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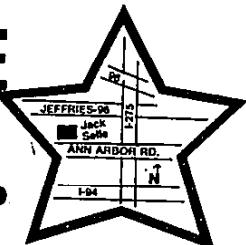
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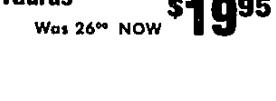
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# Penalties and Points

by John Bozzo

Ever since I played football in high school, the whole year seemed to revolve around the gridiron season.

Football season was when the greatest amount of effort, concentration and activity took place. The rest of the year was spent in preparation.

It wasn't that I looked forward to the start of the season so much, it was just that I dreaded that first day of practice.

We would practice twice a day, three hours each session, for three weeks. My junior year we worked out three times a day.

Those few weeks in August always seemed to be the hottest and muggiest of the year. I knew I was in for a long day when the temperature sign on the bank would show 85 degrees at 8 a.m. as I drove to the first practice session.

From 1966 through 1969 we weren't allowed the extra week of conditioning workouts in shorts and T-shirts that the high school players get now. We wore complete uniforms, including pads, and had contact drills the first day.

No matter how I tried to ignore the calendar, I knew football time was drawing near. My body would tell me. Around late July my knees would begin to ache, my neck would get sore and I would start throwing forearm shivers into walls.

LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL athletes are probably now going through some of the same things I did prior to the season. On Monday, Aug. 14, football players open with a week of conditioning drills. The other prep sports are sure to begin practice soon.

Many football players are probably watching football exhibition games. Just as many are likely to have ignored the pre-season games trying to keep football out of their mind another week.

I can't explain why I kept going out for football those four years of high school, plus two grade school seasons. The best part of the season came when it was over. There's a lot of suffering and sacrifice that goes into playing sports. During my first five years the only reward I received was splinters.

I sat the bench. I worked as hard as everyone, but I was small. My position was lineman and I was only 120 pounds as a freshman. Each of the next two years I put on 20 pounds so that I was 160 as a junior.

My playing time was just enough to keep up my interest. Although discouraged, each fall I would pump myself up with as many "never say die" stories as I knew and then go out and try my best.

Football was THE sport at Lansing Catholic High School (now called Lansing Catholic Central) where I was a student. My freshman season I played as a substitute in eight of nine games. We finished the season 9-0-0, allowing only one touchdown.

AFTER THAT STORY BOOK season, half our team went to other schools, leaving me hopeful for more playing time as a sophomore. Instead I played less. Our junior varsity team had another good season, finishing 5-1-2.

Although I had reached 160 pounds as a junior, I was dwarfed by my teammates. It was my first season on the varsity. Our line averaged over 200 pounds. I played only two games that season.

Our team was picked for the league championship my junior year. That 200-pound line was blocking in front of the defending Class B state championship 880-yard relay team. In other words, we were

big and fast. The problem was that everyone knew it, our team started bickering and we finished 6-2. (We were probably tired from the three-a-day workouts.)

The following year I gained another 20 pounds. In the summer I worked on a weight machine, ran and played touch football. We were starting our senior year with a new head coach and all I wanted to do was play.

Despite my preparations, that first day of practice was miserable. Six hours in the hot sun and I was still on the second team.

That evening I had to take my sister to cheerleading practice. She kept telling me how rough the cheerleading workouts were all the way to school. I almost screamed at her. When I returned home and stepped out of the car, every muscle in my body tensed up so I couldn't move—I had forgotten to take a salt pill.

AFTER A FEW more days and a lot more salt pills I got my chance. Just when I was ready to call it quits rather than spend another year on the bench, I won a starting position.

Our coach collected everyone he thought could play guard and had us battle each other one-on-one. That day I beat everyone. I don't know who was more amazed, me or my teammates.

I couldn't have written a better football season than what happened my senior year. We were unbeaten league champions, had a 7-0-1 record and a high state ranking.

One week we beat a team that was rated second in the state on their homecoming night. That night our team took the second half kickoff and marched 99 yards for a touchdown. The drive lasted more than 10 minutes, which included all of the third quarter.

The next week we threw a flea-flicker pass for a touchdown with six seconds left to play, barely beating a team which had lost its previous 25 games.

I could fill pages explaining all the things I learned through those football experiences. I found out that all the "corny" stuff about never giving up, setting a goal and working hard to achieve it is good advice. At least you know you've tried your best.

However, nothing will explain the feeling I had when the last game ended. I was sitting in a muddy end zone, pulling off my shoes and thinking about how great it was to have been a starter on an undefeated football team.

I HAD KNOWN seven of the other guys on that team since kindergarten. We were all National Honor Society students as well as football players.

One of them, my best friend, played center. We still joke about how he always stepped on my feet when we were pass blocking.

A little boy ran up to me while I was sitting in the mud. He was the brother of the girl I was going to the homecoming dance with that night.

"Can I have your chin strap," he asked. A bunch of other boys were running around, swinging chin straps at each other.

"I can't give you the chin strap," I said. "It belongs to the school."

He looked real disappointed and started to walk away.

"But I can give you this," I said, pulling off my forearm pad. "It's mine, not the school's."

I don't know if he appreciated the gift. He just ran off and punched one of the kids who was carrying a chin strap.