

HUSKERS

STRAT WARDEN

DEDICATION

Huskers is dedicated to my children,
Chas and Rachel. May their lives be forever
enriched by the true values of sports.

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PROLOGUE

THE NEBRASKA CORNHUSKERS have played football in Memorial Stadium since 1923, and this venue has been sold out for over 300 consecutive games dating back to November 3, 1962. Chiseled high on the northwest corner of this stadium, the *old* Memorial Stadium, the concrete and iron one, *buried deep* within the new and *better* façade, are the following words:

**COURAGE; GENEROSITY;
FAIRNESS; HONOR; IN
THESE ARE THE TRUE
AWARDS OF MANLY SPORT**

— *Hartley Burr Alexander*

Every year over five million young Americans participate in various organized youth football programs; but this story is *not* really about football.



CHAPTER 1: THE GAME

“CHOOSE!”

Chuck cowered and gathered his limbs back a step; then from an angular face, his eyes fled behind him to Chris, who looked down, clutched his handkerchief, and trumpeted into it, again. Chuck turned further to where the others—Jimmy, resigned; Dennis, struggling; Billy, laughing; and Dick and Virgil—waited, as if hiding, behind the rusted pipe arch that hadn’t dangled chains to swings in years, beyond the dirt patch where they would play *the game*.

“You *split-class* boys deaf.” Jonathan crossed his arms, leaned back, and sneered down, over the jut of his jaw.

Had a stranger asked Chuck and his friends, *who is your leader*, quizzical looks, as if the questioner had spoken Spanish, would have ricocheted among the seven. Chuck was the tallest, got the best grades, and worried the most. He was not a leader.

Jonathan’s finger, like a railroad spike, jabbed Chuck’s chest bone through the ragged jersey hanging from his shoulders. “Yeah, you, Stickman! Call it.” His arm shot skyward as his thumb snapped.

In silence, a half-dollar flipped flashes into the Indian summer sun of a football FRIDAY afternoon in 1960. Chuck heard his voice squeak, “He-ea-eads.” The silver coin peaked, somersaulted back earthward, and then hiccupped dust from the parched Nebraska dirt.

Chuck jumped backwards into Chris; both stumbled and grabbed each other not to fall. A gleaming 1958 Ben Franklin stared across the gravel road at dried cornstalks and ripening pumpkins—*heads*; they’d won the toss.

“That end.” Jonathan slashed his muscled arm toward the giant transformer between the end zone of the Tecumseh Indians’ football field and the cinder track. “You *splitters* receive.” He, Mike, and Packer ran toward the boys from the *other* sixth grade class.

Chuck and Chris shared a frozen stare. They never won, not anything, not ever. Then, it sunk in: *heads*, they got the ball; *but* they’d have to run against...against *Packer*—even in winning, they were still *losers*.

When they joined their friends, Dick shook his head and said, “Dang it. Told ya *tails*.” He jerked on his helmet.

“Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate? Jonathan! Jonathan! Jonathan!” cheered Charlotte, Suzie, and Carol, the girls from the *other* sixth grade.

“Who asked them!” said Chris. He wiped his nose, wadded the rag, and then stuffed it inside his hip pads.

“Who c-c-cares!” Dennis said then pushed his glasses up where they magnified his eyeballs above his ripe-peach cheeks and fleshy lips. A doughy stomach bulged out between his sweatshirt

and strained pants.

“Quit stallin’,” yelled Mike from the far end, where the grass was less worn.

Chuck turned to Jimmy. “Sorry.”

Jimmy stepped forward into the dirt center of the field. His shoulder and hip pads draped, as if on the back of a chair; and his helmet wobbled. His classmates, behind him, watched Jimmy’s sleeve slide down his arm as he waived it.

Jonathan punted.

Jimmy circled beneath the ball, caught it, and ran right. Not ducking out of bounds—he never did—he cut back and cracked Mike helmet to helmet.

Jonathan slammed into them, knocking both to the ground. Others jumped on; then Packer heaved himself on the stack of bodies, crushing Jimmy.

Catching up, Chuck said, “Hey, no piling on.”

“Right,” said Mike as he rolled to his feet.

Jonathan jumped into Chuck’s face. “Suck it up, Chucky-boy.”

Packer scowled and lifted his bulk as he ground Jimmy’s helmet in the dirt.

Jimmy didn’t move.

Chuck and his friends held their breaths.

Jimmy sprang to his feet, shot through them all, and jammed the ball down in the middle of the field. He ran to several feet behind the ball, bent over, and braced his hands on his knees.

The *other* sixth graders watched him then moved to their side of the ball, where they jitterbugged up and down and slapped each other

on their backs and butts.

The boys gathered around Jimmy. Chuck said to him, "Okay?"

Jimmy glanced at Chuck, but said nothing.

Chuck looked around the huddle at his friends.

