

"My Brief Football Career" by Paul Edward Johnson

At age seven I learned to catch and throw a football.

The seven-year-old kid down the block, Johnny, showed me how to catch and throw his football, which didn't seem to be a ball at all because it was not round.

I didn't even know football was a game people played until Johnny told me his favorite football teams were Purdue and Notre Dame.

I asked, "What's a Purdue? And what's a Notre Dame?"

Johnny said, "Purdue's a school and so's Notre Dame. And they both have great football teams. Even greater than the football teams we have here in Michigan."

"Purdue's a strange name for a school, Johnny. What does the word Purdue mean? Sounds to me like something that stinks. Maybe doggie doo? And Notre Dame? Is that the name of a woman?"

Catching and throwing Johnny's football was much fun. Almost as much fun as when Dad had taught me to catch a baseball before our family moved to Minnesota.

Dad never helped me catch and throw a football. Was not until I was age 12 that he told me why. Was when Dad and I were sitting at the kitchen table after our family had finished washing and wiping all the dinner dishes and pots and pans. He and I had previously painted the table yellow. Two coats of enamel paint.

"Dad? Jerry and Wayne and some of my other friends? They want me to play on their football team. Can you buy me a football helmet and shoulder pads? And maybe football shoes?"

Dad stood, unbuckled his leather belt and swirled it out through his belt loops. Doubling up his belt in his fists, he then slammed it several times upon the kitchen table with such force that yellow paint chips splattered upon the floor and upon my lap.

"No son of mine is going to play football. Do you realize the pain and suffering caused by that crazy game? Pain and suffering that can last an entire lifetime? I had football injuries. And I also caused them. And to this day they bother me. Like shoulder injuries. Hip injuries. Knee injuries. Head injuries. Broken noses. No way I gonna let you play with a damn football team. End of subject."

A year later, at age 13, I surreptitiously joined my buddies on their football team.

It wasn't until the end of the football season that I told Dad at our family dinner table how proud I was that our team had won every game we played, and how I had started each game as a tackle on the team's offensive line.

"All I had to do, Dad, was just push any kid crouched across from me out of the way, so that then all Wayne had to do was then just run past me with the football. It was as easy as that."

"But where did you get a football helmet? And shoulder pads? And football shoes?"

"Before every practice and game we would meet over at Pershing Park. And in the park's field house they would give me leather shoulder pads and an old leather helmet. And every afternoon before a football game I walked over to John McKeand's house and John would lend me a pair of old scruffy football shoes."

"But what about the uniforms? Did they give you one?"

"Nope. We didn't have uniforms. I would wear one of your old white sweat shirts over the shoulder pads. And my blue jeans."

"You wore a leather football helmet?"

"Yeah. It has the letters SWAC printed on the front."

"SWAC? How come SWAC?"

"For Southwest Athletic Council, I guess."

I can't recall the name of our football team. Maybe we were called the Pershing Panthers? All I know is we were all seventh and eighth graders who weighed no more than 120 pounds.

We practiced at Pershing Park during the evenings. Until around nine. And during Saturday mornings.

All our games were once a week. All at night. On a dimly-lighted football field located in a city park on Nicollet Avenue. The parents of kids on the team would drive us there from Pershing Park.

Before each game commenced, we all had to stand in a line and be "inspected" by the coach of the team we were to play, and he would always pause when standing in front of me, and he would always say, "Him."

That meant I had to run into the Nicollet Park field house, take off my leather SWAC helmet, shoulder pads and football shoes, and stand upon a scale to prove I did not weigh more than 120 pounds.

Upon having proved it, the opposing team's coach and I would then jog back to the football field and the game would commence under the football field's dim lights.

I hardly knew the rules. About all I knew as an offensive tackle was that I was supposed to clinch my fists and never grab the jersey of anyone on the opposing team. So as not be penalized for "holding."

All I was supposed to do was push kids and knock them to the ground.

At the start of our first game the football was kicked to us. It was kicked to Jim Hutchins who was our right end. Jim was standing off to my right.

Jim scooped up the ball and instead of running forward with the ball, he ran to his left and in front of me.

I collided with him.

I fell to the ground, but Jim did not fall down and he continued to run toward the left sideline.

Perhaps I should pause here now and mention I could not see much during these football games. Before every game I had to take off my thick eye glasses, and then the football and everybody became a fuzzy blur.

About all I could do without eye glasses was just push and knock down anyone in front of me.

So, after Jim and I had collided, I ran "downfield." And Jim and I collided again. Jim had changed course, and was running with the football toward the right sideline.

Jim bounced off me, paused, and yelled, "Don't be hitting me, Johnson. I'm on your team!"

Jim continued running, vanishing from my sight into yonder darkness until I caught up with him standing triumphantly in the end zone.

On our team's "first down" of the game, I crouched into a three-point stance and faced off against an opposing "defensive lineman."

To me he seemed to be just a little kid. No more than maybe 90 pounds; maybe only 80 pounds.

When the ball was hiked I pounced upon him. You could say I "pan-caked" him. And Wayne, he scooted past us with the football and sprinted for a touchdown.

When the game approached half time, we were leading by more than 30 points, and I was yelling, "Hey! Playing football is easy."

But our final conference game was not at all easy. During the third quarter the score was zero to zero.

We were playing a Catholic school. St. Thomas. Their school was located about a mile from Pershing Park. And I'm guessing they practiced at Linden Hills Park.

