owner, Jimmy Girard, at the rink-side. Punch found it quite amazing that Girard owned the club, for he couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old. But owner he was, having taken over the reins on his father's death.

"You mind stopping in to see me before you leave, Punch?" Girard

said casually. But there was something Punch read in his face that belied the easiness of the voice.

"See you in a little while," Punch said.

PUNCH showered and dressed quickly, and put in an appearance at the club owner's office. The pleasant grin that greeted Punch gave way to a dark, serious expression. Young Girard wasted no time then, launching into his subject.

"There's something I want to know—straight and completely honest." He paused slightly, and his eyes locked for a moment with Punch's stare. Then: "How much did Cal Deland have to do with your work as a Cougar?"

"What you're asking," Punch said evenly, "is whether I need Deland to play my best game."

"Put it that way if you prefer."

Punch took a deep breath. He started to say something, and abruptly changed his mind. It was easy enough to tell Girard that all such talk that pegged his success on Cal Deland's play-making savvy was sheer malarkey. Once he'd have said just that, without the slightest hesitation; now he wasn't at all sure of how essential the Cougar center had been to his game.

"I wish I knew the answer to that one myself," Punch said dryly. "But I honestly can't make heads or tails of the thing. It never seemed to me that Deland was the main-spring in my game. But maybe, like the guys say, I'm wrong."

Girard nodded. "That puts us all on the spot, Punch. A pretty bad spot, too."

"You were hoping that I'd reassure you that the club hadn't made a bad deal, huh? I wish I could say we're in a slump, that everything is going to be just dandy."

The Wolves owner shook his head. "I don't understand it. We haven't got a great team, but it's a good, solid outfit. I've bought and traded and really believed the Wolves would be in the cup chase right from the first go. But it appears that

I've messed things up more than ever and the Wolves are going to land in the cellar again."

Punch was silent. There was a lot of worry and strain tied up inside of the youthful Wolves owner.

"Well, it's still rather early in the season," Punch said hopefully. "Maybe something will happen and get us on the right track."

Girard laughed a little. "I'm not kidding myself into expecting miracles. When Stocky Dolphin asked for you, I was hesitant. But he insisted that the club couldn't miss, with you and Lefty Tremaine and Rad Harner on the firing line. Well, dad always had a great respect for you and so did I, for that matter. I didn't exactly feel it was a gamble, giving up so much ice freight and cash to get you in the Wolves line-up. More than anything, I wanted to give these Wolves fans a winner, and you were to be my trump card."

"You feel that I've let you down. But I can't quite see it that way, Girard. It's true I haven't been seeing much of the red light, but there's been nothing wrong with the other part of my game."

"Look," Girard said, a sharpness rising in his voice, "there's bad feeling among the guys. I'm not blaming you for it, but, nevertheless, it's there, and some of the fault must be yours. I can't let things go on this way. The fans are staying home, and the papers are panning hell outa everybody connected with the club." He paused, and his palm slapped down hard on the desk. "I've given Stocky Dolphin his notice. He's through unless he gets the club rolling at once. I don't like hitting Stocky with this sort of rap, but I've no other choice. It's the fans who foot the bills, and I can't continue to antagonize them."

Punch stiffened. "I see. Stocky put his chips on me and I fizzled and he gets clipped."

"There's not much else I can do at this stage," Girard said grimly. "My own neck is out a mile, and

I can't dig much deeper in my pockets."

"As bad as all that? You broke?"

"I wouldn't say broke, but the pack is getting awfully heavy on my back, Punch." He paused, smiling thinly. "I'm afraid I'm not turning out to be the guy Dad figured I'd be. He practically fed me hockey instead of a bottle, but a lot of good it's done me."

Punch said, "I'm not so sure you're gonna help things, firing Stocky; it's no real solution."

The owner shrugged. "For all our troubles, things might not be so rough if Ed Falk wasn't burning up that Cougar front-line. That's what has the fans talking to themselves. With us, Falk was just another icer, but he climbs into Cougar togs and becomes a star. So the fans come up with the idea that anybody can be a star with the Cougars—especially if they've got Cal Deland to set things up for him."

Punch winced. "Your big mistake, then, was not getting Deland for the Wolves instead of me."

3

THE NEXT night the Wolves and Rockets got together, and the game attracted a larger turnout than usually. Rumors were a dime a dozen, and the Coliseum buzzed with them. Somehow the news had leaked out that Stocky Dolphin was ditching his gold-plated star—Punch Wallard—in favor of the crinky-jointed Hap Faurot. There was talk, too, that the move had been ordered by Jimmy Girard, and that Stocky Dolphin himself was set to walk the plank. Earlier in the day the hockey writers had cornered Punch, and asked him about the locker-room tiff with Rad Harner.

"I can't help you out one bit," Punch had said. "We've all knotted up in a slump and things can get a bit warm under those circumstances. It's all in the game."

A reporter smiled cynically. "The game certainly has changed since

you did the Wolves the favor of playing with them."

Punch had sizzled. "Why don't you guys go bury your heads in the ice? I'm sick and tired of your manufactured yarns."

"Like Cal Deland being your prop?"

"I think you're giving Deland a lot of credit he doesn't deserve," Punch had exploded. "Sure, he's a great center, and has a clock in his head when it comes to gauging the plays. But pulling the trigger on a shot, I did all right, pal."

He just couldn't help lashing back at them. It was a mistake, of course, he realized later, when his anger had cooled. But neither was it fair of them to keep pounding him and trying to make him out as a guy who couldn't have gotten along without the Cougar center. Why didn't they at least wait till the end of the season before sticking a loaded gun in his ribs?

No sooner were the line-ups announced, and his name was excluded from the starting line, than a swift murmur began picking up momentum. Stocky Dolphin was finally getting around to admitting that his deal for Punch was the prize boner of many hockey seasons.

Punch dropped down on the bench, and some of the tautness that was holed up inside of him stole into his jaw. Once again he was conscious of that terrible mixed-up feeling seeming to tear him in several directions. He couldn't blame Stocky for benching him, what with his job hanging on a thread. It was blood on his hands if Stocky found himself junked. And still he could not help but think that Stocky had given him all the worst of it, picking this moment to bench him.

Whatever ideas the Rockets had of steamrolling the Wolves into submission were quickly discarded. Right from the opening face-off, the Wolves played inspired hockey, and fought their foes every inch of the way. It was obvious to Punch that the Wolves were grimly determined to win this one for Stocky. He was

a popular guy with them, and they knew that a defeat might send him toward the exit. But just as important in their mind, Punch sensed, was their resolve to prove that they were a better team without the great Punch Wallard. They didn't need or want him.

IN THE FIRST minute, the Faurot-Tremaine-Harner line broke down the ice, throwing a power drive at the Rocket defense. The fur flew and the body-checking was raw, brutal stuff. Punch saw the Rocket backliner crack Rad Harner a shot that sent him reeling against the boards. But Harner managed to get rid of the puck. Lefty Tremaine picked it up, and simply slammed his way through the two-man bulwark that the Rockets flung in his path. He blasted the puck, and the goalie barely made the save.

There was a rebound, and while the tangling went on in front of the wicket, Hap Faurot slipped the rubber home. The crafty vet, lacking the speed, and sheer power of his teammates, owned a headful of savvy. He'd slid in there, catching his cover flat-footed, and scooped the disc from between the skate of a backliner. The Rocket goalie, Punch knew, hadn't ever seen Hap Faurot pitch the biscuit, for the icers in front of him had blocked his vision.

The Wolves scored again in that first period when Lefty Tremaine hook-checked the rubber, and then teamed up with Rad Harner to dent the twine. It was Tremaine who opened the gap in the defense, and Harner on the shooting end. The Wolves zipped into the lead, 2-0. The fans whooped things up, and filled the air with reminders that it was done without Punch's help.

Even when Stocky Dolphin threw fresh lines on the ice, Punch didn't get the call. Perhaps, he thought, it was better that he stayed on the bench, for any crimp in the Wolves attack would be blamed on him.

The game took on a slightly different edge as the teams went into the second period. The Rockets, who

were rough stuff for any outfit to handle, began to turn the tide. They came down, tightening the pressure each trip, and clawing for a real opening. Punch watched them methodically work-over Hap Faurot's slot. They had him sized up as the weakest link in the Wolves line, and were whittling away at him.

Faurot was all heart and guts, but the seasons had slowed him down a great deal. A nice guy to have to spell a younger man, but hardly able to stay in there over any real length of time. His back-checking began to lose its edge, and he wasn't covering with nearly the same effectiveness as earlier in the game. Just a fractional slip of his game, but that was all the Rockets needed to find the scoring range. In a race along the boards, Faurot couldn't match speed with the Rocket wing. A pass unfolded, and then Faurot's cover went in and slashed the rubber past Crab Dillard's desperate stab. Seconds before the period ended, Faurot took a jolting check, and was slow getting to his skates. The Rockets threw a four-man wave into motion, and the Wolves found their defense tipped off balance. That surge tied the score, 2-2.

Defeat began settling down on the Wolves again when the Rockets manipulated a checkerboard play, and clicked for another tally. For all the Wolves' grim bid for victory, it seemed wasted when the Rockets collected their fourth goal.

Punch glanced at Stocky Dolphin, and the manager's face was pale and pinched. He switched lines, and when the regular trio came off, their frustration was a swollen, bitter thing in their faces. The vet Faurot lowered his head, mumbling to himself.

"...couldn't do it. Just couldn't make it..."

The game went on, and the Rockets were very much in command of it. There wasn't more than half the last quarter remaining, when Stocky turned to Punch.

"Go ahead on with the first line." Punch got ready, and he couldn't

miss Rad Harner's harsh stare. It couldn't have been plainer, the spoken word: "Go ahead and gloat, big shot. We can't win without you, and I'll bet you're getting one helluva laugh outa us..."

ONE LOOK at Punch moving onto the rink, and the crowd let him have the business. He got it, flush and on the button. The jeers came at him, stinging and hurting him like he'd never been hurt by any body-check.

He plunged into the scrabble of sticks and whirling steel, wanting to blot out the jeers. He was fresh and the strength boiled in him, and he cut loose with all of it. He pounced on the rubber like a big cat, when a Rocket back-passed, stealing it from the blade, and streaking down the middle. He carried the puck, giving his line the lickety-split second needed to merge, and drive down. The passes flew from stick-to-stick, but Punch was strictly the take-charge guy. He snagged Rad Harner's flip, and faked to Lefty Tremaine, moving straight in on the wicket. It was all artistry, that feint, pulling the backliner to the wrong side. A deft piece of hip-ping, and Punch was roaring in on the goal. The stick smoked. He beat the goalkeeper, and the red light blinked.

Punch laughed tensely. So he needed Cal Deland, huh? The face-off, and he was digging into the scramble, and wrenching the rubber loose. He fought off his check, and backed the thing into the clear. He could go, and the Rocket made the mistake of gambling on a stabbing interception. Punch kicked ice-splinters in his face and, leaning into the pace, flashed the mercury-like speed that had driven the opposition crazy.

He shook off one icer, fainted another out of position, and slashed into the scoring zone. He saw Rad Harner cross over from the left-wing alley, and knew the guy was expecting a pass. Punch laughed to himself, because he knew he was

red-hot, and nothing was going to stop him. A defenseman angled toward him, and Punch braked and tried to go through on the inside. The Rocket played it cautious, and pulled back, looming like a road-block in front of Punch. That was all right, too, because the guy anticipated a pass to Rad Harner or a direct assault. The angle was good, and Punch whipped into the shot. It took an acrobatic stop to foil the goal. A Rocket defender hustled over to snap up the rubber lodged in front of the cage. He fumbled an instant, and Punch, following up like something out of a gun, whipped a torrid drive at the goal. Right on the button, that shot, and the red light signaled the counter. One, big, dazzling splash, and he'd grounded the Rocket attack, and tied up the game, 4-4.

The crowd was stunned and quiet. Here was the Punch Wallard they'd believed to be a myth and incapable of rising to his old brilliance. But he was single-handedly turning the tide, and threatening to pull victory from seemingly dead ashes. Even when the Rocket defense steadied, checking him hard and close, Punch kept up the torrid pace. It was strictly a one-man show, Punch carrying the chips, and all plays seemed to explode from his stick.

The minutes wore away, and the Rockets splintered a Wolves formation, and organized a four-man wave of their own. They slammed across the blue, the pounding fury of the attack baiting the angles, and then swinging down the middle groove. Punch wheeled into the pocket, stick flashing at the rubber, and trying to plug the gap.

"Get away...cover your own..." Rene Prevost's voice shrilled in his ears, but it was too late. The big Wolves backliner was at his elbow and the puck was flying to a wing in the clear. No chance to cover, with two Wolves out of position. The Rocket was in there, shooting at point-blank range, and he connected. The Rockets went ahead, 5-4.

Punch sweated blood, fighting to

get that goal back. The Rockets packed their defense, and it would have been tough to crack using a sledge-hammer. Punch crashed through once, and blood was trickling from the side of his mouth. Then the Wolves were all in there, five strong, but Punch bowled toward the goal, wanting this marker something awful. He saw nothing but the Rocket goalie, crouched, and waiting for the shot to be let loose. Punch fired it.

For an instant he thought he'd beaten the Rocket goalkeeper, but the guy came up with a save that was a heart-breaker. Only then did Punch notice Rad Harner cruising past him. The wing's face was dark and steaming with anger.

"I was in the clear, Wallard," he said hoarsely. "In the clear, damn you—but you had to do it alone."

The Rockets had the rubber, and they were away, with nobody to really stop them. With five forwards on the ice, and everything thrown in that last desperate assault, the Wolves were caught flat-footed. The Rockets rapped home another goal, and that was the game, 6-4.

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ONCE AGAIN defeat had come to the Wolves, though Punch knew he himself had scored a great personal triumph. After all, it wasn't his fault the game had slipped away from them, for hadn't he led them to the very brink of a victory? He'd spilled every ounce of strength and savvy he owned into those few minutes Stocky Dolphin had seen fit to use him. He could afford to gloat a little, for this night he'd stilled the jeers in the throats of the fans. They'd written off a chunk of his past brilliance as a debt owed to Cal Deland. Well, let them explain away the burst he'd uncorked against the Rockets. No, he didn't need Cal Deland, and as the games peeled off the schedule, he would completely wipe out such an impression.

But, for all the good he'd done himself, he strangely did not experience any real sense of satisfaction. His chest seemed swollen with the same knoll of pressure, and a bewilderment he did not understand was clawing at his insides. Words that he'd heard and forgotten during the intenseness of the game began to thaw and hand in his ears. "...I was in the clear, Wallard. In the clear, damn you..."

That from Rad Harner, he could understand, for didn't the guy hate his guts? All right; so he hadn't saved the game, but only because the Rocket goalkeeper had pulled a miraculous save. Harner couldn't have been better under the circumstances.

That accounted for Harner, but how about Rene Prevost and his snarling remarks? "...Cover your own man...get away..." What he'd done was to block a gap that the backliner should have filled. So Prevost had been caught flat-footed, and wasted no time pinning the blame on him. One and all—he had a fine hatred for them.

No sooner was the last Wolves icer in the dressing room than Stocky Dolphin bolted the door. He didn't want any newspapermen barging in, what with the place soaking with gloom and packed-down tension. The Wolves sat around, seemingly dazed by another defeat. Punch couldn't help but be aware of their stares and, now and then, he picked up a mention of his name. He could not figure how they arrived at the thought that he was to blame for the beating. For some strange reason, however, he sensed that to be the situation.

Punch showered and dressed and was moving toward the door when Stocky Dolphin's voice stopped him. "Well, you showed 'em a thing, huh, Punch? Sorta knocked that stuff about you needing Cal Deland into a great big hat."

Punch gave him a quick glance, not quite sure whether the remark was sarcasm or a nice word. "I gave

it all I had, if that's what you mean, Stocky."

"Sure you did," Stocky said, and his voice had a sharp, bitter ring. "You fought like hell for ole alma mater—Punch Wallard."

"There's no way for me to satisfy this bunch," Punch said, holding his voice down.

"Yes, there is a way," Stocky said slowly, "but you wouldn't recognize it, Punch." He paused, smiling faintly, almost sadly. "There's things about this game that a guy has to learn for himself—even a star like yourself."

"A nice riddle," Punch said tightly, "but it's got me licked. What's the answer?"

The words had bolted out of his throat, angry and challenging. He couldn't help it. He was tired of trying to please them, and sick of their foolish hates and peeves. He could offer no more than he'd thrown on the ice this night, and it was not good enough for them. It no longer mattered.

He crowded past Stocky Dolphin, and outside the dressing room the newspapermen and fans were waiting for him. Punch laughed bitterly, because he neither wanted their cheers nor their headlines. A newspaperman tried to stop him, and he brushed him aside. In his wake, somebody said:

"He's all tinsel and big-shot tonight. But wait till the Cougars go to work on him..."

He swore softly, and kept moving straight ahead.

IT WAS, perhaps, a half hour after he'd slammed the hotel door behind him that a knock sounded. Newspaper guys, he thought, and went to the door with the intention of scuttling their plans of an interview. He was surprised to find Hap Faurot, the chunky, square-jawed vet who'd started on the first line in his place against the Rockets.

"Yeah, Hap," he said, "I was just gonna turn in."

The vet eyed him a moment. "What's on my mind will only take a minute. Then you can go ahead with your beauty rest."

Punch shrugged, and stepped aside for Faurot to enter. "What's your angle, palsy?"

"No angle," Faurot said dryly, "just a few straight hard shots, and you can make what you want of 'em."

"You might as well get your swing at my chin. It's the latest recreation, you know."

Faurot said, "Look, you know what happens if we blow to the Cougars. It's ten to one that Stocky gets the gate. Well, in my book, and a lot of other books, Stocky is tops as a guy and as a manager."

"You might do better telling that stuff to Jimmy Girard," Punch said levelly. "He deals the cards, you know."

"No," Faurot said, his mouth tightening, "the guy who really messed up Stocky was you. I don't mean that you weren't trying every minute of the way. But you never quite linked up with the rest of the team. Stocky figured you to be the spark the outfit needed and so did the team for a while, but it didn't add up that way."

"How does it add up?"

The vet was silent a moment. "It's awfully tough to explain, because it's wrong to say you aren't a team man. Maybe you're not the perfect example of one, but you're plugging to win like every last one of us. Let's say it's not always a healthy thing for one man to completely dominate a team, and make everything grow around him."

Punch laughed. "I'm supposed to stick in the background and let the guys have their fling at the headlines. Is that it, palsy?"

"I don't think it has much to do with headlines," Faurot said quietly. "More, I'd say, just fitting into things. I wish I could put a finger on it, and make you understand."

"Don't try," Punch said grimly. "You guys aren't really interested in saving Stocky Dolphin's hide; the big interest seems to be making a punk outa me."

Faurot stared darkly at Punch. "The Cougars will do that little trick for us." He didn't wait for a retort but simply turned and walked through the door.

THE GAME between the Wolves and Cougars was billed as a Punch Wallard-Cal Deland duel. The outcome itself appeared to be sealed, insofar as the Cougars wrapping it up. They were pacing the loop, and the Wolves looking up from the bottom rung.

There couldn't help but be some bad blood on the ice when the teams met, for Cal Deland had taken some of Punch's remarks as slurs on his ability. The Cougar team, in fact, resented a lot of the talk that the newspapers pegged on Punch, and made no bones about their anger.

"Wallard has a bellyful of sour apples," Bump Lenhart, the Cougar wing, was quoted. *"He figured the club couldn't get along without him. Well, we've got a guy named Ed Falk. He wasn't supposed to be half as good as Wallard, but is showing him up with yards to spare."*

"It's not surprising that Wallard is shooting off his mouth more than the red light," another Cougar said. *"He never did give Cal Deland the credit he deserved, and now he's really twisting the knife in Cal's back..."*

The big stage was set, the Wolves invading the home rink of the Cougars. The crowd was packed in tight, and the surroundings charged with an electricity that had them on the edge of their seats before the opening face-off. For all the big and, perhaps more important, games to come, none of them would be quite so crammed with sheer drama.

Hardly had Punch put a skate through the dasher door, than the Cougar fans let him have a blast of jeers. One short yesterday, and they'd cheered him to the hilt, but now he was in another uniform, and had popped off about his former teammates. It was exaggerated, this grudge business, he knew, and what remarks he'd made were siphoned from him. But there was nothing he could do but stand squarely behind them now and let the chips fly. Just the same, those jeers were like a hot chunk of lead in his chest. He could somehow fight down the hurt of other jeers. A different matter, however, coming from these fans who'd once

owned his heart.

The warm-up and preliminary stuff faded away and the real picture came into view. The teams swung into alignment, and Punch stole a glance at his old teammates. He saw Cal Deland eye him, and a bitter grin scuffed the centerman's lips. His face was hard as a rock. It was that way wherever Punch's gaze carried. The Cougars were telling him that he was in for one awfully rough session. Then a voice was spilling low and harshly into his ear.

"You've been asking for it," Ed Falk said, "and I hope you've got half as much guts as mouth..."

Punch said, "You've all been so nice and sweet to me, I wouldn't have missed this game for anything. A wonderful home-coming..."

It was ship ahoy then, the rubber lozenge dropping, and the teams came together. They were locked for a bitter moment in a crazy whirl of steel and hickory. The pack ripped apart, and the scarlet-shirted Cougars were setting their offensive gears into motion. Three strong, they stormed down the powdery blue ice carpet. The rubber slithered from blade-to-blade, as though controlled by an invisible cord. The play-making ace, Cal Deland, paced the drive, and when the moment ripened would explode the play-off effort.

Punch drifted, keeping a close watch on Ed Falk, and hoping to balk a clean break-through. Once the Cougars cleaved a hole in the defense, they were murder. They could pile on the pressure something awful, and, even when stopped, loosened the defense for the next assault. Punch shifted to fill a gap, as Deland flipped ahead to his left winger, Bart Rowe. The wing, though, swerved laterally, and fed to Ed Falk, pivoting around Punch. Right then, Punch felt the full weight of the attack bear down on him. Cal Deland screened him off, and another scarlet jostled him hard. He was on his back when Ed Falk moved in for the goal bid. The Cougar crowd was up, anticipating the red-light. Rene Prevost, however, managed to hurry the shot, and it was blocked. There was a rebound.

The jam was on then, the Cougars piling in from all angles. A Scarlet gobbled the rebound, and again the big back-liner, Rene Prevost, scuttled the raid, heaving a body-check. Before the puck was cleared, the Cougars forced Crab Dillard to make a brilliant save. Punch finally skated the disc into the clear, but he was hard-pressed every inch of the way. The scarlets clawed and ganged up on him. Ed Falk jolted him into the boards, and Cal Deland stole the rubber. The steam was up in Punch, and he whirled, and caught up with Ed Falk, taking a carom off the backboards. He slapped Falk down, and the squabble that followed barely missed bringing a penalty.