All their faces dropped, eyes not seeing the sparse clumps of parched grass.

"How 'bout fake pitch right? I'll go left," Chuck said.

No heads rose.

"Chris, you and Billy, try to get in Packer's way."

The boys waited. Without lifting it, but shaking his head, Jimmy asked, "On one?"

Chuck scrunched together his eyebrows. "Yeah."

They crept up to the ball.

Dick bent over and grabbed it with both hands. Chuck stepped behind him, squatted, put his hands under Dick's butt, and looked around. Billy and Chris lined up to his right, below Packer, who stood erect like a mad grizzly. Virgil and Dennis lowered into their stances to Chuck's left. Jimmy, hands on knees, crouched behind him.

Packer growled then said, "Chucky, you're dead meat."

Jonathan clapped his hands. "Get 'em."

Mike said, "Crush 'em."

Chuck called the count: "Down! Set! Hut!" After Dick snapped the ball, Chuck turned right, faked a pitch to Jimmy, and pivoted on around to his left, past the defensive end, who had run inside. Chuck jumped out of bounds before Jonathan could hit him. Chuck was no Jimmy.

The boys huddled. Chuck looked over his shoulder at the ball then

said, "Jimmy, pass?"

Heads down, the group offered only silence.

"Same, only I'll pass to Jimmy, deep." Chuck started to clap then said, "Oh, on two!"

"Down! Set! Hut! Hut!"

Dick snapped the ball.

Packer cut past Chris and Billy, crashed through Dick, and slammed his mass into Chuck as the ball sailed. Pain stabbed Chuck's chest and snatched his breath. When Packer pushed off, Chuck sucked air into his lungs, rolled onto his side, and watched the *other* sixth graders celebrate.

The pass had made it to Jimmy, and he'd caught it—he always did. He was the only one who could. Chris, their end, had never caught a pass.

Jimmy stood to the side of the end zone watching. He'd caught the ball then fumbled. Jimmy was their best player: he was fast and tough, and he could tackle. Jimmy did it all, and well; except Jimmy fumbled. He fumbled a lot.

Following their celebration, the *other* boys ran past Chuck and his friends hollering.

"Weenies!"

"Nice fumble, *Jimbo!*"

"You splitters are such *losers!*"

On the kick-off, Jimmy rammed Mike, who kept him on his feet until Packer flung him to the ground. The ball squirted, or was pulled, out of the pile—another fumble. That's the way the *other* boys played it.

Chuck rushed to them. "He was down."

“Right,” Mike said and walked away. “Get over it.”

Chuck followed Jonathan to where Mike had taken the ball. “Come on!”

Packer cut him off.

Jonathan stopped, turned around, and clamped his hands on his hips. “Our ball. Got a problem, Chucky?”

Chuck shrunk away.

* * *

For the rest of the game, every time Jimmy ran or Chuck passed, they were pummeled. The few times Chuck and his friends moved the ball, either Jimmy fumbled or Chuck threw an interception. When they didn’t turn it over, they got to punt. Mike ran one of those back for a touchdown.

On defense, it was worse. Mike and Jonathan ran or Jonathan passed for long gains. Jimmy made most of the tackles. Occasionally, someone would drop a pass, and Mike ran out of bounds rather than take a hit. The boys were being slaughtered. Packer, the monster-boy, swelled larger with each act of cruelty.

On one play that had gone away from Packer, he threw Billy to the ground then thrust his man-sized hand below Billy’s single-bar facemask and ground Billy’s mouth against his braces. Billy cried out then spit blood; it splattered and smeared his face and old sweatshirt. Chuck called a time-out. Packer laughed while his teammates gathered around him and congratulated their champion.

In the second half, Packer, bored, grabbed Dennis, slung him to the ground, bent over him, and smashed his forearm like a tree branch into Dennis’s face-bar cracking it off on both sides. Then he

punched his fist into Dennis’s glasses. Packer towered over Dennis, lying helpless on the ground. “B-b-b-bet I look b-b-b-big from down there. Huh, *fff-fatso!*” Packer wedged his huge black boot in the back of Dennis’s helmet then joined his team.

Dennis crawled to his feet then dragged himself to the huddle. He fought not to cry. Mud covered his face and smudged one lens of his glasses; the other one looked as though two or three spiders had been crushed into it.

Chuck lifted his friend’s chin and inspected the damage.

Dennis dropped his head and caught himself on his knees.

During the thrashing, the younger kids on the hillside laughed and Charlotte and her friends giggled, until the beating became so predictably one-sided that they all lost interest. The kids drifted back to the playground, and the girls talked among themselves. They took notice only when Chuck or one of his friends was brutalized. Then, as when Packer assaulted Billy and Dennis, everyone watched to see if the victim could return for more.