During that game, the kid across the line of scrimmage from me was about my weight, my height, and he knew how to handle me.

Every time "Play 32" was called in the huddle, Wayne was always being tackled by "that kid."

I became so frustrated that I tried to tackle that kid and was penalized for "holding."

So at the end of the third quarter, the coach, Eddie Bader, he benched me. And humiliated me in front of the entire team; he yelling at me, "Jesus fucking Christ Johnson! Get your head out of your ass and wake the hell up. Are you and your sorry ass here tonight to play football or what?"

It started snowing. And from the bench, without my eye glasses, I couldn't even see the players on the field.

Then, with less than a few minutes left in the game, the score still zero to zero, Eddie Bader put me back on the field, in the middle of what had then become a blizzard.

Bader told me to tell Steve Nash, our quarterback, to call "Play 32."

Somehow, some way, I shoved that damn kid opposite me sideways, enough to let Wayne scoot past us and vanish downfield toward the end zone.

Wayne had stomped on my ankle. And prone on the frozen football field rubbing my ankle, I looked up at my teammates, all jumping up and down and celebrating. Wayne scored! And we won!

After telling all of this to Dad at the dinner table, he asked me if our team received a trophy. I told him we would be getting a trophy at a "father-son banquet" to be held after the city championship play-off games.

"You mean you have more games to play?"

"Well yes. We are playing the State Farm team next."

"For what?"

"Don't know. Maybe it's for District Championship."

Sure nuff, Dad showed up for our game against the State Farm team.

And when they ran out from their bus, they seemed to have more than 60 players, all of them running around the football field in their red and white uniforms, their red capes flowing over their matching jerseys.

Before the game commenced, they behaved as if they had already won the game.

We only had about two dozen players and no uniforms.

And about half our players were only seventh graders.

At half time we had yet to score a point. And Dad, standing on the sideline, was yelling at Eddie Bader to try some pass plays.

We didn't have any pass plays. Seems Bader didn't trust our seventh-grade quarterback, Steve Nash, to toss a pass. Steve was only maybe about five feet tall or so and maybe could not see over the linemen.

During the third quarter, we punted on a fourth down.

I ran forward without being blocked, and there before me stood a little lad, looking up at the night sky, his arms outstretched, waiting for the highly kicked football to fall into his arms.

And I just stood there with him, waiting for him to catch the football.

Upon catching it, he looked up at me towering over him, as though he was petrified. Not moving an inch.

I reached down and hugged him. That's right. All I did was simply hug the little fellow until the ref blew his whistle.

Bader benched me.

As I sat on the bench, Bader yelled, "What the hell were you doing hugging that little shrimp. You coulda creamed him. Made him fumble. And you coulda recovered the football."

And Dad yelled, "And you coulda scored!"

We didn't score any points.

But State Farm only scored 14 points.

Dad attended the "father-son banquet" where our team got a trophy for winning our conference championship.

On the way home, in the car, we agreed that I was not "cut out" for being a football player. We agreed that it was not in my nature to hit people.

During my senior year in high school, while in gym class, all of us boys were playing a game in which two teams were lined up at opposite ends of the gym's basketball court.

When the gym teacher blew a whistle two boys from each team would race toward a soccer ball positioned at the center of the court, each pair of lads intent upon kicking the ball into and through the boys lined up against both ends of the court. Kicking the ball over their heads did not count as a score. Only kicking the ball between or below their heads counted as a score.

When it came my turn to sprint toward the ball at center court, I arrived at the ball first, and kicked the ball into the wall of boys opposing me.

The ball bounced off one boy's chest and bounced back toward me. So I kicked it again at the line of boys.

And again it bounced off a boy and back toward me.

As I was then only several feet away from the line of opposing boys, I chose to kick it point blank between Mike and Mike. It bounced off one of the two Mikes, and into my stomach as I was falling to the floor.

Prone upon the floor, I held the ball to my tummy while Mike and Mike and several other lads proceeded to kick at the ball, kick my chest, kick my head, and yes, kick my groin, while all the while I persisted in protecting the damn soccer ball.

I didn't hear the whistle blow to stop it all. I was unconscious.

The next day, in my solid geometry class, the football coach entered the classroom, whispered to the teacher, and signaled for me to step out into the hallway.

Pressing me to a locker in the hallway, he said to me, nose to nose, "How come you are not on our football team? We need more guys like you."

I tried to explain to him how my dance band took up too much of my time and so did being the president of our high school choir.

He stood back, slowly looked me up and down, and said, "From what I've been told, you aren't yellow. So tell me. Are you yellow or not?"

I shook my head and walked back into the classroom.

When looking back at that moment and even now, I have wished my response would have been different.

I regret not having said something such as this:

"Sir. Seeing as you once played for the Chicago Bears and you know all about the game of football, how about we now go into the locker room. And you show me what I need show you that I am not yellow? And after that? How about you then show some respect for how I prefer playing and singing love songs. Instead of maybe injuring myself and others on a football field?"

Oh well. I take pride in the fact our high school football team won a city championship that year back in 1958. Plus I take pride in the fact that my dance band played for our high school's Homecoming Dance.

And pride in how our high school choir then received national acclaim from both the Billboard and Variety magazines for our 1958 Columbia hit recording of two Christmas songs titled "God's Christmas Tree" and "Great Somebody."

During that December of 1958 we received more than three weeks of national fame.

As for my football career? I'm pleased it was brief.