PUNCH got the jump on the face-off, and quickly drew Rad Harner's support. They leaped away, linked in a two-man rush. Harner drop-passed, and maneuvered toward the goal. Punch fainted the Cougar back-liner, Bump Lenhart, giving him head and feet stuff. Then he swung inside, and the roof fell on him. The backliner, sensing the direction perfectly, body-checked, and it was a bruising wallop. When Punch got up from that one, he wasn't quite sure he was all in one piece.

The Cougars turned on the power, unloading a four-man wave, and it carried deep into the crimson zone. Punch was out of position, and he tried desperately to recover. But he couldn't make it; Cal Deland dribbled down the middle, pulling a defender to him, and then passed to Ed Falk, whirling in behind the Wolves. Falk blasted, and the red-light smiled on his effort.

So there it was, Punch knew, Deland's pass-magic setting up the tally, and Ed Falk rapping home the score. There was no sense kidding himself that he'd looked bad on that one. He hadn't been able to cover Falk, and the crowd was getting a real kick out of the fact that the Deland-Falk combination had produced the marker.

There wasn't an ounce of doubt in Punch's mind that the Cougars meant to shoot his slot full of holes. Well,

there was lots of ice to be covered before this game was in the books, and he'd make it plenty hot for them. But that cooped-up pressure that he couldn't shake since becoming a Wolve, seemed tighter than ever. He was strictly a loner. Sure, the Wolves would scrap for all they were worth to save Stocky Dolphin's job and bust out of their slump. But every man of them hated his guts with the same fervor as the Cougars. In defeat, the Wolves would, at least, have the consolation of knowing a chunk of the myth surrounding his ice rep had been torn to pieces.

The thought of the Cougars bent on taking him over the hurdles stung Punch's pride and anger. He pitched into the milling, saving nothing and swapping lumps and tangling whenever the Cougars wanted to make it rough. But, for all his aggressiveness, Punch realized he was losing ground. His own teammates were giving him little support in the nasty squabbles that the Cougars engaged him, and seldom did he square off against one scarlet-clad. Always a couple of them, it seemed, working him over and forcing a tremendous pressure on him. The backliner, Bump Lenhart, took a fiendish delight in dealing him those smashing body-checks. Cal Deland and Ed Falk were checking him hard and often, and welcomed meeting him in the rink corners, and along the boards. In no time at all his ribs ached from a hundred concealed elbows and stick butts.

For all the punishment and clamps applied, he still carried the brunt of the Wolves attack. He pounced on a loose puck, and steamed down the right wing alley. A Scarlet angled toward him, and he stick-handled his way around. Closing in on the blue-line, he had Rad Harner and Lefty Tremaine on the flanks. He saw Bump Lenhart move over to meet the thrust, and Punch set his jaw hard. This time he was going to give the backliner a taste of his own medicine. He'd fix Lenhart with a shoulder into his belly that would cork the wind out of him. And, just for good measure, he'd be ready to feed a taste of the stick.

His plans, however, changed abruptly. Rad Harner suddenly crossed over, and in that lickety-split second, tied into the defender. There were three of them that tangle, and Punch wobbled on his rubbers, but didn't go down. The other Cougar backliner played it warily, caught in the cross-fire of Punch and Lefty Tremaine.

The Wolves centerman started a run on the goal, and Punch saw the scarlet shift to meet the thrust in that direction. A nice piece of work, Lefty Tremaine decoying the defense. Punch rode in, suddenly realizing the backliner hadn't followed through on his motion to cover Tremaine. Instead, he'd shifted back into his path, and it was too late to pass-off to the centerman. Punch laid the blade against the rubber, and at the same instant felt the impact of the hoist. His shot was badly off the target.

Punch bit down hard on his lip. A sure-fire goal and he'd kicked it away. It was not so much, he knew, the fubbing of the shot itself as missing Lefty Tremaine's leap into clear ice. Then too, an eyeful of surprise, Harner removing Bump Lenhart from the play like a bad tooth. The Wolves would have been back in the game if he'd passed off to Lefty Tremaine. But how was he to know that the defender would turn cutie, and guess him to be the pay-off shooter?

A moment later Hap Faurot came on, spelling him, and Punch knew he could use the respite. Stocky Dolphin eyed him closely, started to say something, and then shrugged his shoulders.

THE MINUTES wore away, and Punch wondered what in the world was stopping the Wolves from ripping apart at the seams. The Cougars were in control of the game, and still were not able to add to their one goal margin. Sometimes it was Crab Dillard beating back the Cougar scoring bid with a nerve-twisting stop. Mostly, though, it was a slick piece of back-checking or the scrambling of the attack before it found its real momentum. The Cougars were being forced to organize several times for every trip into Wolves ice. And in-

side the line, the Wolves backliners, Rene Prevost and Heck Erskin, were getting in those key hoists.

Punch's glance went out to Hap Faurot, who'd taken over for him in the wing slot. He'd almost forgotten about Faurot, so inconspicuous did he seem on the ice. Oddly enough, though, the vet always appeared to be in the right place at the right time. He covered expertly, and Cal Deland, maneuvering the Cougar attack as though the ice was a checkerboard, couldn't find an opening through Hap Faurot's position. The vet was crowding the attack, and gumming it up, without being the least bit spectacular. He was a two-way skater, and doing a workmanlike job on both ends of the rink.

The first period ended and Punch expected to go back out there. But, even when Stocky Dolphin changed front lines, he gave the assignment to others. Those tactics stung, because it was obvious to Punch that the Wolves manager didn't trust him in there while the game remained in the crucial stages. With his own job on a shaky limb, Stocky preferred to go along with Hap Faurot and that seemed a strange choice. But Faurot couldn't hold the sizzling pace, and Ed Falk slipped into the clear, and Cal Deland fed a perfect pass. Another point went up on the scoreboard, and the Cougars led, 2-0.

"All right," Stocky finally said, motioning Punch onto the ice, "it's really your show, and I guess you should have your say-so."

Punch went on, and he got just a glimpse of Hap Faurot's face, pale and shaken, and knew that the vet's loyalty to the team was a bigger thing than his ability. He asked himself why Hap had come to him, talking like a dutch uncle, and trying to explain something that seemed beyond explanation. Sure, Hap and the others wanted to see Stocky stay on as manager. But Hap was mainly concerned with the Wolves hitting their stride, and somehow believed him to be the hitch in the machinery.

The Cougars greeted Punch's appearance with satisfied grins, and the change in the pattern of attack be-

came an obvious thing. Once again, they were pivoting the key formations off his wing, and piling on an intense pressure. The game itself seemed to be packed away, with the Cougars holding a two-goal bulge. They came down again, the rippling wave growing into a four-man thrust, that seemed jet-propelled.

On sheer power, they drove a wedge down the middle, and Cal Deland carried inside. He slid the disc to Ed Falk, and Punch, hawking the check, spoiled the timing. That gave Rene Prevost the fraction needed to scramble the raid, and the puck was cleared ahead to Rad Harner. Even then, Punch was aware of Prevost's quick, surprised glance. He couldn't quite understand the meaning of that glance. He did know, however, that he'd used the same sort of inconspicuous tactics that were so much a part of Hap Faurot's game. He'd broken the attack, kicking the timing out of gear, and the backliner had then taken over. He'd stuck to his own guns, and not tried to do the work of a couple of guys.

Punch found no time to tangle and carry on his personal feud during the minutes that followed. He was using that wonderful sense of anticipation he owned to get at the source of the scarlet attack. The Cougars were being forced to shoot from deep and weird angles. It was pretty much the same brand of hockey that Hap Faurot had unloaded. There was no doubt about the effectiveness, for the Cougars expected a wide-open and quick shifting style from him. They'd built their attack for this game around what appeared to be his strength—doing his job and the job of a couple of others. And once he tried to take over the extra duty stuff, they simply poured through the weakness in the other side of the defense.

HOWEVER good Hap Faurot had been in his role, Punch was better, for he had the speed and stick-handling skill that few players in the game owned. He back-checked, and never quite gave the Cougar formations the opportunity to sink teeth into the defense. And, all the while,

he appeared to be nothing greatly out of the ordinary. But the Cougars knew who was gumming up their plays and stopping the formations from truly jelling.

Again Punch covered Ed Falk so tightly that he fumbled the rubber, and Rad Harner made the pick-up. He was away then, and Punch swung across the middle with him. He saw Lefty Tremaine coming up fast, trailing them. They rolled into the shooting area, and Harner flipped to Punch crossing over behind him. Punch faked to his centerman, and charged in, and the defense angled toward him. He waited, letting Bump Lenhart come, and then fed in to Rad Harner. The gap was there, and Harner put the shot away, beating the Cougar goalie with a machine-gun stroke.

Punch turned and skated toward the face-off alignment. He was grinning, and feeling an odd, satisfied sensation rising in him. Then Rad Harner was at his shoulder, nodding and saying: "Nice—nice, Punch. You faked those bums right off the ice."

He stared at Harner, hardly able to believe the words came from him. He wondered if the wing was kidding him, but it only took a glance to see that Harner was very much on the level. And then the answer that he'd been groping and trying so desperately to find, began to focus clearly in his mind. He'd found it in Hap Faurot's play, in these minutes on the ice, but mostly in his own heart.

Right along he'd been a team-man, and, strangely enough, too much of one. Like Hap Faurot had tried to explain, he'd completely dominated the team, and sought to do his work and the work of the others, too. He'd sweated blood, putting full reliance on himself and very little on his teammates. He'd unawaredly treated them as though incapable of handling a difficult situation. So he'd simply taken over, and—spectacular as the results were on occasion—hampered the team's stride. So they'd taken to resenting him, and it was easy for them to feel that he was a star of such magnitude that they were a chorus line for him. When a goal was

SUPER SPORTS

needed and the moment crucial, he did not risk passing off to another man when he himself could possibly ring up the counter. Still, it'd not been selfishness on his part, so much as the tremendous confidence in his own ability.

With the Cougars, he'd been a member of a team of solidly-established rinksters. He had not tried to be the whole team, but the drop to the last-rung Wolves had somehow given him the impression of having to carry more of the burden. So he'd not really been the leader and sparkplug that Stocky Dolphin and the Wolves had expected him to be.

The other outfits, too, had quickly taken advantage of his tactics. They knew, for instance, that on an important shot he'd swing his own stick. Little wonder, the goalkeepers had been coming up with some terrific saves at his expense. He'd been beating himself, and all his feinting and slick maneuvering was largely wasted. How could anyone explain these things to him when anger and bitterness clouded his mind? How could he really discover the kinks in his game without learning for himself—on the ice? Stocky had called him too big a star for the Wolves and how right he'd been.

THE COUGARS couldn't seem to resist trying to smoke Punch out of position. He laughed tensely, bumping the attack off its measured timetable, and snapping up the loose puck. He cleared ahead to Lefty Tremaine. The pace got rough and nasty, the Cougars back-checking furiously, and local warfare exploded along the boards. Punch, carrying the puck, got slammed hard, but hung onto the thing long enough for Rad Harner to corral the pass. Cal Deland really belted him then, and his stick reached and caught Punch alongside the jaw.

The ref laid down the law, and Deland got himself a sentence in the penalty coop. But, just as he was leaving, Rad Harner came over, and so did Ed Falk, and fists and sticks began flying. It was a brawl, the bad blood spilling, and the crowd's noise rocking the Coliseum. Harner got the

gate, and Ed Falk the same medicine, and the Cougars were a man down.

At 12:56 the Wolves tied the game. Punch stick-handled through a clump of scarlet shirts, and slid the rubber to Lefty Tremaine slashing in from the boards. Lefty whizzed a black bullet past the goalkeeper's ear.

It was gone, all gone, that old tight pressure in his chest, Punch realized, and he felt the same, loose easiness he'd known in other seasons. The adjustment to the Wolves' brand of hockey was completed, and he could sense the new and driving strength of the team. The one big broken link, that he'd been, was finally welded, and the Wolves were on fire.

The third period got under way, and the teams got back to full strength. The scarlet-shirts took up their pounding of him, but they were getting more concerned with the outcome than what personally happened to him. Neither was he a loner, and there was always a Wolve around to pitch in for him, and discourage the Cougar tactics.

Twice during the early minutes of the third period, Punch slipped clear of Ed Falk, and whirled into scoring ice. He held fire each trip, passing off, and the Cougar goalkeeper beat the scoring bids. A Cougar drive stalled, and the Wolves took their turn with the rubber.

The Wolves sent three forwards into the scoring zone, while the scarlet covered tightly. Lefty Tremaine shuttled the rubber to Punch, breaking on a cross-ice maneuver. The centerman moved in at an angle, and Punch was timing Lefty's motion, and waiting for him to come back in for the pass. And in that surging moment, came Rad Harner's voice from somewhere. "You—you, Punch. G'wan, take it."

Punch swerved first to the right and then to the left, and his feinting was a smooth, delicate thing. He saw the backliner lunge at him, but knew he'd tipped the guy off stride, and was in the clear. He used all tricks and magic, going in on the goal, pulling the net-minder out of position, and then rifling into the corner. The Wolves were ahead, 3-2.

So there it was, Punch knew, moments to star and moments to submerge himself in the pack. This was the way of a real sparkplug, and he grinned to himself. Ed Falk wasn't in the line-up at the next face-up, and the reason was obvious enough. He couldn't begin to match the brand of hockey that Punch was unloading.

The Wolves, slump-ridden, tasting victory, suddenly went wild. Less than a minute after Punch had put them in the lead, Rad Harner was slapping another counter past the befuddled Cougar goalie. Punch hit again, and the snarled-up tightness of the game was blasted to pieces.

EVEN AS the Cougars fought savagely and hopelessly to get back in the game, Punch knew this was going to be the biggest victory of his rink career. It didn't matter, the feud between him and Cal Deland. Sure, he'd riddled and splintered any ideas that he'd owed his brilliance to the Cougar center. He'd driven Ed Falk off the ice and, time and again, messed up Deland's play-making savvy. But the main thing was that he'd really found his place as a Wolf. The game was bigger than a personal feud.

The minutes dripped away, and the goal-hungry Wolves tore the Cougars apart. When the gong sounded, they had taken the game, 7-3.

At the entrance to the chute, Punch paused briefly, hearing the sound of his name in the cheers of the fans. It warmed him, those cheers of the Cougar fans. They recognized his worth to the Wolves, and found him to be an even greater icer than ever.

It was quite a contrast, the Wolves dressing room, to what it'd been following other games. The tide had turned, and the gloom and awful fla-

vor of defeat swept away. The noise and laughter pounding in Punch's ears, carried the ring of a team that had found its true direction. They'd busted out of their slump, walloping the league-leaders. That in itself was worth a ton of confidence.

Punch tried to get out of his war-togs. They kept swarming around him, slapping his back, and wringing his hand.

"What a clutch guy," Rad Harner chortled. "You sure picked us up and got us rolling this trip." He hesitated, brows knitting. "I donno how to tell you—but you sorta changed in your playing and all at once we were a team. You know what I mean, Punch?"

"Yeah, I know," Punch said, "a lot more about hockey than I thought I did." He laughed a little, and his eyes scanned the players, and found Hap Faurot. "How 'bout it, Hap? You think I got the idea now."

The grin on the vet's face was a yard wide. "You're my idea of a star—now."

It went on, the talk and laughter, and then Stocky Dolphin came into the dressing room with Jimmy Girard. They both looked like they had won sweepstakes tickets.

"Guess I wasn't wrong, after all, giving Jimmy's swag and players away to get you, Punch. Nope, not a bit wrong. Tonight you were one hundred percent hockey player and just the right amount of star."

Jimmy Girard said, "So the Wolves are a real team now and Stocky can forget worrying about his job."

There was a whooping blast of cheering.

Punch never felt so much like hollering in his life.

THE END





Buck The Big Four

by Mat Rand

Tom Lawler was due for a rude shock when he met up with his one-time friend and football idol, Bucko White. And there was more behind the doings of the "big four" than upper-class-man snobbery . . .

TOM LAWLER felt good. He rustled his wide shoulders under the leather jacket and shoved up the line eagerly as another man dropped away, arms dangling with football togs.

He was a rangy, coltish-looking fellow, yellow-haired, with small brown face and strong neck. He had big hands and moved them as if they were lonesome for a sleek, hard football. His husky neck looked as if he

The big four always got an ovation when they appeared.



could crack a solid wall of cement and make five. In fact he looked very much at home in the brawling, slamming locker room though his wide gray eyes were pleasant now.

The assistant student manager checked his list, droned, "next." Tom stepped up.

"Lawler. Tom Lawler."

The other's bespectacled eyes jerked up. "Lawler! Say, aren't you the kid who broke his neck on the frosh squad last year?"

Tom grinned; he'd expected that. He said: "Splintered a vertebra, don't you mean?"

"And now you're out for—"

"Varsity," he supplied cheerfully. "What's wrong with that? I played in the last soph-frosh game last year, made two touchdowns."

The other shook his head ruefully. "Nothing, kid, only you got more

guts than one guy ought to have." He shoved out equipment.

Tom laughed and picked it up. Then noted the locker number. "Say, half-pint. This locker 78 anywhere near Bucko White's?"

This time the other grinned. "Bucko a friend of yours?"

"Yeah, sorta."

"Well, tough guy, that's a gray shirt I gave you. The varsity's are blue. That's how far you're from Bucko White and the Big Four." A laugh roared down the waiting men.

Tom didn't understand what the Big Four meant, but he looked at the gray jersey, then at the grinning manager, and smiled sweetly, "Thanks, mister, but just put one of those blue ones away for me."

He pushed through the clutter of men dressing in the aisle. Bucko remember him? Hell, hadn't he been

first sub for the galloping whitehead back at Storton Prep? He dumped his togs before 78. A lean serious-faced fellow was dressing down the bench. He asked: "Say, bub, where's the varsity hang out?"

The man jerked his thumb sourly up the room. "Down in 200 row. An' bub yourself, big boy."

Tom grinned. That guy sure had a chip on his chin. He strode on.

IN THE 200 row he spotted a tremendously wide pair of shoulders, naked but for yellow football harness. He grinned and stepped forward lightly.

"Hello, Bucko."

Bucko White turned. "Hello."

Tom missed the vagueness. He stared. The man's muscular development was terrific. He was bull-cheated, slabs of armor-plated muscle spread down his torso, his shoulders were unbelievably thick. But it was Bucko White all right, little blue eyes, close-cropped white hair and a square beefy jaw, and Tom shoved out his hand impulsively.

"Don't remember me, eh, Bucko. Tom Lawler, sub half for you down at Storton. I was a soph, 'member?"

"Lawler. Oh, yes, little Tommy Lawler." He took the hand perfunctorily.

Only then Tom felt the chill. He tried to laugh it off. "Not exactly little any more, Bucko. One eighty-six clean. I'm coming out to try and help you this year. Had a little tough luck last year."

"Oh, you were the Lawler. Well, I wish you luck." Bucko White reached for his hip pads. Tom stared. He felt his exuberance flow out and congeal swiftly. He saw the other big men down the bench, dressing, watching him coldly. Nerba, Vosnick, Pond—he could name them all—and a queer puckering seized his heart. And oddly he remembered the manager's smirk.

Hell, he hadn't expected to be welcomed by them with open arms but as one Storton man to another and Bucko had gone with his sis—he tried again. "Uh, Bucko, sis says to say hello."

A harsh laugh burst from Duke

Nerbra. "Go peddle your papers, soph," the swarthy varsity quarter snarled.

Tom felt something knot in his chest and he grabbed his big hands into fists, but before he could choke out an answer he saw Bucko White disinterestedly slap on his pads and reach for his moleskins. The knot became a hurt in his throat. He said slowly: "Okey, Bucko. I guess you don't want to know me. We used to be pretty good friends once, but—well, okey."

He turned. The boyish, pleasant light had gone out of his gray eyes; they had become stony around the edges. For somehow the things he'd cherished for years, like playing football at Rake with Bucko White or singing the varsity victory song after games under the elms on the knoll outside the gym suddenly didn't seem so important any more. 'Sfunny, he thought, how one minute could change so many things.

The September sun was hot. Bull Jeevers bellowed and cursed. With a fixed smile Tom jogged through tires, duck-walked, and did a lot of other seeming foolish things for a hot day with the gray-shirt scrubs. But each time he looked across at the knots of blue men under head coach Ace Kent, his lips tightened. Bucko White and Duke Nerba would hear a thing about him yet.

Practice over, he jogged through the yellow-stone gate, healthily tired. The cold stinging shower felt good. He looked over the sixty-odd assortment, shouting and singing about him, decided none in particular was outstanding, and turned to the varsity up the room.

He saw they were a clannish bunch, especially the backs, and he appraised them more closely. Besides Bucko White and swarthy Duke Nerba there was Scuggs Vosnick, a dark, beetle-browed man with greedy mouth, and Bill Ponds who had pale green eyes and a stub nose that forever was twitching unpleasantly. He decided these blocky chunks of hard muscle might be football men, but underneath they were rats of one strip. He

jammed off the cold water and strode out.

"Oh, Lawler!"

He wheeled to see the lean, serious-faced fellow who occupied his bench with him coming out of shower room. The man's wiry body suddenly looked hard and capable in spite of its leanness, and Tom stopped, interested.

"You the guy who works at the Chi Psi house?" the other asked.

"Yeah," Tom said, surprised.

"My name's Steward. Bill Steward. I got a job there also."

At their bench Steward said, "Saw you talking to Bucko White. Know him?"

Tom came up out of his towel. He grunted. Steward continued: "Bucko makes the Big Four. Without him Nerba's hand wouldn't be even good for bluffing. And Windy Blouse knows it."

Tom frowned. "What the devil you talking about?"

Steward's cool black eyes looked up openly. "You weren't out all the time last year; you wouldn't know. Some still don't know. Did you ever hear of the Big Four?"

Tom remembered the manager. He nodded. "Just once."

"They're Nerba, White, Pond and Vosnick. Last year Nerba saw Kent was weak on reserves. He organized the so-called Big Four, put the pressure on Windy Blouse, and Windy came across with nice apartments, good food, and what not."

Tom blinked. So that was the set-up. It was hardly believable, here at a big school like Rake. You'd think Kent would have dozens of good men. He said it.

Steward winked. "Nerba sees to that. There's only one real football man in a hundred, you know, like Bucko there. Nerba and the boys give him the once over and before two weeks are out you see the kid transferring to another school. I've checked back, Navin, Tooles Morgan, Les Borstand."