* * *

By the middle of the third quarter, the score was 35 to nothing. Chris fought to stop Packer from crashing in on Chuck, but was jammed into the dirt, run over, and left in a crumbled heap of pain. He didn’t get back up. As Chuck struggled to his feet, Virgil and Dick worked to their knees, Billy cried, Dennis collapsed, and Jimmy, arms dangling, stared at Chris. Chuck stumbled to his knees on the ground next to his friend.

Chris clutched his jersey at the neck and gasped for a breath.

“Help . . . me.” Terror ravaged his face as he sucked and sucked for the air he could not find.

Chuck’s eyes searched his writhing friend then the others for help, a clue, something to do.

Packer said, “Hey, check Chrissie-boy. Looks like a dying-fish-out-of-water.” Then he cackled.

Chris’s face tightened and darkened to the cold gray of a thunderstorm; then he went limp.

“Jesus, Chris!” Chuck grabbed his shoulder pads and shook him.

Chris coughed; his chest heaved; and a wisp of a breath wheezed through his ashen blue lips.

As Chris lay, eking bits of air, Jonathan said, “Had enough, *Losers?*”

Chuck turned to Jonathan with vacuous eyes; then, understanding, he refocused on Chris, his color fading toward a fainter gray. Chuck slumped and caught himself with his forearms on his thigh pads. He searched for his friends.

Jimmy, face a mask, stood like a statue. Virgil sat as if deflated. Dick held himself above the ground on one elbow and strained to catch his own breath. Billy, crusted with blood, winced as a finger explored inside his mouth. Collapsed, Dennis was soaked in sweat and caked with dirt. His face glowed ruby red, and he, too, sucked for air. He could see only through his cracked lens; he’d given up on the mud-smudged other one.

Chuck’s gaze fell upon his friend. Though the wheezing was no longer raspy and patches of pink mottled the eerie grayness, Chris lay flaccid, as though lifeless.

Chuck raised his head only enough to meet Jonathan’s eyes, closed

his, and nodded; then his chin dropped to his chest.

- - -

The victors cheered then marched off the field and back up the hill. Their girls followed.

Chris lay on the ground and squeaked air into his lungs. He kept his eyes away from his friends. With his breathing easing toward normal, Chuck and Billy helped Chris wobble to his feet.

Chuck and his friends trudged, in silence, up the hill-stairs. On the landing, halfway to the top, they quit and rested, Chris propped against the steel railing.

When Dick started up again, Chuck glanced to the bottom of the steps, and said, “Wait. Dennis.”

“Fatso’s useless, just in the way,” said Dick.

Chuck faced Dick until he turned away and plodded up the steps alone.

Once they all reached the top, Jimmy kicked up his kickstand, threw a leg over his bike, and peddled away. The others pulled and tugged at their pads then stuffed them in the baskets on their bikes.

When they rolled into Chris’s yard, Chuck supported Chris’s bike as he swung off then fell to his knees in the grass. He threw up then wiped his face. Chuck helped Chris to the back door, but left before his mother opened it.

Chuck, Billy, and Dennis headed up 5th Street. While Billy, spitting blood, pushed his bike ahead alone, Chuck and Dennis turned downhill toward Dennis’s house.

Dennis dropped his bike on the sidewalk. As though a crippled

old man, he hobbled up each step to the porch. As Chuck's front tire rolled off the curb, Dennis called out, "Ch-Ch-Chuck."

Chuck looked back.

Tears had washed pink streaks down Dennis's dirt masked cheeks. "S-s-s...s-s-s-sorry!" His shoulders sagged. He turned and disappeared through the front door, gone.

Chuck stared then shuddered. He wrestled to hold his bike upright and forced his legs forward. *Why did he say that?* To lessen the pain, Chuck's mind, heavy and sluggish, labored to study this puzzle. Leaves crunched under his feet. His bike tires thumped against raised cracks in the sidewalk. He hurt as he had never before hurt, and he was sad, as he had never before been sad. He stopped. He looked around, but there was no one.

He fought to control his face, but his chin quivered. He shook his head; still, the tears came. He cried for Billy and his bloody face; for Chris, heaving just to breath; for Jimmy because he couldn't be a kid. He cried for Dennis because he was fat, couldn't see, and stuttered—because he suffered. Mostly, Chuck cried because he was just a boy with the whole weight of his world not just in his heart but also on his mind.

He hurt, the hurt from a pain much worse than any physical pain from injuries suffered in a football game. Chuck hurt from the pain of becoming *less of* and *more than* just a boy. As the tears flowed and his body jerked with each sob, Chuck pulled cold air into his lungs then released it, each draw more deliberate than the last.

Midway across the corner lot, a block from home, he stalled, as if he'd lost his way, closed his eyes and struggled to reason how he'd

come to this dreadful FRIDAY afternoon, to make sense of it all. Then, Chuck quit, dropped his bike and collapsed on the grass; his final conscious thought, *last MONDAY, if only I hadn't . . .*