"Who's Windy Blouse?" he cut in grimly.

"Kid graduated in '32. Dad left him a flock of laundries and he's nuts about football. Played fourth string

or something when he was here."

Again the cold puckering he'd felt before seized his heart. It was nothing but an out-and-out shake-down, a racket! And they were practicing it here at Rake, in amateur football!

His big hands closed slowly about the wet towel. He looked into Steward's cool scheming eyes. He said, "You got a plan, spill it."

Steward spilled it. It was to get two other men, band together, show some football, and when they get within striking distance make Windy Blouse come across for them or they'd spoil the whole set-up. And Nerba would never stand for that.

"Most of us are poor as alley rats, c'n play football and hate like hell to sling hash. Now does it make sense?"

"And you figure I'm a Bucko White?"

Steward shrugged. "You're the best of the pack. I've looked 'em over."

"Thanks," said Tom dryly. "I'll think it over." But somehow his insides hurt. Two below the belt in one day would make any man groggy.

He stood before his open window that night, the cool air soothing his warm face. He'd just gotten back from the Chi Psi house. Steward had expanded on his plan. Steward the schemer, the second Nerba. He didn't really blame Steward; every man for himself, but the graft of the whole set-up, the lack of school spirit.

He saw the hushed campus, black and leary, before him, the spires of Pillsbury rising into a yellow moon. Other times the witchery of it would grip him; now it only awakened poignant memories to sicken him. He turned away. He'd string with Steward for a while, but some day, some time, the gods of grid justice would swing into action and one Tom Lawler would be swinging right along behind them.

Steward was right. Most of the gray-shirts were a run-of-the-mill. He attached a big-shouldered, thin-legged fellow by the name of Markas who could drop a sixty-yard punt on a pinhead, and Dunkel, a chunky, blocking speedster who could cut down would-be tacklers with uncanny swift-

ness. He was a natural. They had everything, Steward said. Jeevers would see.

JEEVERS did. He gave them white sweatshirts and put the four of them in. "Push into it, you lugs. An' rip 'er fast. We got forty guys here who'll die trying if you won't."

Steward winked as they swung into offense formation.

"Get on your pony, lad. You carry our mail."

Tom nodded grimly. Steward barked signals, they shifted, using the basic Kent system learned as freshmen, Tom dropping into the ball-carrying slot.

"18-36-92—" The yellow leather shot back. He folded his big hands around it, tucked in in his gut and was four steps off already.

He saw Steward crack the tackle, Dunkel kill the over-eager end, then he hit the chunk of daylight. He churned through. The full roared over. Markas folded him over with a smashing shoulder block and with a little grin Tom stepped neatly between clutching fingers to pull into the clear.

"Holy cats!" a whisper came from the sideline watchers. "That's mid-season varsity stuff!" It was the diminutive student manager. Tom saw him, then Bull Jeevers came up cursing, bawling orders, at last to cry, "Do that again, Lawler." And Steward winked.

The end wasn't over-anxious this time and the tackle pawed Steward savagely, but when he hit the line it cracked wide open. His corded legs churned. He shot through. The full had a clear shot. Tom met him in mid-air with a terrific stiff-arm, switched his hips clear, and saw the halves race up.

He stopped on a dime, cut to the right, weaved. The right half's clutching fingers gathered grass, the left stumbled from a tricky pace change. Tom nimbly out-stepped the quarter to the goal line.

He trotted back, breathing easily. He saw new light in Bull Jeever's little black eyes. He felt Steward's

hearty slap but dropped into his slot silently. These birds hadn't seen nothing yet. He was going up to raise hell with those blue touch-me-nots working out down-field and pronto. He went to work.

A dozen plays later Jeevers jerked him. Half hour later tossing passes to the ends, he saw a weazened, gray-haired coach in baseball cap and sweatshirt standing with Jeevers watching him. Somebody said, "The big shot's eyeing you." It was Steward.

Just then the leather drilled back. He closed his long fingers around it caressingly, danced to the right, set and tossed.

The right end crossing before the opposition saw it, legged hard and stuck out his paw. The ball floated in. Neat and pretty. He saw Kent's diamond-blue eyes narrow upon him. He grinned tightly. He hadn't practiced pitching at an old car tire for two summers for nothing.

He floated them out, long ones, short ones, soft passes, but they cut the air swiftly. Then Jeevers stopped beside him.

"Draw your varsity jersey tomorrow, Lawler."

He nodded, noncommittal. "Okey." Steward heard. The little manager heard. The little fellow chirped. "I got that blue jersey saved, Lawler."

Tom didn't quip back; with the rest he trotted in.

DUKE NERBA was the only back in when he dropped his football equipment before locker 245. Nerba looked over surprised, then laughed unpleasantly. "Well, well, bud. How's the sis?"

He tightened his lips and remained silent. Bucko came in. Nerba said: "Look, Bucko. Your little hometown hot-shot's up already."

Bucko looked over, also surprised, then grunted and turned away. He decided there was something funny about Bucko White, as if the big guy were ready to bite himself just for the hell of it. He wondered why.

Tippy Dolan the wiry, little back coach took him in charge with the fourth stringers. Half hour sweating

at varsity shifts and they were brought up-field where Kent had the varsity spread defensively against the third eleven.

"Watch an' get some pointers," Dolan clipped, then took charge of the thirds. Tom looked over the varsity and decided the Big Four might be rats but they sure looked like football men, big, alert, savage; then Kent barked, "Scrimmage."

Kent went back of his tackles to polish their defense. Three line smashes by the thirds and Tom decided the tackles were doing right well. The third stringers had lost exactly thirteen yards. Then he saw Dolan eyeing him, as if he'd heard things about him from Jeevers, then heard the expectant bark: "Lawler, get in here."

He fastened his helmet, fingers trembling but eyes even. That line was nothing to fool with, and those four backs behind it. He wet his lips. It would be fun to crack it.

He didn't carry the ball for two plays, then Dolan gave him the nod. Nerba jeered when he dropped into the ball slot and the line relaxed. He saw it and grinned, then the leather came hurtling back and he was going in.

He hit the six-hole, corded legs driving. It exploded. He felt his leg strike something, a hand grasped, he ripped through. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bucko White coming in. He threw a straight-arm pivoted, legs churning, and cut for the outside.

His quarter picked him up, shouted. He doubled back as the quarter rolled into Scuggs Vosnick, but Vosnick came over like a thunderbolt and Tom pounded him down, fading fast. He pumped hard for yardage. Then he saw Duke Nerba racing up, eyes slitted dangerously. He lowered his head and gave it all he had.

Nerba landed on his haircut twenty feet away.

It was Bucko White who, coming around like a flash, nailed him thirty yards down. He felt as if a ton of wet cement hit him, but staggered up. Bucko's lip was bleeding, his eyes thin.

"A regular old meat-eater for you, Duke."

Nerba snarled, "I'll take him down." The quarter fingered a rasped cheek beginning to bleed freely. Tom looked at them. He said evenly, "It'll take more'n the Big Four." Then Dolan and Kent were up barking.

He took a lot of punishment the remainder of that afternoon. Those big boys on the line knew how to handle their mitts, and weren't a bit bashful. And when he did get to the backfield, it was just short of murder.

He crawled to his feet each time a step nearer their own goal and with a weary grimace decided Steward might be right about Kent being weak on reserves, but he sure had one helluva first string that could play in any college stadium. He was glad when it was over.

HE WAS peeling his wet, clinging jersey when somebody said, "Get wise to yourself, kid. Don't get hurt."

He jerked off the jersey to see Bucko White's broad back going down to the showers. He stared, puzzled. There hadn't been threat in it. It sounded more like a kindly tip. But why— He dressed slowly.

He didn't have long to wait. That night, returning to his room from work, two men slipped out of an alley before him. He stopped, cold prickles running suddenly up his spine. He recognized those men. "Well, what is it, Nerba."

"Listen, punk. Regent is in need of football men; maybe you'd better transfer."

"I like it here."

"Maybe you won't Lawler." Softly.

"Oh, yes, I—" He saw Vosnick's fist coming, rolled swiftly, and came up with his own right. It caught Vosnick falling into it. Vosnick's jaw was slack. There was a tiny "click" as teeth hit, then Vosnick went down. It all happened in a flash, so quick Nerba couldn't get in, but Tom backed warily. He continued through tight teeth: "I said I would like it here. Now I know I will." He stepped over the still form of Vosnick and continued down the street.

He got it that week, every time he scrimmaged against the varsity. Cleats in the face, fists in the guts, savage tackles that made his ears ring and his eyes shake. Vosnick and Pond were the worst; Bucko's, he noted, at least were clean tackles.

Then Steward came up and with Iln Markas and Dunkel, and Steward saw what was going on. That night he said: "You're a damn fool, Lawler. Lay off till we get lined up; we can protect you. With those fourth-stringers, they'll kill you."

"I'm playing this my own way, Steward," he answered grimly. "I don't go for your plan."

Steward wasn't overly surprised. "Okay, college-try. Give it a whirl, but you'll come around."

Tom was surprised at the way he took it; he'd expected an outburst. Now, he wondered, just a little puzzled, why Steward was so cock-sure about him coming around. Steward for all of his calculating football brains couldn't be right every time. He laughed shortly.

THEY OPENED against the Harston Aggies that Saturday. Tom sat on the bench. His body ached in every tendon from the pounding he'd received the past week, but his heart was jumping like a school kid's every time a blue back went into that wall of orange. The Aggies were tougher than expected. Even the Big Four were having difficulty out there making ground, and he was just wondering if Kent would trust one of his poor second-stringers out there if a man got clipped, when Pond got a cleat across his twitching nose. Pond went out and Kent came down the line.

"Lawler!"

Tom froze.

"Lawler!" Kent barked it as when under strain, then Tom was up. Brittle-eyed, the little coach said: "I'm shooting you in raw, Lawler. I think you got the stuff. Keep your head and dig."

He raced out. He handed his slip to the umpire. The line spat on their hands matter-of-factly, but he saw Nerba, Vosnick and Pond eying him,

snarling. Bucko was set already, eyes on the ground. He was glad of that. He slid into the shift and the game was on.

The first play he was off at the flash of leather. He dispatched the end neatly with a rolling block, but Nerba came back snarling.

"Get out of the way, punk. Almost ran over you."

He felt his gorge rising. He'd been in that timing like clock-work and Nerba knew it. But he dropped elbows to knees, silently and waited the signal.

Bucko made six through guard. Nerba made a first through center. Vosnick cracked tackle for five and Nerba made another first around end. They were rolling now. But Nerba came back snarling and snapping after each play.

"Get moving, clunk. Shake the lead, high-school stuff. This is big-time."

He felt the cords in his neck grow tighter and tighter. Then on the twenty Nerba wheeled slow for a reverse and Tom crashed into him. The ball shot disastrously back to the forty where an orange-jerseyed Aggie clawed it in. First and ten for Harston!

Nerba was purple with rage.

"You damn, clumsy—"

Tom's control broke. His lean arm shot out, grasped the quarter by the throat.

"You did that purposely, Nerba, and I'm going to ram this fist into those rat-like teeth of yours."

"You'll ram what?"

Vosnick stood there, jaw out and greedy mouth buttoned tight. Tom saw the fists. He said: "So you want to get in this, too."

"I'd love to, sophomore."

"Pipe it," growled Bucko.

"You guys gonna play ball or fight," snapped the referee, then the ump's whistle shrilled.

"Brewster for Lawler."

Tom stripped his helmet. He glared at the three. "Okay, wise boys," he snarled. "But after this you asked for it." He stalked off. There was a scattering of boos from the Rake stands.

"I'm glad it happened to you," Steward said as they sloshed dishes side by side that evening. "Now you see what you're up against. You do it for the old college spirit; I, to get out of this. What's the diff? But we have to play ball."

He nodded his head wearily. But when work was over instead of heading for his rooming house he turned for the river driveway where the apartment houses were. He still had one hope—Bucko White.

BUCKO, in faded slacks and sneakers, opened the door. His little eyes widened at the sight of Tom. Tom nodded curtly. "Could I see you a minute?"

Bucko shrugged and led the way inside.

He followed, conscious of the soft rugs and the general air of luxury of the place and was about to mention it when he entered the living room. He stared. Nerba, Vosnick and Pond were sprawled out in chairs.

Bucko jerked his head to an empty rocker. "Sit down. Guess you know the boys."

He felt hot suddenly. Bucko hadn't said he had company. He said, "Yeah. Yeah, I know them." He met Nerba's boring, hard eyes. "I came to see Bucko privately," he continued evenly, "but I see it would be of no use anyway, so I'll spill a general piece. You guys can't run me out of Rake. Because I'm in here to bust you and your dirty graft. You can't get me like Navin and Morgan. You can't slug me and—"

Nerba came out like a shot. "That's a lie, Lawler."

"Don't call me a liar."

"You're talkin' strong, punk," Vosnick snarled.

"And from now on I'm going strong. I'm starting running that ball and I got three good men with me."

Nerba's eyes changed subtly. "Maybe we can talk business, Lawler. Blouse is a sucker for flashy ball carrying."

Tom's balled fist caught the quarter squarely. "That for your dirty graft."

With a snarl Vosnick leaped. He tried to dodge the blow; it caught him on the chest and sent him reeling. He saw Pond coming in. Vosnick's left straightened him. He felt his back to the wall. He stopped. This was going to be something.

But before he could tangle two broad shoulders stepped between. "Cut it, fellows," Bucko White said calmly. "It's my apartment and I don't want it smeared."

"He asked for it," Vosnick panted.

"So'd Duke. Now, scram, kid, and as I once told you, keep your nose clean. Git!"

Tom found himself out in the hall. He was shaking with anger. The four of them—first-class gorillas, racketeers! Hell, Steward was right. Get a new backfield, bust 'em wide open. He went out, grim-jawed.

A war was declared on the Rake practice field. It was an uneven war, so it seemed, a sophomore quartet against a powerful varsity backfield. The Dudley game came and went. Only one man of the soph quartet got in. He made the two touchdowns even with the third-stringers. The newspapers sat up a little. They made no secret of Kent being weak on reserves; they knew he was worried. The Kings game approached. They were getting tougher. Tech the Saturday after, the first of the big ones. Kent's eyes grew haunted.

Then the Thursday before the Kings game smart Tippy Dolan put in three likely looking sophmores with a yellow-haired fire-eater who wasn't seeming to click with any present back combination, and before the afternoon was out Kent's little gray eyes had a new light in them, and Tippy Dolan was smiling. The hapless seconds had been run into the ground.

This new combination went into the Kings game the second quarter. The score was 7-0. When they came out it was 21-0. The stadium came to its feet as these new heroes trotted off.

Tom Lawler peeled his dank jersey wearily. The cheers sounding above were hollow mockery to him. He'd

gone through hell the past two weeks, physically and mentally. He had never thought to play football for Rake would require a fight like this. He dressed quickly and went out.

HIS CREPE soles in the stadium corridor were noiseless. He heard voices ahead, one clipped, sarcastic.

"They looked better than you did out there. What's the gag asking me down."

"Without Lawler they'd be nothing I tell you. You do as I say on that Tech game and never worry."

He stiffened. That was Duke Nerba's oily voice. He heard the other mutter: "Blouse is a cinch. He's all hopped up, but it risks a lot of dough and after watchin' those men today—"

"Don't worry. I'll handle that end." The outer door opened and the two men went out.

He stood there, frowning, a moment, when he too went out. But the crowd had swallowed Nerba and the other and he trudged unnoticed through the after-game throng to his room.

He was pulling off his apron in the Chi Psi kitchen that night when Steward came in from the dining room with a late afternoon edition. Steward's black eyes snapped.

"Guess this is the clincher."

He looked. Headlines screamed: "*Soph Backs Star in Brilliant 39-0 Win.*" He grunted. "Clincher for what?"

"For Blouse. I'm going to see him right now."

He hung up his apron with great-deliberateness. "I'll go along."

Windy Blouse was a fat, blubbery fellow, all smiles—until he found out the reason for their call, then his round face lost its pleasantness with a suddenness that was startling.

"Chiselers, eh? You must think I'm some sucker. Get out."

Steward's eyes beaded. "You're throwing away a national championship."

"Nuts. I've got four men out there who'll deliver."

Tom stepped forward, and said, "Be sure they will before you do

anything about that Tech game."

"What do you mean?"

For answer Tom herded Steward out and slammed the door. He wasn't there for a "scholarship" but the boisterous arrogance of the man angered him.

"What's the set-up?" Steward demanded outside.

Tom squinted grimly down the row of the street lights and said, "I dunno exactly but I've a hunch something's going to crack wide open that Tech game."

Tom had an idea all right, but there was only one way to prove it. Stay in one piece until the Tech game and then step out and win it.

Nights after work he walked home different ways; then he kept to his room. He practiced diligently but remained aloof from even his own backfield. He saw Bucko White watching him often and his eyes would harden. He was no better than Nerba; they were all in it. And evenings he'd scan the sport sheets closely. They gave him a lot of space, but he wasn't reading that; he watched the betting odds.

Then in the regular Wednesday scrimmage Kent put them against the varsity and in the first play Tom knew the varsity backs had something up their sleeve. Pond hit him with a dirty back tackle that sent him spinning. He came up groggy. Steward instantly saw the layout.

"They're after you, Lawler. Lay off."

He muttered. "I'll take my turn."

Vosnick lit into him next time. Another dirty tackle, with a kick in the back to end it. He got up white-lipped.

"Don't hurt yourself trying to get my back, Vosnick."

Vosnick snarled, and again Steward implored him to pass up his turn, cursing Kent's blindness as to what was going on underneath. Tom refused stubbornly.

Then going through guard on a spinner he got it. Bucko White hit him cleanly; he felt the shock and lunged sidewise instinctively; then two bullets struck him, one high, the other low, and the lights went out.

WHEN HE awakened it was in a white room and Steward was beside him.

"The dirty skunks," Steward began.

"I didn't think they'd do it," Tom said weakly, interrupting the other fervent cursing. "What is it? My back?"

"They don't know. They got you here for observation and X-rays. Kent's plenty sick."

"Yeah?" Tom felt plenty sick himself. "What really hurts is Bucko White's in on it."

"In on what?"

He hesitated a moment, then told Steward what he'd heard in the corridor after the Kings game. "You once said Nerba's a scheming devil. That ain't the half of it. He's selling the school for some of the dough this guy's betting with Blouse. All the Big Four are in on it. I figured we were the ones to win that game; now they got me."

Steward's black eyes burned. "Nothing's certain."

"No, except that if Rake loses the Tech game, when I get out those birds are going to get one helluva pounding."

It was Friday when Dr. Rathborn after two days of prodding and X-raying, said: "It's nothing serious this time, Lawler, just a nerve kinked in there. But once more—" He shrugged significantly. Tom nodded and went out.

He walked slowly across the campus. He felt his back, twisted it. Hell, it felt fine. Nothing wrong there. He'd go to his room and lay low. Tomorrow at 2 p. m. Messrs. Nerba, White and company were due for a little surprise!

He entered the dressing room at one-thirty the next afternoon. Steward saw him, let out a whoop. Grins appeared on the men's faces, but his eyes searched Nerba's face alone. The parchment-like swarthy face didn't flicker. Could he be wrong? Vosnick and Pond scowled, but that was usual. Bucko White wasn't looking. He began dressing, puzzled.

A voice spoke behind him. "Sorta rushin' it, Lawler, aren't you?"

He turned to look into Kent's little eyes. "Oh, I dunno," he said. "Why?"

"I've been talking to Rathborn."

"I'll take the chance."

Kent grunted and turned away and he knew he'd never see the inside of that game unless something happened. He began watching Duke Nerba like a hawk.

He pulled his big blue jersey with the white 48 down over his shoulder harness, jerked his moleskins tight and came erect stamping his cleats. He was fit, felt good, a powerful, ram-paging back eager to be on the loose.

Kent's brittle talk was short. Tom was glad. He pounded out with the rest of the squad and when he hit the green, sun-splashed gridiron the roar that greeted them lifted his heart. But the tremendous ovation the Tech stands gave their big, red team running out a moment later dropped it.

With narrowed eyes he watched Nerba and the Big Four line up, saw the big eleven red jerseys spurt forward, heard the tremendous roar, then settled back, grimly. Now would tell the tale.

But the first quarter passed smoothly. Vosnick carried the kick-off back to the thirty, Bucko bulled over a first down, Tech stiffened and Nerba kicked. Tech made two firsts then were forced to kick. They battled in mid-field. Rake had it on their forty at the quarter.

THE SECOND began. Suddenly he saw something. He leaned toward Steward and whispered, "See anything different out there?"

Steward's black eyes narrowed. "Yeah, Nerba's using only inside plays."

"That's it. And now catch why."

A moment and Steward swore at what he saw. The Rake backs were letting themselves wide open and covering it with close-in line play.

Tom flashed a look at Kent. He saw the coach's eyes grow puzzled, then smaller and smaller, and almost at the same time the red backs began going places. Five, three, eight—The Rake stands began imploring. Another first. On the twenty now. Tom felt hot blood pounding in his

temples. Damn those—

"Second backs!" Kent snapped it.

He leaped to his feet. "Listen, Coach, I—"

"When I want you, Lawler, I'll call you. Easton, Botts..."

Tom sank back. Those seconds would never stop them. He glared at the four varsity backs as they trooped in. Bucko White alone glared back.

Tech scored. They threatened again. Kent sent the Big Four back in. The red steamroller was on fire. Now they couldn't be stopped. The half ended 13-0, and what had looked like a cleverly-sold, tight game now threatened to be a rout.

Choking with rage, Tom stalked after the blue squad. He kicked the swinging locker room door open. He saw Nerba just sitting down.

"I don't believe I'd sit down, Nerba."

His right hit Nerba high on the cheek. Nerba did sit down.

He bounced right up. Tom took him going in. He took two hard punches to the face then counted again.

Suddenly lights exploded before his eyes and he picked himself off the floor to see Vosnick glaring down. Steward was coming running; Pond jerked off his helmet; the whole locker room was in an uproar. Then Kent entered.

"Hold it," he roared. Tom got up from the floor. He spat a mouthful of blood and said: "Just in time, Coach, to see what kind of a stripe you got for varsity backs. These guys are throwin' your game."

The words fell like a bomb. Silence gripped the room. Kent turned slowly, face ashen. "That's quite a mouthful, Lawler."

"I heard Nerba talking to a guy after the King's game. There's dough on Tech today, big dough. That's why they got me out of the way."

"That's a lie," Nerba shouted.

"Lawler's right," Steward shouted.

Vosnick let a bellow and lunged for Steward but Bucko White clipped him on the chin and Vosnick went down. Bucko wheeled upon Tom, his big face hard and white. He said:

"Can you prove that, Lawler?"

A hush clamped down on the locker room. Tom felt it, felt Kent's boring eyes, Tippy Dolan's, the entire squad's and suddenly his heart stopped. He had no proof.

Kent saw it. His voice came harsh. "That'll be enough for you, Lawler. Turn in your suit. You others get out there and—"

The locker door burst open. Windy Blouse barged in, puffing, wild-eyed. "Nerba! White! What the hell's the matter?" He choked.

Kent wheeled. "What the hell is this? A public meeting place? What do you want, Blouse?"

"I got ten grand up on this game. I thought it a cinch. Nerba said it would be."

"Nerba!"

Tom jumped forward. "Does that say anything?"

Kent looked at him hard. "It says, get the hell outta here, the whole pack of you. I'll give the line-up out there." He turned to Dolan.

TOM HEARD his name called for that second line-up. He jammed his jersey tight into his pants and said to his three running mates. "Get into it, fellows. Those thirteen points don't mean anything to us." He looked at Tech running out. A hand fell on his shoulder. He thought it was Kent. It was Bucko White. He spoke and his voice was funny.

"I wasn't in on this last deal, Lawler, I swear it."

"Let's go, Steward." He tried to pull away.

Bucko's hand tightened. "And I didn't know they got you purposely. I thought your back had given away."

He wrenched away. His throat was hard. He said, "Keep your dirty paws to yourself, White." Then he was running out with Markas and Dunkel and Steward.

A roar shot up at the sight of the sophomore quartet. They had read things after that King's game. Four flashy, hard-hitting new stars. Tom tightened lips over his teeth. He felt good now.

He looked up the long stretch, heard the whistle. The ball went up tumbling straight for him. Two light

steps, his big hands picked it out, he cuddled swiftly behind Dunkel and Steward and was running hard.

A red jersey dropped him on the forty. He jumped up. They flashed into formation. Steward shoved him through center. He ripped off eight. Steward let him ride on again. A first off tackle. He got up a little wobbly. He grimaced. Hospital training!

"You're hot," Steward panted. "We'll give 'em 85 off tackle."

He nodded grimly. He tucked the pill in, took his two steps to the right, his guards swung out, in, then he was plummeting at the quick-opening tackle shot. He hung onto the tail of Steward and stepped out.

Two men jostled before them. In their excitement they bunched and Steward rolled into them. He stepped across the line, head up.

Steward got up, bony face grinning. "Hell, this is fun. For dear old Rake U. Let's do it again."

Markas plunked one over the crossbar and they laughed.

Tech received. He found it all wasn't fun a minute later. Those big red laddies were drillers from way back and everytime one came roaring through the blue line two came around at him with a high-low block that was something to shake a guy's eyeteeth. Yep, a hospital was no training spot. He hit the big red full and both sat down suddenly. Damn. The clunk made a yard.

He hit the full again. Two yards this time. Tech kicked. The game went on. He knew when the quarter was. He saw Kent looking out white-faced and waved him down, then they were at it again.

There was a ringing in his ears. As Steward barked the signal he looked down at his big hand. It was shaking. He looked at the dirt and sweat on it wonderingly, then he was off, instinctively.

"First and ten!"

HE GOT up, saw they were on the thirty and jogged back again. He was surprised to see Stew-

ard bleeding at the mouth, Dunkel's left eye almost shut from a purple egg. Hell, they had to hang together. He shouted hoarsely. His voice sounded far away. There was a roaring above, the stands. Steward barked and he dropped into the ball carrier's slot instinctively.

They slashed at tackle. A reverse made it four to go. Markas bulled through guard for a first. It was heavy, bone-shattering shoulder-to-shoulder stuff now. He churned into center for three. Steward did a sneak, was dropped for a minus four. A daring flat pass gained it back and eight more. First and goal! Subs raced in. He got up, kicked his cleats free and moved back.

At the "hep" he started in. Steward, Dunkel, Markas steamed before him. His cleats ripped the turf. He felt his head hit something. His shoulders smashed it aside. His legs drove on. He felt himself falling and gave one last lunge. He thought a goal post cracked over his head.

He was up moving. What the hell? He was between two men moving off the field.

"Easy, Lawler," Kent said beside him.

A horror shot through him. His back! He straightened. A grin swept over his caked, battered features. "Coach! Coach! It's okey. Let me in."

A cool voice spoke before him. "You made it thirteen-all, Lawler. Guess an all-American ought to squeeze out a few more."

He looked up. It was Bucko White, eyes small and hard, but glowing deep underneath. It was a clean light; it meant a clean deal in Rake football. And suddenly the hatred drained from his heart. He nodded.

"Yeah, a reformed all-American, I guess, Bucko."

And then he didn't feel like pounding the hell out of Nerba or Vosnick or Ponds. He knew they'd get theirs. He didn't feel like pounding anything. This game was on ice. He just folded.

THE END



ELIXIR



In the locker room he sat before the game.
It was still some time before the cry, "Play Ball".
He had donned a uniform upon his frame
For more years than he cared now to recall

The record book gave his official age,
But even there the record had its flaws;
For even to the book's official sage
He had never quite revealed how old he was

He didn't pitch a full game any more
But for relief he still was unexcelled.
He still could rise and quickly "close the door",
When the starter from the mound was shelled.

He touched his elbow where the chips had been
His legs were tired and his ribs were sore.
He recollected purple patches of skin
And the ankle broken when once he tried to score.

All at once he felt so tired and worn;
Every ancient wound flared up anew.
Like Samson, of his power he felt shorn.
He thought, "It's time to say I'm through".

Then to his ears there slowly trickled in
A multitude of sounds from the playing field.
From his chest he lifted up his chin.
It came to pass his wounded spirit healed.

He heard his team mates briskly warming up
Their voices rang out sharply in the air.
He heard the pitcher's tosses whizz and pop
Into the catcher's mitt with speed to spare.

He heard the sounds a gathering crowd makes,
Low at first, then mounting bit by bit.
The sounds stirred him; gone were all his aches.
His nerves tightened in his stomach's pit.

He smelled the odors of the locker room.
Man smells, and leather, cloth and wood,
Sweeter far than any rare perfume,
The aroma made him feel alive and good.

He felt his blood mounting with a surge.
Like a rookie his heart began to pound.
He felt again an elemental urge
To get out there and blaze them from the mound.

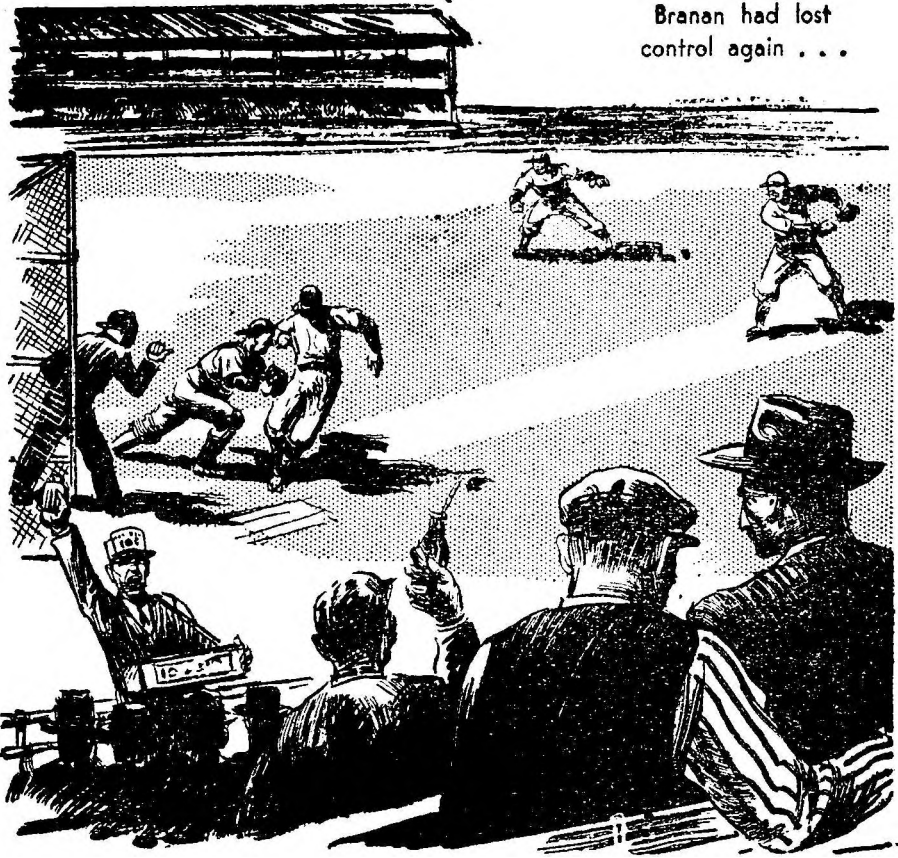
He rose from the bench; his shoulders squared.
His muscles flung away time's heavy load.
He flexed his arms, his fingers and all prepared,
To the field, a kid again, he strode.



S I D P R E S S



Branan had lost
control again . . .



Halfway Hurler

by D. A. Kyle

They had Lank Branan pegged into a slot, tagged as the man who couldn't finish a game. And Lank had begun to believe it. .

A DROP OF perspiration trickled down Lank Branan's thin nose and he brushed it away with the back of his dusty pitching hand. He watched Geegee Gordan, crouched behind the plate, slide two fingers into the pocket of his catcher's mitt. Geegee was asking for another fast one.

The tensed hush of the crowd swept across the infield and focused on the mound, beating at him like the heat waves which already were suffocating him. Then ten thousand

faces were a gray blur within the shadows of the stadium. He couldn't see them clearly, but he could feel them; they were waiting, expecting the inevitable—waiting for him to crack under the pressure.

Lank threw his arms above his head, pulled them down close to his chest. He craned his neck and looked over his right shoulder at the runner leading off second base. With two out, the runner was coiled like a spring, ready to break with the three-and-two pitch.

Lank's eyes came back toward the plate. Geegee's dark glove hung there for his target and, narrowing his concentration on it, he fired the ball in. The muscles along his back and shoulder pained him unbearably this time.

The Eagle batsman swung viciously at the pitch.

Strikeout!

"Attaboy!" Dan Kelly said, coming in from shortstop and walking Lank to the bench. "You've got the touch today, Lank."

"So has Blanchard," Lank replied. Blanchard, the Eagle pitcher, had given up only one hit to the 'Gator batsmen to keep the game a scoreless deadlock.

"Nuts," Kelly said; "Blanchard wouldn't last."

Chet Horne, the portly 'Gator manager standing on the dugout steps, overheard the remark. He grinned sarcastically at Lank. "You're not the only one, Branan," Horne told his pitcher. "He's got a reputation, too."

"Aw, lay off, Chet," Kelly said. "The kid's got stuff today."

"Sure he's got stuff," Horne agreed, "but—" He shook his head derisively and turned down the bench. "Ziggler! Get out there in the bullpen!"

"What for?" Lank asked, indignation burning at the base of his skull. "You going to yank me?"

"Not yet, kid," the fat manager replied. "I'm just getting ready; the sixth frame's here, y'know."

Lank watched Buz Ziggler grab his glove and trot down the right field foul line. The beefy relief twirler had a self-satisfied grin on his florid face which Lank resented. Without replying to Horne's last remark, he stalked to the bench and squeezed down next to Geegee.

The usually jolly Geegee studied Lank silently with cocked head before he said seriously: "Just keep chucking 'em in like you've been chucking 'em in and you won't get lifted."

"Sure," Lank replied. "Sure." But the confidence he had felt after

whiffing the last batter was gone now. He knew the familiar pattern; he was weakening and Horne had seen it. He wouldn't last the seventh, maybe not even the coming frame.

Kelly was right about Blanchard. The Eagle hurler didn't last; 'Gator batters got to him for five hits to start the sixth, shelled him from the mound and put the 'Gators ahead 3-0.

UT ON the mound again, Lank tried to be reassured with the big three runs posted on the scoreboard behind his back. But he wasn't. The top of the Eagle batting order was up and the lead-off man acted as though he was ready to tear the horsehide apart. Lank couldn't kid himself; he had a reputation—a guy who gave out in the late innings—and he knew it and the Eagles knew it. This was the beginning of the end, right on schedule.

The first pitch should have been a fast one and it wasn't. The Eagle batter teed-off on it and drove a sizzling liner in the hole between the left and center fielders.

He put two curves over for two quick strikes on the next man, wasted two and then came down with his hard one. The ball sailed out to centerfield and rattled against the wall.

Geegee, his mask high on his forehead, walked the new ball out to Lank.

"It's your fast one," Geegee said worriedly. "What's the matter—it ain't got no zip?" He handed the ball reluctantly to Lank. "You got good control, but no speed; you just burned out?"

"I don't know," Lank said weakly. "Let's cut out the fast ones for a while. Maybe it'll come back." Geegee shouldn't have been surprised; Lank had weakened like this in every game so far and the season was half over. After all, that was why he wasn't a big league pitcher. He was good while he lasted, but he didn't have the stamina, reason enough for still being in the minors.

Geegee moved in behind the plate

again and asked for an assortment of curves and half-speed pitches. The next batter, over-anxious, topped the ball to Kelly. The lightning-fast shortstop gobbled it up, held the runners at second and third and got the first out with a delayed throw to first.

That brought up the Eagle clean-up hitter. Again Lank fed the batter everything but a fast one. The big man nearly snapped his spine on two sharp breaking curves, but the count went to three and two. Desperately Lank tried to strike him out with his best pitch, an inside curve, but the batter fouled it off. Three more times the ball was fouled off before Lank lost a pitch and gave up a walk.

Bases loaded.

The count went to two and two on the fifth man to bat when Geegee signaled for a fast strike.

Lank shook off the sign. He didn't feel ready yet and if the batter were to get hold of a soft pitch with three men on—Lank shuddered. Geegee's call was right, but he couldn't do it.

When the bat hit the ball Lank knew it was tagged. He watched Resnick in centerfield race the ball to the wall. Perfect fielding held the hit to a single, but two men scored.

Geegee came out to the mound then, with Horne right beside him.

"That's enough, Branán," Horne told Lank. "You've done your work for the day." He watched Ziggler ambling in from the bull pen. "It's a good thing I've got a reliever like Ziggler."

"Take your shower, Branán," Ziggler said as Lank handed him the ball. "I'll sew up the game for us." He favored Lank with that irritatingly superior smile. "Don't I always?"

"Sure," Lank replied. "Good Luck." Though Ziggler was no particular friend of his, he was grateful for Ziggler's help. Somehow, it was reassuring to have Ziggler available, ready to pick up where Lank left off. It was Chet Horne who

really bothered him. And deep in the recesses of his mind: Harry Van and Mary Riggins.

Ziggler stopped them, but not before two more runs had crossed the plate. Though each side banged out a few more hits, there was no further scoring and the game ended with Ziggler still on the mound, the 'Gators beaten, 4-3.

CHET HORNE was shaking with anger when Lank caught the train that night. The 'Gators were headed for Atlanta to begin a three game series the next day against the Chiefs and the team had completely boarded the sleeper by eight o'clock. Lank climbed aboard just before train time and ran smack into Horne.

"You're back of this, Branán!" Horne snarled at him. "If the boys don't cool off mighty fast, I'm going to pin the blame on you and trade you away!"

Lank was flabbergasted. "Me? What did I do?"

Horne didn't answer. He yanked open the parlor car door and stalked off the platform, headed for the club car.

Inside Lank met Kelly. The shortstop had a mouth which looked as though it had just sampled the sourest persimmon in Dixie. He started to brush past Lank but the pitcher stopped him.

"What's going on here, Dan?" Lank said. "I just ran into Horne—what's eating him?"

"The jerk!" Kelly fumed. "He just bawled out the whole team...accused some of us of quitting on the field." Kelly grabbed the lapel of Lank's seersucker suit. "Called us quitters! Why that fat slob! He oughta be down in Class D!" He pulled his hand away and peered coldly into Lank's face. "I don't quit; I don't lay down. I give the game everything I got until the last out. I don't know about you, but that's the way I play!"

Before Lank could phrase a reply Kelly pushed around him and disappeared into the rest room.

Geegee was seated alone, reading

Sporting News, when Lank sat down next to him. He looked up and said, "Hello, Kid," and turned the page.

"What's Horne been saying, Geegee?" Lank asked. "What did I miss?"

The catcher flipped his paper aside and snorted. "The guy's beefing again. Says we ain't playing hard enough. He don't really mean the things he knocks you for."

"Things? About me? What things?"

"Aw, you know." Geegee, the stolid, imperturbable Geegee, was flustered. "You must've heard."

"No, I didn't. And you better tell me." Lank knew now, though, Kelly's words added up. He waited for Geegee to confirm the suspicion which was puffing like a split finger in his brain.

"Now don't get excited," Geegee cautioned. "You know how much hot air Horne blows off—he thinks you didn't half try today. Says you eased up instead of bearing down to avoid straining yourself. And because we didn't get any more runs behind Ziggler, he says we're all doing the same thing."

"That's a lousy thing for him to say about anyone."

"Yeah, ain't it."

"You don't believe that, do you? About me, I mean. You caught me. You don't think I laid down in the sixth?"

Geegee's heavy eyebrows pulled together until the ends met. "Some of the guys agree with Horne." He stuck thick fingers up and scratched his over-sized nose. "Those guys are Horne's stooges. They'd agree to anything he said."

Lank's stomach squirmed around inside him. He attempted to meet Geegee's eyes, but they were turned away from him, glancing at the folded paper on the seat.

"Do you think I quit?" he persisted, forcing out the question he knew Geegee was dodging.

"I'm not saying you did, Lank." Geegee's fingers went down and toyed with the paper. "It's only that

the way you lost your fast one don't seem natural. I mean, you don't have no pain or nothing."

"Maybe not a big pain, Geegee, but my shoulder hurt; and all the time I thought it would disappear."

"I know, kid." The catcher grunted. "But Horne ain't gonna be satisfied unless your arm drops off."

THE DISSENSION on the team was bad; Lank saw that when they were in the locker room before batting practice. The usual free and easy pre-game talk was gone. Instead, groups of players stood or sat around griping about the weather, the food, the train trip, everything. Or else they kept an ominous silence, like Kelly and Resnick and Fossi who sat in the corner by the exit rubbing the stiffness out of their gloves.

Horne came in and swept the room with his piercing black eyes. No one greeted him. "I want this game today," he stated abruptly. "The Chiefs are breathing down the necks of the Sox. Take this series and we'll be set to fight it out with the Sox."

He pulled the batting order from his pocket and gave it to Ted Kriza, the giant first sacker, who was captain. "I said some harsh words last night. And I still mean them. When you go out there I want you to be straining your guts every second, understand?" Horne turned toward Lank. "You, Bran; you've got a girl friend to see you outside. I'll give you two minutes with her."

Lank slowly rose. Horne stood there, eying him silently, a touch of scorn on his flat face. The eyes of all the other players in the room were on him too, some questioning, others frankly antagonistic.

There was nothing for Lank to say. This was a violation of one of Horne's strictest rules and he was breaking it. With Horne a party to it! Lank shuffled across the concrete floor, passing between Kelly and Resnick as he went out the exit.

"Mary!" Lank said when he saw her at the end of the tunnel, her

back against the cool brick and her head turned out toward the playing field. "Mary! What are you doing in Atlanta?"

"Frank," she replied. "It's good to see you." She had never adopted the players' whimsy of changing his name from Frank to Lank. That was the nicest part about Mary: to her he had never become merely a ball player. He was still Franklin L. Branan, her college beau, who had chosen to throw a ball instead of writing figures in business ledgers.

He gave her a happy little hug and stepped back to look, at her. It had been nearly a month since he had seen her, but she hadn't changed. Her chestnut hair was pulled back tightly over her head and gathered at the back with a big brown velvet ribbon. Dark sunglasses hid her brown eyes, though not the sparkle that was always present there. In a white blouse and brown cotton skirt she seemed cool and efficient.

"I'm in town," she was saying, "to check with the company's district supervisor. Came in yesterday." Her full lips curved up slightly in an impish grin. "Of course, I timed it with the 'Gator schedule."

He smiled in return. Count on Mary to turn up unexpectedly. And at the psychological moment when he was feeling low and needed her infectious cheeriness. But she knew enough not to attempt to see him just before he took the field; she certainly wouldn't have embarrassed him unless it was important...

"I've only a minute, Mary," he said, swiftly serious. "What prompts a visit at this zero hour?"

Just for a moment she seemed puzzled. Then she took his hand in hers.

"I did want to let you know I'd be watching this game today. And if you weren't playing, why perhaps we'd sit together." She noticed that his serious expression hadn't changed and she added quickly, "Is there something wrong?"

"No-o-o." Lank hesitated. "But Manager Horne takes a dim view of anyone disturbing his precious play-

ers." He squeezed her hand. "I thought you knew."

"I do know, Frank," she said. This time a frown was faintly visible above the pink rim of her glasses. "I didn't plan to see you. I wanted to leave a message with the batboy. But Mr. Horne noticed me and when I told him what I was doing here he told me to wait here and that he'd send you out."

"He told you that?" Lank was incredulous. That wasn't what he would imagine Horne as doing. It smacked of an ugly trick on the part of the manager to further discredit his pitcher: deliberately helping Lank to break a rule, and drawing Mary into it as an innocent party.

Mary noticed the dark cloud spreading over his face.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Did I get you into trouble?"

Lank heard the players thundering out of the locker rooms, the noise reverberating through the tunnel. He pulled Mary outside on the turf and escorted her to the nearest field box gate. Before he left her to rejoin the team pouring from under the grandstand he had dispelled her misgivings and she was gay once more.

ON THE BENCH Lank had a chance to worry by himself. Shoved down with the rest of the bench warmers, sitting between Cosgrove and Berg, the utility fielders, he felt the isolation of his relationship with the team. He was in the doghouse, blamed for having provoked Horne into his recent outburst, suspected of having let down the team, and now branded as a dame-chaser inconsiderate of rules; Lank pondered his more intimate personal problem...

He'd had no chance to ask Mary, yet he knew he would have to ask her before the day was over. The Sox had been in Atlanta the day before. Which meant Harry Van. Handsome Harry—the boy who'd made a play for Mary back in college two years ago and whom she'd skipped for Lank. "Timed it with

the 'Gator schedule," she'd said. Yes, and timed her visit with the Sox schedule, too. It wasn't as though it had never happened before; it had. She'd seen Harry on other occasions. Many times; almost as many times as she'd seen Lank. And when he had asked her about it jokingly, she'd passed it off just as lightheartedly.

The cheers that shook the dugout brought Lank's mind back to the game. Resnick, third batter up for the 'Gators, had fanned to end the top half of the inning. Lank's eyes idly followed his teammates out into the field.

Harry Van had so much more to offer Mary than Lank had. Harry was a salesman in the winter months, an extraordinarily successful salesman for insurance. The friends he had made in baseball—and he was the expansive, forceful type of personable young fellow who made many—were an ever-widening source of business. But more than that, what injured Lank's pride the most was the indisputable knowledge that Harry was the better ballplayer. An outfielder, Harry was outstanding as ballhawk or slugger.

"And me," Lank said bitterly, "a bum who undermines the spirit of an entire team!"

"What?" said Cosgrove, squirting a yard of tobacco juice out into the sunshine and watching it squirm in the powdery dust like a garter snake.

"Nothing," said Lank. "I was just wondering whether I ought to borrow that plug of yours and start making like a major league pitcher for a change."

Cosgrove didn't laugh.

* * *

It wasn't really a fight, yet Lank left Mary that evening feeling as though they'd had one. He checked into the hotel that night an hour before deadline, feeling ready to chuck everything for a peaceful job in the boiler room of a tramp steamer.

"Harry," she'd said. "Of course, I

saw Harry; he sends you his regards."

And Lank had blown up. Not entirely, but enough to have Mary chastise him like a spoiled child and ruin their evening together. He'd been so miserable that he'd taken her back to her hotel, mumbling about "a bad night on the train" and "need lots of sleep." It had been a long time since he had hinted at engagement rings and he had hoped she was becoming fonder of him. Now, however, he knew she felt nothing more than the casual interest she seemed to show. He had wanted to confide in her and found it impossible to do so. She seemed disinterested in his trouble. The conclusion was obvious: she didn't love him.

Geegee was already in bed, reading the evening sports pages. Lank silently undressed and hung his clothes in the wardrobe closet. Geegee engrossed in his reading, offered no conversation and Lank was satisfied to brood in the silence.

As Lank climbed into the other bed, Geegee turned to him, spitting his huge wad of gum between his fingertips and sticking it on top the headboard before he spoke.

"Wanna look at the standings? That game today puts us two behind the Chiefs and four and a half behind the Sox. Gonna be a close fight come September." He tossed the papers on Lank's chest.

Lank's eye caught the headlines: *Van Grandslams Sox to 4-3 Win.*

And under it was a big, ugly-as-life photograph of "Today's Hero—Harry Van".

Lank threw the papers on the floor and snapped out the light.

LANK FINGERED the resin bag and mentally counted the gate. The Sox stadium was packed for the final tilt with the 'Gators—nearly 35,000 customers, Lank estimated, all screaming for 'Gator blood. There was that crucial-game feeling in the air which stirred the crowd and made the players jittery.

His fingers were gripping the ball now, ready to make the first

toss against the Sox lead-off man. The jitters had him, too; he could feel the muscles in his forearm jumping crazily. His starting assignment should have been no surprise, yet in a way he wasn't prepared for it. The first two games had gone to the 'Gators—at a high cost. Horne had used all his pitchers in the previous two days except Ziggler and Old Timer McBriggs—and Lank Branán. Horne had had no choice. Lank was the starter for the final game.

His arm whipped up and down and the ball plopped into Geegee's mitt. Sabrett, the Sox batter, let it go by.

Ball one.

Lank wanted to win this game. Most important, though, he wanted to chalk up a complete game, for a change. That meant he had to win to do it; he couldn't permit Horne the slightest opportunity to derrick him.

His second pitch was another ball. *I've got to get it over*, Lank thought. *I've got to!*

He tried and failed. Sabrett walked on four straight balls.

Geegee made a motion as though he were coming out to the mound. Lank waved him back. This wasn't a time when Lank needed a delay to steady him down, to give him a chance to catch his breath. His arm was still cold, that was all; Geegee couldn't talk him into warming up.

The second Sox slugger powered the pitch into the right field corner for two bases. Men on second and third!

This time Geegee did come out. Lank tried to listen to the catcher's words of encouragement, but the crowd's roar was like a veil of sound over his ears.

Geegee, behind the plate again, was begging for a fast one. Lank threw it—inside for a ball. And three more just as bad. The bases were loaded with no outs.

"Hell's bells!" Kelly said. "Settle down!" The shortstop trotted over to the mound and was pounding his glove in exasperation. Lank didn't reply; he watched Geegee walking

slowly across the plate toward him. By the time Geegee had arrived, Ted Kriza, the captain, had come over from first base. They all pummeled him with advice, needled him with caustic comments. Finally they all went back.

The batter at the plate was familiar. Harry Van.

LANK FELT the blood drain away from his head and return with a surge. For one horrible moment he felt completely beaten and then, just as quickly, his mind was circulating again.

Lank stared steadily into the far, far away mitt of his catcher. He took his abbreviated stretch and glanced at the runners. With none away they were sticking close to the sacks. As his head turned toward the plate, Lank saw Horne standing on the dugout steps, ready to make his move. The expression on Horne's face was pitifully obvious: he wanted Ziggler in there and the temperamental Ziggler wasn't ready, still not finished with his frenzied bullpen tosses.

Geegee wanted a fast one; Geegee wanted a strikeout. But that's not the smartest pitch, Lank thought and shook off the sign. This pitch, he reasoned, had to look good—a high and fast one, being deceptively neither. And dead. Absolutely dead.

Van was deceived. He swung too quickly, tried to check himself and hit the dead ball squarely. It whistled directly into Lank's glove. With a quick pivot, the ball went to third, doubling off the running. The relay to second was a split second too late. Not quite a triple play, though good for a twin killing!

With the stands still groaning loudly, the next batter, with the back of the rally already broken, went down on three consecutive blazing strikes.

In the dugout it seemed as though the whole 'Gator team was trying to cave in his ribs with their heavy hands.

"You were terrific!" Kriza said.

"Make that colossal!" Kelly shouted.

"That's m'boy!" said Geegee with a grin.

But Horne was less enthusiastic. "It's a damn good thing," he said. "I'm not forgetting those walks."

Bobo Baker, Horne's chief coach, pulled Lank behind the water cooler. "I understand Harry Van's a rival of yours," he said, his gruff voice confidential. After Lank's puzzled nod, he added, "Don't get me wrong, I'm only interested in giving you an added incentive to win today." He winked at Lank. "There's a big league scout in the stands today, from New York. He's sizing up Van. Making Van look like a monkey isn't gonna help his chances any."

Lank said slowly, every word weighed, "I've nothing against Van personally; I'm not trying to get even for anything."

Bobo was suddenly surprised and slightly hurt. "You ought to, boy. He brought your girl to the game today!" He studied the bewildered look of indignation which swept over the pitcher's face. "I'd pin his ears back and show that girl of yours that you're a better man than he is!"

When Lank took the field he spent his time while rubbing up the ball to look for Mary behind the Sox dugout.

It took him two innings and six Sox outs to spot her sitting in a box on the rail to the right of the Sox bench. As he watched her he saw her wave, but he turned away without waving in reply. The knowledge that Bobo was right turned his heart into a lump of ice.

But if his heart were ice, his pitching arm was hotter than a horse pistol. And the pellet he flung up to confront the Sox batters with was just as fast as if it were a bullet. He didn't rely on his fast ball alone, the assortment he threw kept the Sox off balance and constantly behind the count, unable to dig in when they wished. Even Van, in his second time up, popped out weakly to Kriza.

Horne's voice penetrated Lank's stony shell.

"Bobo!" he shouted. "Get Ziggler throwing!"

LANK LOOKED up and caught Geegee gazing at him placidly. The catcher shrugged. "It's the sixth inning coming up and the score nothing-nothing—Horne ain't taking chances."

"I won't give him a chance to use Ziggler today," Lank said coldly and grabbed his mitt to stomp out to the mound.

Nor did Horne have a chance in the sixth.

Lank, briefly tight with rage at Horne's bullying tactics for nearly two-thirds of a season, walked the first man. And Harry Van stepped in.

A beautiful breaking ball was pounded into the ground by Van, rabbitted out to Kelly's glove and the 'Gators had their second double play of the game.

Geegee walked the ball back to the hill, but this time his face wasn't glum and his voice was good-natured. "I swallowed my gum on that last play, Lank; I wonder if'n Horne swallowed his cigar."

Lank suddenly shook with laughter. "What's s'matter?" Geegee asked, his homely face alarmed. "My joke weren't that good."

Lank cuffed Geegee on the shoulder. "I just realized, Geegee. My arm's hurting like hell."

"Are you crazy? That's not funny!"

"It is to me, Geegee. I just realized it, and it doesn't matter; not a damn thing matters except winning this game."

"Yeah, Lank," Geegee said, a smile cracking his face. "Yeah. That happens when you been bearing down. I was wondering when you'd find out. Along about now my old bones all start kicking up like blazes. You just gotta expect things like that." He handed Lank the ball and turned to go. "But if you *know* your flipper's really giving out, let me know."

Pitching to the next batter was



like getting his second wind. Now that Lank knew he could stand the pain and that it wasn't so bad after all when he threw his hard one, it didn't hurt nearly as much. He had no doubt now that he *had* been easing up, instead of gritting his teeth and making an extra effort. Whether

knowingly or unknowingly, Horne's needling had had a basis in fact. Well, he wasn't going to hold back again, he was going to fire his pitches in, hard, as long as he could.

The third batter struck out.

The score was still a series of ciphers when the ninth inning ar-

rived. Brown, the 'Gator third sacker, walked after one was out and Geegee singled him to third. That brought up Lank.

Horne called him over to the dug-out and Lank, for a terrorizing half minute, thought he was going to be yanked for pinch-hitter Ben Aaron.

"I should lift you, Branan," Horne said sternly. "But thinking the matter over, I'll leave you in. Sometimes a manager has to keep a big-shot happy. Anyhow, you're pitching okay. Only don't hit into a DP."

LANK STEPPED into the batter's box wondering about Horne's remark. The manager was the boss. What "big-shot" did Horne have to please?

The Sox hurler fed him a bad one and he didn't bite.

Maybe he could work a walk, load the sacks, and give the top of the order a chance to drive in some runs. That was the safest way. Yet if the count went full, his chances of fanning would be equally as great. Better that he should take his cut if a pitch looked good. He glanced at Baker on the third base line, but there was no sign. It was up to him.

The next pitch looked to be right as it left the rival moundman's hand and Lank swung for the fences. He connected and the ball soared far and deep. He was crossing first base when he saw the Sox centerfielder make the catch. The disappointment at skying out turned into joy when he saw the 'Gator runner tag up and head for the plate. The play wasn't even close; the 'Gators had their run.

He closed out the ninth as though he were pitching in a dream. The first batsman popped to short. Then came Van. The first two strikes were mighty attempts to lose the ball into the left field stands. With the count two and two, Van changed his strategy. He tried to slice one into left field to get on base.

The ball was in Geegee's glove and the catcher was doing a little jig. Lank had whiffed Van for the first time that day.

Disheartened, the next Sox batter, a pinch-hitter, bounced out weakly to Kriza.

The 'Gators had swept the series from the Sox! And Lank had handcuffed them in the final game, 1-0!

As the crowd swirled on the field, Lank dashed toward Mary. He eluded Kriza's attempt at an affectionate embrace, dodged around the pursuing Geegee and reached the railing.

Before he could say anything to her, she reached across the painted pipe and kissed him. He felt his tongue tie itself up helplessly.

"Frank!" Mary said. "Oh, Frank darling! You didn't quit! Van told me such horrible things, things other players were saying about you. I knew they weren't true—and you proved it! You were magnificent!" Her rush of words ended. She turned to the man sitting next to her and said, "Wasn't he magnificent?"

The man, Lank realized with a start, was Fireball Flaherty—the famous scout!

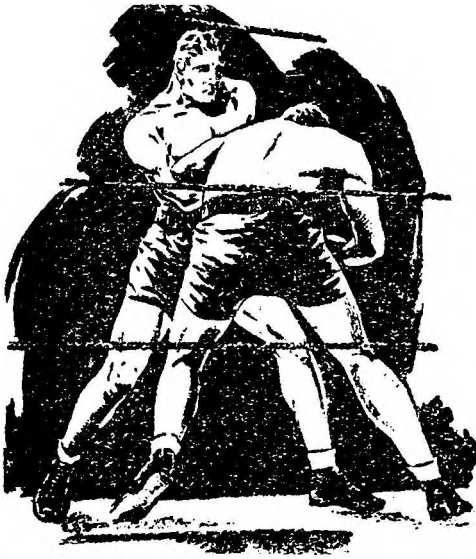
"You were good today, Branan," Flaherty said. "I'd like to call you up to our northern farm club. Horne's been telling me about his ace reliever, Zigglar, but we're not interested in relief men, we want starters—who finish. Harry Van's good, too; but unfortunately he's not a pitcher."

Lank felt hands on him and he was being lifted into the air. He glimpsed Kriza's face and Kelly's smile, and Geegee prancing off waving the ball in a tight fist.

So Horne had been using him just for a chance to bring Zigglar in to shine in relief. Of all the dirty tricks! No wonder Horne had been so quick to undermine his confidence, so quick to yank him.

As Kriza and Kelly set him on his feet at the entrance to the tunnel, he thought of Mary. "Darling!" she had said. She had never called him that before. He got a greater kick out of it than shutting out the Sox—and tonight he'd tell her so.

THE END



QUARTER MILE SLUGGER

by

Lester del Rey

Yup, there's nothing in the ring to compare with fancy foot-work . . .

ROADWORK, I always say. You can't beat it. That's what'll make a champ every time. I've been in the game thirty years come my next haircut, and I never see it fail. The guy that wins in the ring is the guy with the pins in condition to hold him up.

That's why I'm looking for Lefty Lummo, though I'll settle for Pug Peugh, if I gotta. Sure, you heard of Lefty. He was a fair middleweight once, and not too long ago I was building him up for a comeback. Sure, I'm Sid Moon, the manager of Lefty. I still got the mug under contract, and if I can find him . . .

Maybe you heard of the fight when Lefty met Pug Peugh in Filly. Now Peugh was a stumblebum, I guess, but he'd been getting the breaks. And—well, I'd been kinda nursing Lefty up, so maybe he'd been getting some himself. But I wasn't too worried, mostly. I'd been making Lefty go out on the road, and his pins were shaping up. For a guy his age, he wasn't doing bad. Why, one morning, he actually beat me back to the camp, though I kinda wondered then if maybe a bug had stung him.

Anyhow, he'd had plenty of roadwork, and I wasn't too worried. That is, until I got a better look at him just before the fight. He was actually trying to think—and that's bad just

at that time. I tapped him on the back.

"Come out of it, Lefty, it's a push-over. And after this—well, we're finally up, kid. Next is the championship." I wasn't kidding, either. Don't ask me how, but I'd dragged him that far. After this, there was only old Mauler Munsk in the way of the championship. "It's in the bag."

"Uh," says Lefty. "I seen Pug Peugh. He fit the Mauler onct. Pug's gonna take a dive." He scowled, rubbed his big chin, and fingered the cauliflower ear—the worst one. I mean. "Mauler Munsk hits mean, Sid. Pug told me so."

"Pug's just kidding." I got it then, and scowled. "Look, I told you to stay away from the guys you're fighting. Don't look good, chinning with 'em before a fight. And I don't want this by a dive—you get him first."

"Uh."

"Bet he's trying to fool you, let you take it easy. You beat him up, Lefty. Don't let him try it on you. And after that, we'll have the championship, and the blondes'll love you."

"Uh," he says again. Lefty likes blondes, the big ones, and his eyes lit up. Then he growled, sort of. "Mauler's mean—he cuts you up. Pug said so."

"Mauler's older than you," I tell him. "You'll murder the bum—but you gotta murder Pug Peugh first. Let's go."

He grunted again, but I was going out then. We climbed into the ring, and the fans kicked up a mild flurry, you might say. I took a gander at Peugh. And I didn't like it. He was thinking, too. If he dived, and Lefty let him...

The referee pulled the old wheeze, and then I tried to tell Lefty again there was to be no diving by Peugh. But Lefty looked like he meant business. "He won't dive, Sid," he says. And I felt better.

Until I see what he means. Ever see a slow waltz with kinks in it? Well, that's dynamite. Peugh opened up, and it musta taken ten seconds or more for his hand to reach Lefty—only it missed. And Lefty moved cautious up to him, drew back—and I remembered those ads about being tough but plenty gentle. That was the blow. The hair on Peugh's chest never bent. But it musta given them cold feet, being that close to each other. They drew back, danced around, and came in—to clinch.

IT WAS PRETTY, the way each kept the other up and scratched his back so gentle like. But the fans didn't like it. The referee came over to break it up, and they drew back. Lefty moved first this time. He was arguing something fierce with Peugh, but he couldn't have been too bad, because he never lost control. I couldn't see any space between the glove and Peugh's chin, but neither did I hear the well-known smack of leather on skin.

Peugh wobbles back, begins to slide! And Lefty turns white as milk with bleach in it. Did I mention leg-work? He had it. He blurs his feet getting into the clinch, and Peugh can't fall that way.

The referee is looking mighty funny as he breaks it up, and they go into their dance. But finally the bell rings, and they go back to their corners. I'm raving, naturally. I tell Lefty he'll never get another fight,

he'll be rode out of town on a rail, and anything I can think of. He grunts. Across the ring, I see Peugh's manager turning from red to blue, and doing like I am, but Peugh won't even grunt.

They look better the next round. Some of the things Lefty is yelling in Peugh's ear during clinches must be telling; Peugh is forgetting the dive, for the time being. They take monstrous swings at each other's gloves. They dance, they chase each other. They even hit to the biceps. After that first round, it looks almost good, and a couple women down front who don't know better yell. The crowd takes it up feebly, but it ain't good.

They get to round four that way, and I'm expecting the referee to call it off for stinking any minute, but maybe they've learned enough in all those tank towns exhibits to get by. Me? I'm not seeing too good by then. I'm sick, I'm hoarse from shouting, and I'm hoping I pass out.

"Why don't you kiss the bum?" I'm asking. But Lefty is still thinking. "Peugh—he's all right," he tells me. "He's gonna draw. I told him if he tanks what I'll do. I seen the Mauler twicet."

That was his longest speech, and I could see his mind wandering back to the Mauler again before he got to it, by the look in his eyes—and they were clearer then they'd been before the fight. Well, I'd seen the Mauler, too, and his pins were shot, even if he did have the wickedest right in the business. That title would of been nice, too, and maybe Lefty could have made it.

But he wasn't thinking about it. Maybe he was thinking of Hollywood. Could be. His acting got better and better, until I almost thought twice he actually was hitting Peugh. He'd picked up a trick of dancing in with both arms working, smacking his gloves together so they'd sound like a hit, and dancing out again.

It was right cute. Too bad I couldn't appreciate it. But at least it showed what good roadwork can do.

PEUGH WAS grinning. I frowned at that, then got it. If Lefty looked too good, if he made it look like maybe he was actually hitting, he'd maybe get something on points. I turned that over.

And Lefty got wise. He walked into a push-off by Peugh, dropped his chin, and kissed the canvas. Peugh turned green, but Lefty was coming up again on the first count. Such brains I'd never seen—it just shows what a man can do when he's desperate. Days I'd spent on my back wracking my own grey stuff so I could give Lefty dope enough to get by, knowing he'd never think himself—and now I see him getting his own ideas in one night yet!

But finally I get an idea myself. "Lefty," I say, slow and careful so he'll get it, "you draw this, and we'll get a comeback with Peugh somehow—only I'll tell Peugh *how* to lose. And then I'll tell the Mauler where it hurts worst when you're hit! Now you go out there and murder Peugh!"

He looked sick, then. "Peugh's okay," he mumbles. "Me 'n' him are friends—if he don't tank. He tolt me about the Mauler..."

The strain of getting that new idea was tough on him. He actually tapped Peugh in the beginning of the round—the ninth round, it was, somehow. They went into a clinch, muttering love words in each others' ears, until the shock of a real blow wore off. Then they danced some more, and I could see Lefty still thinking.

Maybe I was considering...

And then I saw Lefty pour out a real one, scrubbing into the blossom that had been Peugh's ear once. Peugh reacted out of habit. He lashed out before he thought. And Lefty kissed the canvas this time, sprawling and lying like he was dead.

Peugh sickened and wilted, and got an inspiration, all in the same second. He'd been twisting from the swing, and he went right on, reeling around, and coming down flat beside Lefty. The little birds began to sing over him, and the hand of the referee went up and down, and stopped in disgust! Both were obviously going to be there all night.

They were still there half a minute later, while the fans were trying to make up their minds about going back for their money or pulling a lynching party, and I was figuring how I could get out without joining as a star player in that latter. It was then the loud speaker cut in.

"We've just been informed," it said, "that Mauler Munsck announced his retirement from the ring tonight..."

Peugh was up first, but Lefty wasn't far behind. I heard *pe* yell come out of Lefty's mouth. "Friend, huh?" he was yelling. "So you steer me on the Mauler?"

He blinked, maybe thinking of the blondes, while Peugh went over the ropes. Then Lefty was after him.

Footwork counts. And roadwork is important, like I told you. Lefty caught him in the third row, landed one, and jumped back. Peugh never quit moving.

The last I saw they were rounding a corner a quarter mile from the arena, and still going strong. Peugh was doing okay, but Lefty was running circles around him, hitting every time he passed. And then I lost 'em.

So if any of you guys between here and Canada should come on Lefty Lummo, let me know. I'm figuring after all that roadwork, he's the next champ. I still got a contract.

You got the price of a beer?

THE END



Gridiron

Outcast

by Cliff Campbell

WHEN HE reported for the team and was asked what position, he merely said: "I'll play anything you want me to. Reckon I'd fit best in the line."

The record showed that he was "John S. Bowan," that he weighed a hundred and seventy, that he'd had some experience at an unknown, backwash high school. He was set up in a lank way and there was a prematurely old look about his light, blue eyes. The fellows naturally called him "Bony." The only strange thing about him was his refusal to don a helmet.

"Well, let him rack his nut," one of the coaching staff said. "Be a good joke if we made him wear that headgear of Masked Smith with the Buccaneers." He was referring to the crack new end of the pro club in the adjoining city, who'd already showed his wares in a pre-season game. He'd been dubbed "Masked" because of that enveloping helmet with the chin-protection belt across the bottom that all but hid his features.

After that, he was overlooked. It was Raynor's greatest team in



Bowan claimed an injury . . .

"Bony" Bowan was terrific until the game came — then he couldn't be found . . .

years, last year's powerful soph machine back in toto. And young Buck Clayton, just out of college a few years himself and appointed to the head coach job after the former mentor's death, was too busy posing as Pigskindom's master mind to notice ordinary material. An unbeaten season, which meant humbling the traditional foe, the Big Blue, would mean a national rep and a long-term contract for him.

All of which was strictly okay

with Bony Bowan. All he wanted was to do his bit out there in practice.

Then, along about mid-season, those star backs got tired from totting around their press clippings. The offensive of the Brown Tide of Raynor folded. Little but fast Mogave almost nosed them out with a pass barrage. Monday, Clayton burnt their ears off their heads, then sent them out to maul the scrubs around.

The mauling proceeded until Team D was tossed to the first-string lions. Then a sweep off the right side failed. A moment later, the same scrub left end got in and messed a lateral. Clayton struck out his Mussolini-like jaw and marched out. The varsity backfield coach spoke up: "Their left end is diving straight in, Coach. Y' know how dangerous that is!"



FROM TIME immemorial, Raynor ends charged straight ahead, then turned and tried to box the play. Clayton turned on the offending kid. He promptly passed the buck too. The scared kid pointed to the tackle beside him.

"He told me to play it that way, Coach. He did." And he was pointing at Bony Bowan.

Like any young martinet, Clayton was a devil for having his orders carried out to the well-known letter. He faked a smile of gratitude.

"Well, it's nice to have so many assistants showing me how to play the game all right," he purred. "Yep. But hereafter, please tell me you're going to help coach—or I might treat y' like an ordinary player!"

The sarcasm got a laugh. Clayton sent orders to his varsity to strike wide and make a fool of that end by turning him inside when he charged blindly. They did, two plays later. Threw him inside, as well. But the ball-toter, forced rearward to get clear of the headlong charge, was nailed far out for a loss by Bony Bowan. It happened again shortly after. The varsity got wise and put two blockers on Bony. But he kept the runner from turning into the clear until his secondaries could come up and trap the man.

"What's the matter with you, varsity?" bawled Clayton. "Letting a long-drink-of-water like that chump bull you around."

A few men noticed the lank Bony go a shade paler. The next instant, he wore a thin smile as he stepped toward the chunky coach.

"Nothing the matter with them, Mr. Clayton," he said very respectfully. "They're hitting hard and fast. But they got to work the hipper-dipper and faking faster at the start."

"Yeah," said Clayton. "Yeah?"

Bony nodded humbly, ignoring the other man's belligerency. "That's why Mogave stopped 'em cold in that second half! The ends drove right straight in before the works got wound up."

Clayton said "yeah" again. But at the end of the drill, he gave orders to an assistant to move that Bowan up to the B team the next day, mumbling something about liking a cuss who could do some thinking. But he was thinking of his own discipline without which no man can run a team. This kid, in real company, would soon show up. Of course, it was just a lucky thing, that dope of his about the faking and spinning and ball-handling being too snapless. The varsity had caught on right away and begun to pep it harder. This Bowan had been right. But...

"And stick him, that Bowan, at end," he added to the aid. "He thinks he knows so much about playing. We'll see."

The varsity had hardly run off a handful of plays that next afternoon in the chill drizzle when Chum Stark, B Team guard, did see. Not spectacular, this Bony was a heady man on the defensive. He strengthened the whole side of the line. There was something calming in the way he refused to be mouse-trapped or to lose his head until he knew where he was going.

"Looks like that end job is your real meat, huh, Bony?" Chum said.

BONY BOWAN didn't answer. He even looked sad about the whole thing. The varsity got a little sore about being slowed up, especially as Clayton's tongue grew more vitriolic. They piled it on, Janes, the varsity right wing, turning on the rough stuff. It backfired in their faces as the B Team tackle went down with a pulled ligament after a pile-up.

Clayton huddled with his aides, then made shifts fast. Bowan back at his former tackle position, but still on B Team. The Brown had plenty of end reserves that season but was a little light on tackle replacements. Sam Sinder in at left end for the second-stringers. Get things going again there and for the luvva Pete, varsity, take that ball somewhere!

When they lined up in the new

arrangement, there was a look of relief on Bony's face. Then, a couple of plays later, Chum Stark heard him giving Sinder, the new end, a tip on how to set himself on that end-around-end play. A minute after, he was signing Sinder wider, and rightly, when the varsity shifted from a single wing-back.

"What's the idea helping Sam Sinder hold down his job?" Chum asked, sleeveing sweat, as they regained their feet.

Bony shrugged. "If I can help the team by helping any man on it—well," he suggested.

"Don't be a first-class halfwit!" Chum grunted. "Your real position is on the wing—an' you might get in games if y' played it! Why help another guy take the chance away from you?"

Bony didn't answer. He just kept holding down tackle pretty well and working all he could with Sinder, giving him hints. And Sinder took them gratefully. He was a senior who'd worked for two years on the squad and never had had much hope of making his letter. On the light side and none too rugged in the bargain. But he'd caught on that this Bony chap knew his groceries. He began to learn. Every once in a while, he began to bob up with a surprising piece of play.

The varsity, plenty swell-headed to begin with, knew who was responsible when they were halted on that side. The next day and the next, they put more pressure on this Bony guy. More and more the chorus of driving cleats on the offensive smacked at Bony's side of the second-team line. Tackle cut-backs were drilled at him. Big Bus Gillart, the threat-back, seemed to take pleasure in galloping out of a spinner at Bony's spot. And Janes' tongue, the varsity right end, got steadily more personal as he worked in an elbow or some holding whenever possible.

"Somebody's goin' to get their arm torn off and have their brains batted out with it in these parts mighty soon," Chum Stark remarked

to nobody in particular. Janes had just mouthed some fighting words.

But nothing happened. For Bony Bowan took the rough stuff without a sign. Chum scratched his head and wondered if this slim guy with all his grid savvy could be, possibly, yellow. It seemed far-fetched.

Then came the first hint in that Saturday's game. In the third quarter, with the powerful Raynor machine leading by a single point, the Burros up from the Southern Conference began to gallop. They ripped along, constantly sweeping off or turning the left side of the Brown line. They boxed the end or sucked him wide or trapped him dead-footed. Clayton replaced his weary first-string end. Still the Burros tore off the Raynor left side.

They passed midfield. Clayton bolstered with a new tackle, then another end. But the Burro razzle-dazzle had them baffled, slug-nutty, and looking silly. Clayton slammed down his hat and got an idea.

"Hey, where's that—that Bony bird? He thinks he wrote the book on that end job! Okay! In he goes!"

"Bowan! Bowan in!" went the cry down the bench. "Hey, for gossakes, where's Bowan? Bowan?"

ASSISTANT managers ran around frantically, dumfounded. A mere whisper was usually enough to have a sub tearing off his parka and half-way out onto the field. But—there was no Bony Bowan to be found!

A fumble halted the Burros then. But they got ripping off that left side again before the game ended and scored. If the Raynor machine hadn't added seven points to their total with a long pass some minutes before, it would have meant defeat. Buck Clayton strutted from the field, a typical "I-told-you-so" guy. But he hadn't forgotten and promptly bawled Bony's name when he swung into the locker room Monday.

"Where in blazes were you Saturday, Bowan?" he bawled when the slim player stepped up. "Out picking daisies?"

Bony smiled. "They don't grow in the grandstand, do they?"

Clayton swelled up. His chunky form got two inches higher. Veins became purple serpents pulsing in his forehead. "Grandstatnd? Y' mean to say you sat there and watched the game in a paid seat? You weren't on the bench—"

Bony was calm as ice when he cut in. "No, I wasn't on the bench. I didn't think you'd want to use me, Coach."

Clayton cursed and waved and roared. Any man on the varsity squad was due on that bench Saturday afternoons. Anybody but a plain, damned fool would know that. Subs sat there and ate out their hearts with the hope of getting sent in.

"And you—" Clayton choked and hoofed into his office.

And he, Bony Bowan! The squad couldn't make up their minds about him. Was he a damn fool as Clayton had said? Or didn't it mean anything, going in there for the school? Or—was he afraid?

Bony Bowan stayed in there at left tackle on the B Team. Maybe it was because the Brown was short on tackle replacements. Or perhaps it was because Buck Clayton hoped to see the varsity bat his ears so low he could use them as galoshes. The varsity, with the great, rushing Gil-lart at the spear-head and Janes unloading a steady stream of insults, proceeded to do just that. Or try to.

But this Bony just worked along implacably. He knew how to take care of himself handily and he had a way of staying deadly cool. And all the time, holding down that tackle spot, he kept feeding tips to the terribly sincere Sam Sinder, tipping him off to stuff, bucking him up. Sinder was getting a lot smarter. Even his style of drifting through to pluck down a pass had improved. And he'd always been deft as a juggler at that. That seemed to make Janes, the varsity end opposite, sorer and more savage than ever.

"Yep, Mrs. Janes' little pride and joy is just one heap of burnin' coals

inside," Chum Stark explained it to this strange Bony as they trudged down to the goal-line zone to give the regulars some practice at handling punts. "Y' see, Janey's one weakness is picking the pig's chemise outa the ozone. He's got a trick of dropping the big-money pass."

Bony Bowan half tripped over an up-turned clump of sod, a sure sign of dead weariness. Chum eyed him out of his own, good-natured, tomato-like face and saw the way the cheekbones of the other jutted and the way his skin was drawn like parchment over his teeth. It looked as if the cuss was cracking a little under the pounding the varsity was handing out. It had been a straight five days of heavy-duty drill, Clayton taking full advantage of the eleven-day period he'd had from the Burro game to the climax battle with the Big Blue on Thanksgiving Day.

"Yep," Chum went on, noting those things, "Janes is plenty sore about the way the Sinder kid is yanking down those pegs."

Again, Bony Bowan didn't seem to have heard. Finally he lifted his head. "Uh—yeah? I don't get it. Janes plays right wing. And Sam Sinder's a left wing."

CHUM SPAT some cotton. "Sam happens to be now. Last year, the old coach had him on the other end. He's one of those peculiar players who works equally well from either side. So-o, my fran', Janes has some worryin' to do about his job—if Sinders gets much hotter. Savvy?"

Bony nodded as if ten-pound weights were suspended from his chin. And Sam Sinder, playing like an inspired man, functioning with a new confidence, did get hotter when he was suddenly shifted to the varsity for a period later under the arc lights. Shifted to Janes' berth at right end. When that ball was ferried through the air, he sifted through time and again like a phantom to snag it. He made a fingertip catch over one shoulder without breaking his stride.

"Hey, is that Masked Smith of the

"Buccaneers out there?" cried some excited observer. He was referring to that left wing of the professional club in the adjoining city. "All he needs is that trick helmet!"

The whole thing had Janes burning up all right. When he was returned to his regular berth and the varsity put on a running attack, he went like a wild man. Gillart, the great threat-back, headed a storming assault on the left side of the second's line. There was no question of it now. Bony Bowan was growing sluggish under the pounding directed at him. But he still had his football savvy on tap.

Twice he dropped back into the roving position as Sinder raced and cut in to harry and hurry the varsity backs. Sinder played with real recklessness. He began to look like a thorn in the opposition backfield. And lank Bony, playing that drifting tackle, snatched one flat pass from Janes' arms. A moment later, he got out wide enough to make the ball-carrier on a double-reverse, with one of his blockers already removed by Sinder, head back inward to a tackler's arms. Bony started to drop back as the varsity shifted on its next play. Buck Clayton's whistle froze action for the moment.

"Hey, you!" he thumbed at Bony, addressing him for the first time since the Monday blow-off. "Maybe you're playing in a game all your own! Or are y' just getting ready to back into your grandstand seat!"

There were some chuckles. Bony looked very serious.

"It's the way you got to play it against a team like the Big Blue to give your end a freer hand at getting in there, Mr. Clayton. It leaves the tackle—when he drifts—ready to cover the wide end!"

"Yeah." Clayton's temper egged on by ambition, was shorter than ever. If he could just cop that final game, it would be an unbeaten season—and a real contract and rep for him as a coach. And this chump, who didn't know enough to show up at a game, telling him tactics. "Yeah? Say, maybe you're so good y' oughta

be over with the pro club, those Buccaneers—coaching. Maybe you could teach that Masked Smith his job, huh?"

"Maybe I could—I mean—uh—" Bony's mouth pinched up tight in his pale face. "Skip it. But you gotta handle a team like the Big Blue with a shifting defense. Because they got a shifting attack. They got those optional plays based on a key man—plays with two alternatives and the key man deciding which one it'll be. You must see what I mean, Clayton." He was in deadly, sincere earnest.

"That's a lot of high-sounding clap-trap the pros have cooked up! And to hell with it. The all-star college teams give 'em plenty of hell in those special games each season, don't they?" Clayton advanced threateningly. "Get back in there and hold down that tackle spot—and not as if y' were trying to jiggle a baby in its carriage!"

Both of them faced each other a little breathless after the long speeches. Bony seemed about to say more. A pleading look was on his face. Then he walked back in. Work ended after a guard thrust by the varsity.

"Don't be a chump, pal," Chum Stark said as they dragged themselves off to the showers. "Why make Clayton sore? You got a good chance of seeing action against the Blue even in the tackle spot."

"I don't wanta—"

"You don't want to what?" gasped Chum.

"I mean—I don't want to make Clayton mad," Bony explained, suddenly flushed. "I just want to see the Big Blue beaten."

"Why not have a hand in it personally?" Chum demanded practically.

SATURDAY, the next afternoon, was the last scrimmage slated. Some of the men were already saying Buck Clayton was a dam-fool slave-driver who was risking the chance of victory with injuries. The varsity took possession of the ball

and started to work fast. But no man was driving in too viciously that day, wisely; they'd even dropped the feud with this strange Bony. That was, with the exception of Janes; and his feud now seemed to be with the quiet but ever surer Sam Sinder.

Twice he roughed him unnecessarily. Bony Bowan's eyes tightened up a little and he gave Sinder the signal he was going to fade back from the line of the next play; did. And Sinder was in to gum up a spinner. The next time as he rushed an end sweep, Janes gave him the foot and tripped him hard. Bony was sucking his breath hard as he crouched in position. Janes eyed him across the scrimmage space and sneered.

Then the next play was snapping from a double-wing. Bony had already started to fade back, roving. Clayton whistled to call that roving. But Bony and Janes were too intent. And it was Janes cutting behind his own line to take the ball on an end-around-end. It was Bony who crossed back of his second-string line and charged out to block Janes' way. The latter hesitated to feint a dodge. And Sinder, trailing around from behind, brought him down. As he was released, he brought his knee down hard on the prone Sinder's head, so quickly it was unnoticed by all but Bony.

In a flash, Bony had yanked him up, cursing between set teeth. "Why, you dirty—"

Janes, crazed in his fight to hold his position, started a punch as players hustled up. Freeing him, Bony Bowan unleashed a whistling straight, short right himself. Janes's head was snapped backward as if on a spring. And it crashed into the face of Tim Swarth, varsity left tackle, one of those running up. The next instant, Clayton was between the two, roaring: "No brawling here, you damned monkeys! Back, now!"

Then they were forgotten for Swarth who was spewing blood from the mouth. The blow from Janes' head had splintered a tooth and driven it up into the gum, cutting an artery. They took him to the

field-house and Clayton had sense enough to cut the scrimmage for the season, then.

Sunday afternoon, playing some strange psychological hunch, Clayton took his squad into the city to see the Buccaneers, the pro outfit, clinch their league championship. Their great left end, Masked Smith, with that helmet with the chin piece, played a whale of a game. But he had to be taken out late in the third period, walking very slowly. The Raynor men lost interest after that.

"But he wasn't catching passes any better 'n our Sammy Sinder can," Chum Stark insisted. "Now was he, honest?" he demanded of Bony, who joined them at the hotel where they were to leave for their hideout camp before the Thanksgiving Day game.

Somebody said it was funny for a guy like Bony, who seemed to prefer to see games from the grandstand instead of the bench, not to have been there when the coach was handing out free tickets. Bony just smiled thinly and answered Chum's question.

"Don't think he was," he agreed. He seemed suddenly cheerful. And he went around the country hotel, where they stayed the three days before the game, as if a burden had been lifted from him.

THEN IT was the fateful day, bleak, gray and chill.

That was a game. Clayton's machine scored with dazzling, ripping thrusts in seven minutes. But as the second quarter opened, the Big Blue struck back through the skies, scored, but missed the try after touchdown. Then Raynor went into the air themselves after intercepting a pass at midfield and made it 14 to 6. Just before the half ended, Gil-lart blazed through center after a beautiful fake from the enemy twenty-five line and crossed again. It didn't seem important when Raynor missed the try for the extra point with the score at 20 to 6. And not a Raynor man forced out of the game yet.

Clayton used his second-string backfield and fresh wings, including Sinder for Janes, when the second half began. Things went along all right for half the third period. Then, like a thrust from the sky, the Blue began to strike from inside their own ten. It was swift, lancing stuff. The Brown Tide regulars were rushed in. The Blue was repelled once but took the kick and came on again. Raynor would seem to have the play doped when it would back-fire in their faces, be the reverse, or shift into something else entirely. Again the Tide held for downs in the shadow of their own goal and punted to safety. But again the Big Blue began to blaze off on another touchdown march.

Just before the period ended, Bony Bowan trotted up to the coach and crouched before him. "Coach, for gossakes, put in Sinder at left end and have the tackle play a drifting position!"

Clayton motioned him away brusquely. Unbelievably, Bony grabbed him and shook his shoulder. "Just try it!" he pleaded.

Then the fourth quarter was under way and the Blue had scored again to make it 20 to 13. The Brown Tide offensive fought bitterly. But they had to kick soon. Swarth, left tackle, broke through to muss a play. Even as the cheer for him welled, they were leading him out, blood gushing from his face. A blow in the face had jammed a splinter of that tooth, broken when Bony had punched Janes, further into the gum and severed another artery. He was finished for the day.

"Bowan! Bowan!" snapped Buck Clayton. "Go on in!"

But Bony Bowan stood like a man transfixed. Clayton barked at him again. Then the Bony chap began to shake his head.

"I can't, Coach! I—I've got some ripped shoulder cords."

There was sudden, frozen silence along that bench. Men couldn't believe their ears. Any one of them would have been glad to go in with a broken shoulder and say nothing about it.

"Go in anyway an' try to hold them!" Clayton got out.

Bony's head went woodenly from side to side. Frantic, Clayton grabbed him, forced him ahead, commanded him to play. Bony ripped loose.

"I—can't!" he croaked.

Clayton stood with popping eyes and sent in a third-string tackle. The Blue couldn't help but smell the weakness on that side and they worked it, marching on down the field.

"Play that driftin' tackle for gossakes!" Bony yelled to the coach.

Clayton laughed sardonically and tore his hat in two as the Big Blue kept ripping and slashing. Then they made another touchdown right through that left tackle spot and made the point after it to tie up the score. That was the ball game.

IT WAS Stuffy Dykes, the trainer, who struck the spark that ignited that blasted Raynor gang as they trooped into the dressing room. He yelled wildly, waving his pudgy arms: "Ripped shoulder cords me eye! It's a lie. He had no injuries when I examined him an' every man after the last scrimmage Saturday!"

The thing hit like a bombshell, stunned them, froze every man as he was. Then Chum Stark shook his head and said he'd never wanted to believe Bony was yellow. That set them on the latter like a pack. In that flaming instant, he was blamed for the injury to Swarth in the first place. And he'd refused to play for the Brown Tide.

Janes got in the first blow. Then half a dozen of the hysterical men were on him, smashing him down, hammering him to the floor. Clayton and his aides had to struggle for minutes before they could tear the half unconscious Bony free and rush him out of the room. They didn't want a corpse on their hands. A yellow man was enough!

The thing seeped out though it was officially denied for publication. And Bony Bowan should have been

a campus scandal for whom it would have been dangerous to show his face in public. But a break came that quickly centered attention elsewhere. A proposal was made to have unbeaten Raynor meet the local pro champs, the Buccaneers, in a game for charity. Raynor, hungry for a chance to recoup its glory, accepted. Arrangements were made. The game was scheduled for the second Saturday after that Thanksgiving game. And, after a brief respite, the Brown Tide went back into training, polishing up and dummy-drilling on their plays.

They should have been a disgruntled outfit, sluggish and discouraged over the championship record that had been torn from them. But they weren't. They were a bitter bunch. They felt they'd harbored a traitor in their ranks and they couldn't figure out why he should have been. But they were out to take it out on somebody—and in a big way.

It showed right from the kickoff before that packed municipal stadium. Packed to the gills with sixty thousand people even though the Buccaneer management had stated that the great Masked Smith would not be able to play because of injuries received in the last pro game. From the start, Raynor tacklers were slamming down men as if they'd been caught in bear traps. The Brown Tide's blocking was deadly efficient and furious. The ball-handling was quick, decisive and sure. Every man was on his toes, thinking and going hard and fast every moment.

The first period was scoreless, the Buccaneers plainly weakened by the loss of their crack end, Smith who wore a helmet like a mask. The Bucs made one terrific surge as the second period opened, penetrating inside the Raynor thirty. Then the stands were electrified as Gillart, at defensive fullback, back-tracked, leaped, and dragged out of the air a pass down the center. He wheeled in his tracks to straight-arm a would-be tackler, then was off. It was a great run he made that day.

It didn't stop until he had crossed the Bucs goal-line. And he placed for the extra point to make it 7-0.

Nothing more happened until the third period, just ding-dong, steel-hard, brilliant football. Then the city supporters of the Bucs were on their feet and howling. A man was coming in in the red-starred white shirt of the Bucs. They didn't need to see the number on his back. They knew him by the masked helmet he was never seen without.

It was blared over the public announcing system: "Smith going in for Garson at left end for the Bucs! Smith at left end!"

HE WASN'T an intimidating figure, this Smith, sort of slim and loose-jointed. But the Brown Tide knew he'd arrive almost at once. There was a new, surging confidence to the Buc play. They hit with a fresh snap, talking it up, laughing in a hard way. Gillart of Raynor out-did himself. But twice he was stopped cold by that masked end. Raynor punted. The next instant, it was an end-around-end, after what looked like a sure pass to Smith's side. And it was Smith himself on that end-around-end, going like something whipped by a catapult for nine yards. A spinner. Then a flat pass out to that Smith at end and he was off, eeling and ploughing. A pass down the center that looked as if it was going no place. But that Smith with the headgear like a piece of medieval armor dived in, skating on his chin, and wrapped his fins around it.

It was Smith, Smith, Smith. Raynor couldn't hold him. They thought they'd doped the Bucs' stuff pretty well. But repeatedly a play they were sure of would turn into something else. Over on that Buc bench, the coach chuckled.

"Nothing like that optional play stuff with an alternative on every play! And with Smith in to put the threat in our pass attack—even with that bad shoulder of his—hell, the college kids are sunk!"

The Bucs rushed across mid-field.

Smith captured a pass from two of the brown-shirted Raynor secondary for a twenty-yard gain. The Buc running back stabbed it on a single reverse for six more. Then that Smith suddenly flew into the end zone, cut in front of a guarding man, and pulled down another heave for a touchdown. The Bucs made the after-touchdown try good to make it 7-7.

The fourth quarter came. Substitutes began to come in for both sides. It was a battering game. Chum Stark appeared at guard for the Brown Tide. He seemed to do something for the team. Raynor made one first down. Another. But with a pass receiver in the clear, Gillart, the thrower, was ploughed under by that Masked Smith. Then Janes went on an end-around-end that had the Bucs fooled for a moment. One of them wasn't. He was Smith. He whipped back of his own line and nailed the tough Janes.

They had to lead Janes out. He was foggy-brained and two of his ribs had been cracked. He kept mumbling: "What did that Smith mean when he said: 'One score settled!' What did he mean?"

It was Sam Sinder who went in for Janes. Raynor had to punt. The Bucs came on again in the closing minutes. It was plain to every fan in the stands that the great Smith was slowing down from that injury. To the men on the field, what showed of his ashen face looked as if he were the relic of a man who'd gone through two seasons of football in one. But the Bucs were sure now, the big, pro club that was going to show its superiority and clinch it. They marched into their thirty-five. Their forty-five.

Just before the next play broke, Sam Sinder of Raynor barked something and motioned his own right tackle to drift back. And he himself was in the hipper-dipper of the pro backfield before they'd really gotten it turned on full speed. Still there was no gap for a wide sweep where he'd been because of that drifting tackle.

In the huddle, somebody on the Bucs said that that Snider was a smart cuss. Smith smiled bleakly. He ought to know.

The Buc attack began to slow down. They got to the Raynor forty. By that time, the college men were playing a drifting tackle on the other wing as well. Smith went wide and grabbed a flat pass. But before he could lateral it, that drifting tackle was camped on his shoulders. The Bucs did get to the Raynor twenty-six. Two passes failed, the receivers covered by that drifting defense. Raynor took it and punted desperately.

A GAIN the Bucs unloaded their spinners and reverses and assortment of passes. They were fighting time by them. Time and the Raynor right end, Sinder, who played the heady grid stuff of a pro-trained man. And that drifting defense was the answer to the optional play stuff the pros were shooting.

Smith grabbed one more pass and bored to the Raynor thirty-five. As he rose, Chum Stark let out a bellow. But the Bucs were already rushing back to execute one final play. And it failed.

Final score—7-7!

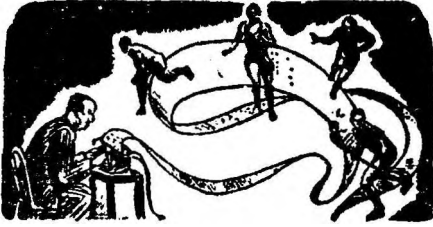
Chum Stark rushed over and pulled Masked Smith back from his team-mates, chuckling all the while. He worked that track helmet from the lean pro star's head. And the astonished Raynor men were looking at Bony Bowan, the man they believed had betrayed them. Clayton rushed onto the field.

"So—y' were a pro all the time! Workin' with us, huh, to sell us out! What did the Big Blue pay—"

Then Bony Bowan had him by the shoulder. "Mr. Clayton, I've been playing pro football to earn my way through college! I turned out for your squad—knowing I couldn't play—but because I wanted to do my bit to help make a great Raynor team!"

Men stood speechless. They began to understand things now. Sinder said he guessed that was why

(Continued On Page 91)



Dope From The Dugout

Facts and Fun from
The World of
Sports
by WILCEY EARLE

QUITE A GOOD IDEA

Colonel Lemuel Q. Stoopnagle, putting that inventive brain of his to work, has come up with a rather unusual football field.

It has been invented with the sole idea in mind of easing things when there's snow on the ground. The field will have black stripes instead of white ones.

AREN'T THEY DOPEY

Those quiz programs which clutter up the ether waves must think their guests and listeners are morons, especially when they dwell on sports.

Some of the questions which have been asked and have mystified us no end read as follows: "In what league is the Brooklyn Dodger Baseball Team—American, National or International?"; "Who is the heavyweight champion of the world?"; "Is Jack Dempsey a former wrestler, baseball player, tennis star or boxer?"

We've just gotten a preview of the tough question a quiz program is go-

ing to feature next week. Here it is. "In what year was the 1927 World Series played?"

ANYTHING COULD HAPPEN IN BASEBALL

Of all the big time sports, baseball, without a doubt, presents the most complex plays, plays that inveterate ball fans with long years of experience would say were impossible, do happen.

Take yourself, for instance. Do you think it is possible for an assist to read as follows: "Catcher—to leftfielder—to third—to catcher—to first?"

Of course you don't think it is possible—but it actually happened.

Ebbets Field, home of many zanyish plays, was the locale for this one. The Giants were battling the Dodgers. Len Koenecke, the Dodgers' centerfielder, who was later to be killed in a plane crash, came to bat with men on first and second and one out. Len laid a perfect bunt down towards third. The Giant backstop sprang at the ball, picked it up and fired it to the third baseman in an effort to get the man coming from second. It was a wild throw.

Koenecke meanwhile was fascinated by the action and stood wide-eyed at home plate with the bat in his hands. He had simply forgotten to run. Finally, the shouting of the fans, his mates and coaches, started him towards first. By this time, the men on first and second had advanced to second and third.

Meanwhile, the Giant leftfielder had retrieved the horsehide and fired it to the third baseman. Koenecke, still in a trance, tripped and fell while running to first. The third baseman threw the ball to first, but it was wide.

Koenecke, lumbering down to the initial hassock, was the most surprised man in the world when the umpire declared him out at first. The Giant catcher, backing up the play, caught the ball and flipped it to the first baseman, an instant be-

fore Koenecke arrived there.

Amazing, isn't it; but absolutely true.

TOO—TOO—TRUE

On Jacobs Beach in New York City, haunt of the fight denizens, the other afternoon, a group was talking about the punch-drunk fighter who opened a restaurant. The guy was a glutton for food. Practically ate up his profits.

"Not only is he punch-drunk," commented an unsympathetic bystander, "he's much-drunk!"

TOUGH BREAK

We were chatting with a couple of gentlemen who were very interested in following the horses, the other day—to be more specific, The United Street Cleaners' Association—and reminiscences of horse-racing came to mind.

One of the boys had a friend who bet twenty bucks on a 40-to-1 shot to win. The nag was a sure thing to cop the honors when it suddenly tripped and broke its leg.

The poor guy was frantic. All that easy money slipping thru his fingers. Went into a nearby bar and tried to drown his sorrows, but he just couldn't forget.

Finally, he staggered home in a drunken stupor and went to bed. So what happened? So this: All night long he had night-mares!

CAUSE FOR WORRY

Ethan Allen, former big league ball-player, tells of a character who approached Mel Ott and asked for a try-out with the Giants.

"Have you had any baseball experience?" asked Mel.

"I work in a side show," replied the character; "people throw baseballs at my head."

"Isn't that dangerous, people throwing baseballs at your head?" pressed Mel.

"Oh, I don't mind them; it's the people in the back that worry me. They throw darts at my rear!"

QUITE A DISTANCE INDEED

After a tireless, week-long struggle, Bob Hope finally managed to snare a ducat to the sell-out Rose Bowl game last year.

Bob's seat, however, was just a little removed from the scene of action. As a matter of fact, when he parked his car, the auto attendant gave him his change in pesos.

SPORTPOURRI

Genial Jack Dempsey signs no fewer than 500 autographs a day.... When George Jessel was a kid, he mascotted for the New York Giants, when John McCraw was at the helm.... Lightweight Freddie Addeo has six toes on his right foot. When he lets go a solid right, he really gets a toehold.... If football becomes popular in Russia, the Reds would undoubtedly be great punters. They are always kicking about something.... Abe Stein, the wrestler, is now taking voice lessons—no doubt to grunt and groan more sweetly.... Would you say that a pitcher who walks six guys in a row is all balled up?.... One of the queerest characters around wrestling rings in New York City is "Hatpin Mary." Grapplers are scared to death of her. Every time they land outside the ring, she jabs a hatpin into them.... The most beautiful femme tennis star to flash in the net firmament in the past two decades is Gertrude (Gussie) Moran.... A friend of ours bet on a nag that was so slow, the jockey had time to write his autobiography of the trip.

THAT WOULD BE TRAGEDY

Duke Rosenberg, Brighton Beach's topnotch wit, overheard the following repartee at one of Coney Island's handball pavilions Sunday.

A notoriously loose-moraled wench kept heckling a fellow playing handball. He asked her to stop because he couldn't concentrate on his game, but to no avail.

At long last, he stopped the game, stalked over to her in high dudgeon,

(Continued On Page 92)



HI LI- HI LOW!

by Tom Thursday

A fast man with the angles was Misdemeanor Murphy. But when he tried to pull a fix with the fastest of all sports — jai-alai — !

that remarks that I have no doubt been dead for at least ten years, then says, "You mean you have not heard of Jai Alai, pronounced Hi Li, where the customers get dizzy watching the *pelota* being tossed against the wall?"

"I do not care for handball," I say.

"Handball!" snorted Dinty. "Listen, this game makes handball look like it is standing still and all the players are Rip Van Winkle. It is an old Spanish custom, originating in the Basque country, and you can make bets on who is going to win, just like the pari mutuel systems at the racetracks."

"What," I say, "no crap games?" Crappers is my favorite indoor and even outdoor sport, although I have not won a dime since Grant played Lee for Richmond.

"Dice," says Dinty, "is very vulgar and uncouth and I do not truck with it. But Hi Li is all class and played by gentlemen for gents. So I will call for you at 7:30 tonight and show you what Hi Li is all about."

I'M JUST two days in Miami, where I'm going to spend a month's vacation if I can grab the gold supply at Fort Knox to pay prices, when I brush into Dinty Dennis. He gives me a welcome hello and after we toss the old chitter-chatter for a few moments, he says, "What are you doing tonight?"

"Well," I say, "first I'm going back to the Hotel Holdup and see if Jesse James is still the owner, then I thought I'd do a little reading, adding to my general culture."

"You will be my guest at Jai Alai, which opens tonight," says Dinty. "It is the world's fastest game. What speed; what grace; what great players!"

"What is this thing you speak of?" I ask.

Dinty rolls his eyes in a manner

I GO BACK to the hotel, where the day clerk is a blood relative of John Dillinger, and he tells me that there was a guy in to see me. "He is a red-nose gent," says the clerk, or cluck, "and he also has a pig puss."

That describes Misdemeanor Mur-



phy, who is Public Enemy No. 1 in my book, and I'm wondering how the rat's out of the clink, because he is a very undesirable character in the sporting world. He also associates with such bums as Honest Mike Homicide, who is in all the rackets that the cops frown upon as very unethical and *outré*.

Dinty calls for me that night and takes me out to a joint that is bigger than a blimp hangar, and puts me in a choice box seat right in the middle of everything.

"The game will start in a few minutes," says Dinty. "It is very simple to understand and if you want to make a few bets you can do it with the commissioners or through the *pari mutuel* windows."

"I do not understand this business," I say. "How do they play this monkey business?"

"They play singles or doubles," explains Dinty. "They hit the *pelota* or ball, up against that back wall, and it has a speed of more than 100 miles per hour, according to how hard it is hit. Each player keeps hitting it until one misses, and that is the guy who loses."

Dinty departs hence and I watch the first game, which is singles and the two players knock hell out of the *pelota* and I learn later that sometimes the ball hits a player in the nut and he becomes a treat for the embalmer. I can see that this is

a very dangerous game and I personally prefer ping pong or the old crappers.

On one of their hands they wear a big wicker thing that looks like a basket, but which they call a *cesta*, and I would like to have one full of dimes. I can see it is a very speedy game but I do not see any sense to it because they have the ball in the first place and if I had it I would hold it as I do not care for such foolish exercise.

WELL, I am beginning to get a little kick out of the game when some lug slaps me on the back just as a player named Manuel Lopez, a very pure Basque, is beating his playmate with speed and a load of dispatch. I have a small wager on this Lopez senior and when I am slammed on the back I do not care for the interruption. Dinty tells me that Lopez is a new player and the odds on him are 2 to 1, so I buy a two-buck ticket for him to win and he does.

Then I turn around to see who the lug is who has slammed me on the back and find it is Misdemeanor Murphy, the arsenic in anybody's soup.

"Well, well, well!" says smallpox. "If it ain't my old and true palsy-walsy. Welcome to Hi Li, and I see that you have already picked a winner and I congratulate you."

"If it is the same to you," I say, "I do not desire to be disturbed. Besides I am here on pure pleasure, as the guest of Mr. Dinty Dennis, who does not like to have shady characters cluttering up the joint."

He slaps me on the back again and sits down beside me and I move my pocketbook into my right shoe as Misdemeanor would steal the whiskers off a tomcat. "I always get a kick out of you," he says; "you remind me of Bob Hope, Jack Benny, and Wilcey Earle."

"You remind me of Alcatraz and Sing Sing," I say, "and see if you



can get any humor out of that. And by the way, what are you doing now, besides being out on parole?"

"I am a expert lapidary," says Murphy.

"I do not understand how you can swipe laps," I say.

"You do not know what a lapidary is, I see. A lapidary is a gent who deals in fine gems, like diamonds. Look," and he shows me some glittering stones in a chamoise bag.

I am about to call the cops as I have no doubt that some jewelry store has been robbed and then Murphy puts a three-karat diamond in my hand and says, "This is the one I'm going to give Miguel Lopez; ain't she a glittering beauty?"

Well, I would not know a diamond from a plate of Georgia grits and I say, "How much is this thing worth in legitimate money?"

"It's a very great bargain at four grand," he says, "but I am going to give it to Manuel Lopez as a very special gift, and besides Honest Mike Homicide is very much interested in Lopez's career."

"The same way Joe the Stalin is interested in the career of the atom bomb," I say.

Murphy ignores my remark, and goes on, "Now, if any of my very good friends, like you, would like to get a nice gem at what is positively a super-wholesale price, I will make them a proposition. Meantime, I must call at the hotel of Manuel Lopez and give him this little present."

After the skunk leaves, which purifies the atmosphere promptly, I rush around to see Dinty Dennis and tell him about Murphy's plot to bribe Lopez. Dinty gets red, white and even pink in the face and states it is too bad that Pretty Boy Floyd and Al Capone had to croak when bums like Misdemeanor Murphy continue to breathe.

"But don't worry," says Dinty, "I will out-plot that yegghead and all will be well—for everybody but Murphy."

AFTER THE games that night Dinty and me wait outside in a parked car until Misdemeanor leaves Lopez's room, and we note that he is looking very happy, indeed. As soon as he walks out of sight we go upstairs and call on the Senor Manuel Lopez, and find him admiring a beautiful diamond ring on his finger.

Dinty makes a few potent remarks and then we make a date to meet Lopez the next morning in order to thicken the plot. We find the Hi Li player waiting in the lobby when we get there and then we all go around for a visit to Jake the Jeweler on Flagler street.

Jake the Jeweler gets his trick glass out, sticks it in his right eye, and gives the gem a snappy look-see.

"Well, now," says Jake the Jeweler, "this is all very interesting. In fact, I wonder what they did with the rest of the soda-pop bottle that this hunk of glass came from?"

"You mean it is a cluckeroo?" asked Dinty.

"It is not even a Zircon," says Jake the Jeweler. "However, since you tell me about the dastardly plot against honest sport I think I can do something that will make this Misdemeanor Murphy whinny with rage. So if you'll please wait a few minutes I will go back in my shop and do a little magic work on this glassware."

After Jake the Jeweler leaves, we have a little talky-talky with Manuel Lopez. Dinty would like to know if Lopez would actually throw a game for the racketeers in return for the ring. The senior rolls his dark eyes in horror and says he was going to double-cross Murphy and then tell the cops.

Soon Jake the Jeweler returns and shows us the ring and it looks much better, and then we hatch out a little plot that spells no-good for Brother Murphy.

"This should teach him a lesson that he will not learn in college," says Jake the Jeweler. "In fact, this will break his heart, or whatever he has for a ticker."

That night I go out to the Biscayne Dog Track and see Misdemeanor Murphy with a fistful of green moola. He is very happy and gives me the usual bust on the back.

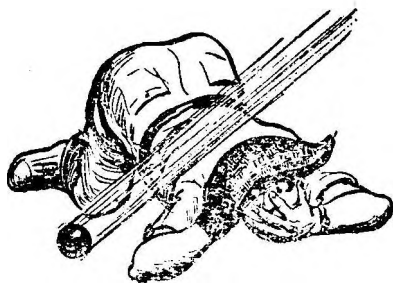
"Play Galloping Ghoul in the third race," he says. "I have won three straight races with my system and you can't lose."

"What is this system," I ask, "or have you put a diamond ring on the dog's toes? Or perhaps you have bribed the mechanical rabbit to get fallen arches en route around the track?"

"My system," says Murphy, "is original and also scientific and likewise very simple. I find out from the trainers what kind of meat the hounds had for lunch before they race."

"I do not understand," I say. "What is this food stuff you speak about?"

"Well," says Murphy, "if a greyhound eats a pound of plain beef



steak he is not happy and not in prime condition; but if he partakes of a pound of top sirloin he cannot lose."

"What do you have to give the trainers for this very choice inside dope?" I ask.

"I have promised each and every one a nice little ring," says Murphy, "with the heartfelt compliments of Honest Mike Homicide. Now, put your jack on Galloping Ghoul seeing he cannot lose because I have saw him eat the pound of top sirloin with my own eyes."

Murphy walks off to the pari mutual windows to place his bets and I start doping out my personal system, which is likewise original and highly scientific. I figure the winner with my eyes closed and it just takes a second and the dog I pick ain't Galloping Ghoul but entitled Leaping Louse.

MISDEMEANOR returns and we watch the race together and soon I note that Galloping Ghoul is troubled with either smallpox or something because he is very bored with the race and stops now and then to do a little sniffing along the fence.

"This is very strange," says Murphy, "very strange, indeed."

"Who is that dog about ten lengths in the lead?" I ask, as I do not see as good as when I used to gaze at Mae West.

"That is a terrible tramp named Leaping Louse," says Misdemeanor, "and he should be four miles from last, according to my private infor-

mation. Yes, this is very strange, indeed."

"Thanks for your tip on Galloping Ghoul, anyway," I say.

"I am sorry I tout you wrong," says Murphy, "But do not lose faith because I will give you a winner in the next race."

"How much does this tramp Leaping Louse pay?" I ask.

"The bum is paying off at 100 to 1," says Misdemeanor. "Why do you ask?"

"Because," I say, "I have two bucks on this terrible tramp and I will now go to the windows and collect my two hundred pieces of cabbage."

This makes Murphy dizzy and he wants to know what fortune teller I give my business to or have I got a system that is better than his.

"Why," I say, "it is all very simple and likewise original and highly scientific. I just use my eenie—mee—nie—mince—moe system."

"What can this system be?" Misdemeanor would like to know.

"I just take the program," I say, "find the race which is coming up, shut my eyes and run my fingers up and down the list of dogs. When my finger stops, I look at the name of the dog and that is the winner."

"I bid you good evening," says Murphy; "I do not wish to converse with nuts."

"And nuts to you," I say.

WELL, MANUEL Lopez does not play again at the Hi Li for three days but Misdemeanor Murphy makes a little call on the player two days before he plays again and they have a little chitchat. Lopez tells us all about it—later.

"I have heard strange things about that diamond ring I give you," says Murphy, "and I would like to see it once again to admire its beauty."

Lopez takes it off his finger and hands it to Murphy and Misdemeanor remarks, "You have no doubt had it cleaned and polished and it looks very bright, indeed. Thank you

for letting me see it again and I bid you good evening."

I go into the publicity office and find Dinty Dennis buried in smiles.

"How is everything going?" I ask.

"Everything is going fine," says Dinty, "and very soon Murphy will also be going but not so fine."

The next morning I am in Lopez's hotel room with Dinty and we are hiding behind the curtain when Misdemeanor comes in.

"A very good morning to you, Senor Lopez," says Murphy.

"Ah, and a good morning to you, senor," says Lopez. "What is it, please, that you would wish?"

"Well, now," says Misdemeanor, "I have a little favor to ask, but it will get you fifty dollars for nothing so you can't lose but only win. In fact, an old girl friend of mine, one that I love very dearly, has just come to Miami and I want to give her a present of a diamond ring; but all I have on hand are four-karat rings and she has set her heart on a three-karat. So, if you will accept a four-karat ring for a three-karat I will be very happy, indeed."

"Ah, but senor, this will break my heart," says Lopez. "I have love this ring you give me and I will be the most unhappy to give it back."

"Well, now," says Murphy, "I will make it a bonus of \$100, along with the extra karat stone, which shows you how much I adore this girl friend of mine. But first I would like you to come around and have my old pal, Diamond Joe, take a look at the ring so he can offer some suggestions about a new mounting."

PRETTY SOON they leave and Dinty and me give them time to get in the elevator and then we run down the stairs and go out the back entrance. Five minutes later we go into the little shop of Diamond Joe, which is only two blocks from the hotel, and find Murphy and Lopez a moment ahead of us.

Murphy gives us a surprised but big hello and Dinty says we just happen to step in to see of Diamond

(Continued On Page 88)

The set-up
was clear
as crystal



I Dived For You!

by Mal Kent

It was a slick set-up, a fixed fight where the man arranged to lose knew nothing about the frame-up!

GENTLEMAN Jim Braden had that far-away look in his eyes as he sat by the window, doodling endlessly on a scratch pad, and Corey knew that something was worrying the Gent. You didn't ask Braden what was up at a time like this, you just waited; after awhile he'd look up and spill it.

The Gent put finishing touches on his doodle and coughed slightly. Corey put down the crossword puzzle he'd been working desultorily and waited for the Gent's revelation. Braden knew his onions for all his aristocratic airs and his quiet manner; he glanced at his watch briefly and turned it a couple of minutes ahead. It was always running slow,

but he wouldn't have it fixed.

"We shall entertain a visitor in a few moments, Corey," he said. "An uncouth specimen, rightly called Weasel Mink—no doubt, his full name was Minkowicz, or something in that line."

"Yeah," said Corey, "the Weasel used to be connected with Atkins and his mob."

"Ah, yes—the late and hardly lamented Jeffrey Atkins, who chose to have a fatal accident just before his malfeasances were about to be uncovered." Braden added a few more touches to the doodle. "I did not like the way you vanquished Larsen last year, Corey. There was something distinctly wrong about it."

"How come? That couldn't have been a dive, Gent. I hit him solid, and I'm not so dumb I can't tell when I've made a clean knockout."

"No, no, you gave him the *coup de grace*; Mr. Atkins was no fool, he would not have engineered anything obvious. Moreover, Larsen did not put on a bad show in any sense of the word. . . . And that is precisely it, Corey; I have a growing certainty that Larsen should not have lost when he did. The time wasn't right for a knockout—in a later round, I believe you might have beaten him, or won a decision...there is something suspicious about this."

The doorbell chimed, and a moment later a shifty-looking person was admitted. Weasel Mink looked his name; he had the slippery air of the weasel and the appearance of a shabby mink. He slid into a chair without invitation and took out a package of cigarettes, lighting one with hands that trembled.

"I come to do you a favor, Gent," he whinnied.

"For which you expect a consideration, of course," the Gent told him.

"Sure. I didn't have to tell you nothin'; there ain't any heat on me, see. I coulda kept my mouth shut."

"Thus," the Gent observed, "your actions are to be regarded in the light of human kindness, with the expectation of your virtue being rewarded." He ran his eyes quickly over the sprawled figure in the chair. "And since your fortunes seem to be momentarily on the ebb..."

"I was double-crossed," Weasel muttered. "That fifth race..."

"You should have learned by now that no horse can go as quickly as the capital you place on him... Very well, Mink; what you disclosed on the telephone aroused my interest." The Gent took out his wallet and slid off a few bills, laying them down on the table beside Weasel. "Let us consider this as an option; precisely how much more is to be added will depend on the value of your information to us."

"It'll be plenty," assured the other,

his tone brightening at the sight of currency. "This wouldn't of come out if Atkins hadn't had a accident, but some guys got nervous when the big shot popped off." He leaned forward and dragged on his cigarette. "I guess you know that there was big money put on Corey last time he met Larsen; well, this time the bets are on Larsen."

The Gent shot a look at his fighter. Corey blinked and said, "Hell, that's crazy, Gent; I can take him."

Weasel grinned unpleasantly. "That's what you're supposed tuh think. But supposin' I tell you that that last fight was fixed?"

BRADEN shook his head slowly. "I would find such a statement difficult to believe. Larsen has a good record, and there was no reason for him to throw a light.

Weasel snickered. "That was the slick part of it; he didn't. Larsen never knew he was supposed to lose. Atkins never did anythin' in a crude way—he just saw to it that Larsen was trained wrong."

"Ah," breathed the Gent. "It begins to make sense.

"Yeah, but that was the angle. Atkins and Tumbrell—he was Larsen's manager then—studied pictures of Corey's fights until they had every point of Corey's style down pat. Then they trained Larsen to work against Corey's style—only they gave him wrong steers on a few important things so he'd be crossed up at the right time. He'd expect Corey to do one thing, and he ready for it—only that wasn't the thing Corey did at that time at all. So Corey got him off guard—he was bound to get caught. And, besides, they didn't steer Larsen on to any important weakness. They kept Larsen plugging away on a line where he wouldn't have a chance of winning. Sounds screwy, doesn't it? Me, I'd think—hell, suppose Larsen was lucky? But Atkins figured that was a better gamble, and it worked."

Braden nodded. "I begin to see. Atkins did not promote the wagers as a guaranteed proposition; he did

(Continued On Page 98)

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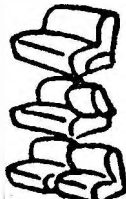
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(Continued From Page 84)

Joe had any ancient Danish or Mongolian coins, as Dinty is a collector, and would give three ears, if he had them, to get certain scarce items in the coin line.

Then Misdemeanor hands Diamond Joe the ring and the burglar gives it a slow once-over.

"Now this," says Diamond Joe, "is a beauty. A genuwine, real beauty of A No. 1 quality and with plenty of blue-white snap and fire. It would be valued at about four grand in normal times, when the depression is depressing, but today it should be worth five grand."

"You sure about this Joe?" asks Murphy. "I mean, are you very positively sure?"

"Am I sure! Listen to him, will you? What do you take me for, a hamburger vendor or maybe short order cook? I am a first class, grade-A lapidermist, that's what I am."

Murphy has a very puzzled look on his puss, and I can see that he does not know what the score is, which is exactly, Lopez 1000—Murphy .000, if not less.

"Well, now," says Murphy to Lopez, "seeing how much you like this ring and seeing how much I care for my girl friend, I will give you \$500 bonus, along with the four-karat stone. I know you do not want me to disappoint the little lady, whose heart will break if she does not get this ring as soon as possible."

"Ah, senor," says Lopez, "I feel for you strongly but, senor, I cannot bear to part with it right away. So, if you please, senor, I ask you one big favor."

"What it this one big favor you ask?"

"You will please be so kind, senor, as to let me wear it for just one more day, and then I will give it back to you because, senor, I confess I need the \$500 in cash you offer to send to my poor old mother back in Madrid, Spain. You will do this for me, please, senor?"

"Well, now," says Murphy, "this is very unusual but since you are such a fine boy and a real pal, I guess it

will be okay. So I will see you at your hotel tomorrow."

That afternoon I am in Lopez's room with Dinty Dennis and the three of us have a little chitter along with the chatter and then we all pay a visit to Jake the Jeweler. He greets us all with a cheery smile and a few well-bred winks and nods and then takes the ring to the back of his store for a little necessary monkey business.

He comes back in about fifteen minutes and passes the ring to Lopez and then we all thank Jake the Jeweler for his kind and considerate assistance and that night we are at the Hi Li games.

LOPEZ IS playing in the first set of doubles and he not only busts the *pelota* against the wall like a super-champ but causes Misdemeanor or Murphy to froth at the gills from impure rage. In fact, Lopez wins the game instead of throwing it, as advertised to Honest Mike Homicide and his fellow racketeers, and naturally Murphy is very upset, to say the least.

"Why, the dirty crook," I hear Misdemeanor mumble. "The dirty, double-crossing crook!"

"Is there something the matter with the games?" I ask Murphy, but before he can answer a beefy-mug guy comes up behind Misdemeanor, and remarks, "Do you desire to fall in Biscayne bay or do you want to shoot yourself, in person?"

Then he walks away and leaves Murphy with a very red face to match his beakus, which is always very red from unnatural causes. He turns to me and says, "That is Honest Mike Homicide and he is all sored up about a little matter that has not turned out okay. So maybe I will have to get out of town for a few days so he can get back his good nature."

"What seems to be the chief matter?" I ask.

"That Lopez does not understand me and makes a terrible mistake when he wins tonight."

"This is all very sad," I say. "But

what about that ring you give Lopez?"

This brightens up Murphy and he says, "You will please take a little walk with me because if Honest Mike Homicide's boys see you with me they will not waste any lead as they do not desire to annoy strangers. I must first see Lopez and get the ring ahead of time because I think my girl friend would be happy if she got it right away."

So we go to Lopez's dressing-room and Manuel says, "Ah, senior, is it not a shame that I play with such, what you call lousy players, that I

cannot do as you say? But next time, senior, I will show you what is what."

"You will please what me no whats," says Murphy. "I have come for the ring ahead of time because I must leave Miami right away account of my Aunt Matilda is very ill over in Tampa. So you will kindly let me have the ring and here is the \$500 I promised you as a bonus."

"I am very sorry for your Aunt Matilda," says Lopez, "and I will be kind to you and let you have the ring before tomorrow. Here it is, kind senior, and I hope your nice seniorita is happy with it and treats you with very much love and kisses."

Murphy grabs the ring and tosses Lopez five hundred-buck bills, then pushes me out the door. "I must now call on Diamond Joe to get a little loan on this ring," says Murphy.

"But it is now midnight," I say, "and is not Diamond Joe closed or is he like a police station, open all night?"

"We will go to his home," says Misdemeanor, and pretty soon we are in a taxi and ten minutes later we stop in front of a small, white bungalow in the northwest section of town.

Murphy rings the bell like a four-alarm fire and pretty soon a light appears on the front porch, and then Diamond Joe pokes his knob out and I can see that he was in the middle of a bad dream.

"What is the idear?" says Diamond Joe. "I do not receive anybody in the middle of the night."

(Continued On Page 90)

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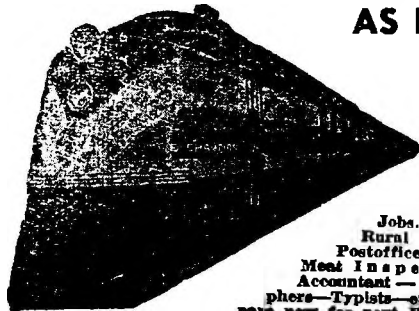
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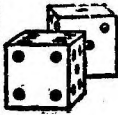
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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 89)

"I am very sorry," says Murphy, "but this is a very extreme emergency and I am suddenly called away because of the sickness of my dear Aunt Matilda. So," says Misdemeanor, "I would like you to take one more look at this stone and see if you think it is as good as you said it is."

"Come in," says Diamond Joe, "but this midnight business will cost you extra. Besides, I have already appraised this stone and they do not change over night or for a million years."

WE STEP inside and Diamond Joe tucks his red bathrobe around his fat belly and then turns on a bright light. He puts the glass to his eye and pretty soon we hear a 'H'mm' and a 'Huh.'

"What is this you are talking about?" says Murphy. "I cannot understand what you say."

"This is very funny," says Diamond Joe, "and most peculiar. When I look at this stone before I see a perfect blue-white gem of the very first class, and it is in the same setting. Yes," says Diamond Joe, "it is most peculiar."

"I do not understand what you are saying," remarks Misdemeanor. "And you should not josh me when my Aunt Matilda is waiting for me to race to her bedside."

"Well," says Diamond Joe, "it is like this. I see a small piece of low grade glass, maybe from a window pane, and it is worth about a dime. This is most peculiar."

"I have been robbed!" says Murphy.

"You should call the cops," I say. "Are you not a taxpayer and entitled to police protection?"

"You will please not mention cops," says Misdemeanor. Then we get back into the taxi, and he tells the driver to go to the Florida East Coast R. R. station. When we reach there, he says to the ticket agent, "I desire a one-way ticket to Montreal!"

Corey to do one thing, and be ready

GRIDIRON OUTCAST

(Continued From Page 71)

Bony had coached him. And they realized now that he had been injured in that last pro game as Masked Smith, that his alibi for not going in was genuine. Too, that what he'd taught Sinder had cost his pros the victory today. Clayton wasn't quite sold.

"But this playing under two names?"

"Bowen is my own. But my brother is an assistant coach with the pros. So we decided to have me use 'Smith' so people couldn't say I'd gotten my job through pull. I'd have given my heart if I could have afforded to play for Raynor and—"

"You've been practicing twice a day, with us and with the pros at night?" Clayton gasped as full realization came to him. "Yes, you have! But why didn't you tell me the circumstances?"

"I was afraid—well, that you mightn't want me around if you knew I was a pro!"

CLAYTON began to grin. He reached out and grabbed Bony's muddy mitt. "You were right about playin' a drifting defense with a rovin' tackle or two against the Blue! If we had, we'd have won! That was proved today when Sinder went in and started that system. Now—"

"Thanks," Bony said huskily.

"Want you around?" Clayton went on. "Hell, man, you won't play pro ball and half kill yourself next season if I can persuade you to serve as a coach under me!"

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I DIVED FOR YOU

(Continued From Page 89)

not do anything to suggest that there would be an arrangement. He merely persuaded various associates to place their money where he wanted it. Ingenious... But what, may I ask has this to do with tomorrow night's fight?"

"Plenty," said Mink, "plenty. It worked so good, they decided to try it again in reverse."

Corey snorted. "Yeah? They got another think comin', then; I haven't been mis-managed," he looked at the Gent, "have I, Braden?"

The Gent picked up his pencil and got to work on the scratch pad; he tore off the filled sheet, crumpled it and tossed it expertly into the wastebasket, started afresh. The set-up was clear as crystal. "Then, if I follow you correctly, Mink, Larsen is now accurately informed on Corey's mannerisms, while we will be in the dark. Larsen has been training in secret; our only source for study has been the last fight, designed to mislead us. The strategy then, was a plan to make Larsen champion."

"Wait a minute," Corey broke in, "how could this happen without telling Larsen that he was taken for a ride in that fight?"

"Tumbrell had a heart attack a week or so later, remember?" Weasel Mink lighted another cigarette. "After he died, they found out that Tumbrell had double-crossed Larsen, but they kept it quiet. Atkins kept in the background; Larsen still doesn't know the full story."

"Fascinating," said the Gent, "quite fascinating. And how is it, Mink, that you uncovered such a deep-laid conspiracy?"

Mink's hand trembled. "I—I can't tell you that—it don't make no difference to you, anyway. And if you don't believe me, I'll let you in on the next move. Corey's due to get a phone call from Larsen—that is, someone will say he is Larsen and it'll sound like Larsen's voice..."

He broke off as the telephone jingled. The Gent picked it up. "Yes, who is this? A friend of Corey's—you wish to speak with him? Just a

(Continued On Page 94)

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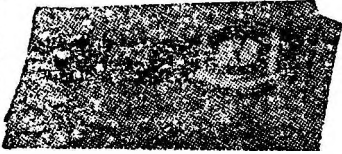
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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 98)

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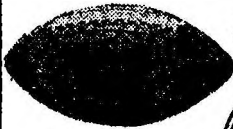
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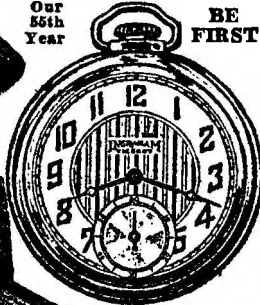
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moment." He crossed the room, picked up another telephone and pressed an intercom button, then nodded to Corey, listened as his fighter picked up the receiver.

"Corey? This is Larsen. I'm calling from a phone booth and you better not try to trace this. Look, pal, I'm just telling you somethin'; I dived for you last time, but I ain't doin' it again tomorrow, see. This fight is going to be on the level, and I'm givin' you a lacin'." There was a sharp click on the other end of the receiver.

The Gent manipulated the controls, spoke to the clerk in the lobby; he had code questions devised for such occasions. There was a wry smile on his face when he put the the instrument down. "Very well, Mink," he said. "Your information has been quite valuable." He peeled several more bills off his roll and put them on top of the others. "I think you will find this satisfactory."

"Sure, sure. Thanks, Gent; I knew you'd be generous. Any time I can help..." Braden ushered him out.

Corey looked at him with haunted eyes. "Jeepers, Gent, what are we goin' to do? I'll be in the dark, with him knowing everything about me."

Braden slapped his shoulder. "Corey, when you first started fighting, how did you work?"

"Why...I just did everything I could and watched the guy I was fighting."

"Precisely. And that is what you will do tomorrow night. Do you believe in me, Corey?"

"Sure, Gent; you never let me down before, but..."

"And I am not letting you down now. Believe me this time, too, Corey; you can beat Larsen, no matter what style he is using. It will not be easy, but you can do it.

"Just remember this, Corey—if there is a conspiracy afoot, *this visit and that phone call is part of it.*"

Corey looked at him a moment, then grinned. "I get it—a sort of foul to my morale, huh?"

Exactly."

(Continued On Page 98)

I DIVED FOR YOU

(Continued From Page 94)

LARSEN looked confident, as Corey went out to meet him in the first round, with the Gent's final words ringing in his ears. "Remember, Corey, this Larsen is a clean fighter; he doesn't know about any foul play behind the scenes. He will whip you if he can, but as far as he knows, this is an honest fight." The challenger danced around the ring much like Jersey Joe Walcott, but he didn't have Walcott's over-caution; the round consisted of feints and counter-feints as the two light heavy-weights sized each other up, neither landing any important blows.

"They're counting on you to be confused and undecided," the Gent whispered to Corey as he sat on his stool. "Use your head, but don't be afraid to go for an opening."

Sure, thought Corey, that's easy to say, but... The bell broke into his thoughts and he moved out again. Maybe I ought to change my style, he thought; he'd never been much of a dancer, preferring to mix it up and tire his opponent out. But now he gave Larsen a run for his money, while the fans started to make suggestions for action.

"Keep it up for awhile," said the Gent. "He didn't expect this."

"I want to fight him, Gent," Corey demurred.

"Very well, then—start out dancing, then shift suddenly."

Corey nodded, and went into the third, continuing the footwork. But it was Larsen who shifted suddenly, unleashed a blasting attack that took Corey by surprise and brought him against the ropes. He counter-punched, landed a couple by Larsen shook them off and kept boring in until the ref separated them.

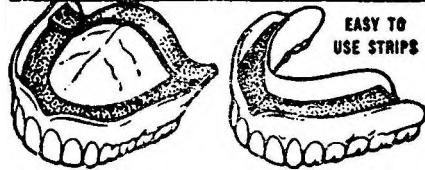
He went back into the dance, trying to figure it out, until the bell rang.

"Watch his right shoulder," the Gent said. "He telegraphs with that."

Corey nodded and went back to work, anger rising in him at the thought of this behind-the-scenes

(Continued On Page 96)

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SUPER SPORTS

(Continued From Page 95)

play. For a moment, it got the better of him and his attack was premature and ill-planned; it cost him heavily as a barrage of punches rained on him and he found himself lying down, heard the count start.

At six he was up, his control back, but Larsen had gone into the defensive and left no opening. Nor could he find a hole in that defense for the next two rounds. Larsen was clearly ahead on points.

Someone came down the aisle and handed the Gent a note. He read it briefly, then smiled. "Corey," he said, "snap out of it and listen. This is what I have been waiting for. The big wagers are on you, not Larsen."

"You mean..."

"Don't worry, Corey; it is all right. I will explain, later; but now, this is your fight to win. Forget about everything but winning."

The Gent radiated confidence, and Corey found it was catching. He watched Larsen's shoulder, saw he could read it at important moments even though Larsen was handing out terrific punishment. He feinted with the left and drew out an attack, then fell back momentarily.

It looked like a retreat, and Larsen bit; Corey shifted and was taking the aggressive. The fans roared as the fight became a slug-fest, neither man giving ground. Then, suddenly, Corey danced back; it wasn't time yet. Larsen could use a breather, but Corey knew his advantage in letting Larsen take it now.

"Good work," the Gent approved. "That took brains to stop when you did; another fighter would have tried to finish it then and there."

When the eighth started, Larsen was slowing down. Corey danced around him making him miss a couple. Then Larsen's shoulder dropped slightly. Now! He sidestepped a money-making swing, let loose an explosion of left jabs, followed by a battering right, then brought his left up for the kill. Larsen tried desperately to cover, but he was dazed and another powerful right stopped him cold. He crumpled to the canvas.

(Continued On Page 97)

(Continued From Page 96)

At eight he was pushing himself up, but he couldn't make it; he slumped down again and the fight was over.

IT WAS AN ingenious plan," the Gent said, his pencil flying over the paper rapidly. "The whole purpose was to destroy your morale, and confuse you to such an extent that you would not know what to do. You would hesitate at the wrong moments, thinking Larsen knew what you were going to do, and fumble—while he was proceeding with complete sureness. And this would become worse each round, for every setback you had would discourage you more. In the end, it would be an easy victory, because you would have defeated yourself."

"But what about all this malarky the Weasel was telling us about the last fight?"

"I checked up on that. Larsen was mishandled all right, but not the way in which we were told. He had an accident two days before the fight, and I suspect he as suffering from a slight concussion. Tumbrell sold out in that he did not report the injury, and the preliminary examination did not show up anything suspicious; that is why the wagers were so high against Larsen."

"But the bets were on me this time."

"Exactly. And that is where Weasel saw his opportunity, he came here with this story about an elaborate fix, and arranged for that telephone call. Then he took the money I supplied him, and bet it on Larsen, with large odds; he would have made quite a take had his scheme worked."

"Golly," said Corey, "that was slick. It almost worked, too; I sure was worried, Gent. If you hadn't found out about the betting being for me, I don't know..."

"Corey, I must confess something to you; I lied to you then. While it turns out that the odds were as I thought they would be, I did not know. I merely arranged to have a message brought to me, just in case you were in trouble. That was a

blank piece of paper." He tore off the sheet and started another. "I hope you will forgive my deceit."

"Sure, any time you want to pull something like that, Gent."

"Never again, Corey. No, that sort of thing can only work once."

"But how did you know the Weasel's story was a phoney, Gent?"

Braden smiled. "That telephone call; it came much too opportunely. I checked on it, and found that it was coming from downstairs in the lobby. ... Even so, Weasel's plan was good; it was the technique of the big lie. The story sounded improbable, but there was just enough plausibility about it to make it halfway believable, to make you wonder. And that was all that was needed... even a slight doubt in a fighter's mind is enough to throw him off."

"You see," he laid down the pencil and tapped his fingers, "there were a few elements of truth in it. Larsen had been mishandled in the last fight; your victory then was somewhat peculiar. Larsen had been well handled this time. He had studied your method of fighting—but no more than any fighter studies his opponent. Actually, you knew as much about Larsen as he knew about you—but you were made to mistrust your knowledge."

Corey clenched his fists. "If I ever get hold of that Weasel..."

Braden smiled. "I am afraid Mr. Mink is going to find himself somewhat unpopular. You see, I discovered that he worked out this plan with Big Joe Parsons, the heir to Atkins' syndicate. So I tipped off Mr. Parsons that the Weasel had worked both sides of the street—obtained capital from me as well as him, then told us the facts in the case and bet his roll upon you."

"If I estimate Big Joe Parsons correctly, his sense of humor is not large enough to take this in the spirit of good clean fun; I fear that he is going to ask Weasel ungently to return the money he obtained and turn over his winnings as well."

Corey laughed. "Do you think Big Joe'll believe Weasel when he says he hasn't a dime?"

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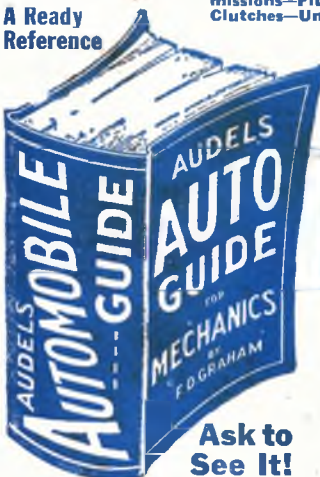
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