Six to Nothing

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smiled. "We all enjoyed it very much. And come again if you can."

Half way down the corridor I turned and looked back through the open door. Mrs. Porter was standing bent over the crib that contained Petey.

"Say hello, Petey. Can you say hello?"

—Anne Burnett, Ex. ’57

Six to Nothing

THE RED SUNSET forecast a cool, clear night. The blue of the sky overhead darkened slowly from east to west as if a giant shade were being pulled, a shade with many thin spots pierced by slivers of light. The field lay in the cover of darkness awaiting the hour for which it had been so carefully prepared in the afternoon, awaiting the same grinding and trampling it had endured twice this fall and many falls before. The yardline stripes were freshly mowed and re-marked, the ten yard strips had been alternately rolled in opposite directions, each sideline had been limed twice and showed no wave. The hash marks seventeen yards and twenty-eight inches in from the sidelines were exactly eighteen inches long. The two yard line markers in front of the goal posts were precise and the end zone was striped with chalk markings. The goal posts had been wrapped spirally with red and black crepe paper at one end, red and white at the other. It was a field that had been marked by cleats of boys fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen — high school boys who were fast, slow, big, small, strong, weak, brave, and cowardly. It had absorbed blood from noses, had felt wrenched knees and sprained ankles, even broken shoulders and broken legs. It was not a new field.
All week they had drilled. Monday without pads. Tuesday a tough day with lots of contact. Wednesday a full and long scrimmage. Thursday a light session again, and now they were ready.

There had been the usual group of townspeople watching the workouts. The milkman who stopped during his route; the gas station operator from across the road; Bill Becker, a farmer whose son, Jim, played tailback; Bob Bruner, the drugstore owner who was rabidly and radically behind his alma mater; and Frank Contratta, who was only an occasional observer. Frank was casual and silent, sitting in a car parked close to the sidelines. There were a few others, not too familiar, but they could have been expected considering the importance of the game.

During the week a lone figure had jogged around the field each day, had participated in the light drills on Thursday, but the rest of the time just jogged around the field. His knee was tightly wrapped and each step with the left leg had been stiff, but at the end of the week was comparatively smooth again.

Jim Becker was the kind of tailback that made a single wing go. Fortunately the team had another boy nearly as talented to take up the slack at that position. But nobody could run the powerful end sweeps like Jim. And every sweep was a potential touchdown. Once past the end he turned on the speed and used a change of pace that would make a college coach green with envy. He had been disgusted with the coach, though he had said nothing, when he'd been pulled out two weeks ago to hold the score down. And last week he had been nearly forced off the field when he had hurt his knee. The local weekly newspaper had called it a wrenched knee. They also said he was, "...a doubtful starter. The hopes of the game may hinge on his speed, although it must be acknowledged that a sharp blocking line shares his honors."

The sun had set on this Friday as lights in the houses of the small town kitchens winked on. Wives were hurried by husbands and children who had forgotten their appetites but not the game. Some cars arrived early so that their occupants could watch from them at the end of the field.
The choice seats in the bleachers were taken early. People came in two by two with blankets under their arms, some with cushions, all with heavy winter coats. The cold air condensed their breath. High school kids, bobby soxers, came and sat in their cheering section. The cheer leaders wore red corduroy slacks and white sweaters with the school letter. The tall, slim brunette was Jim's girl. His father and mother were among the early arrivals and occupied seats on the fifty-yard line. They had been reluctant to let Jim play football. He hadn't been allowed to play his first year, and even now, when three-fourths of the senior football season was gone, his mother was not convinced.

The bleachers on the home side were nearly filled before the teams came out for their warm-ups, and then people, mostly the opponent's boosters, began to line the other side where there were no seats. Bob Bruner did not arrive too early, not early enough to get a seat, and was stationed in the camp of the enemy. He was short and almost fat, and he had a stocking cap pulled over his ears. Through the game he left no doubt with the enemy as to whose side he was on. He had played tackle on this field ten years before and he felt qualified to give advice anytime to the quarterback. But he also felt qualified to give instruction to the visitor's quarterback. And worse, he gave advice to the enemy rooters. At a point in the game he had felt the need to move to a different part of the sidelines, but no one kept him from cheering for his old school. He wanted to win. The other businessmen on main street had the same feelings. The town still rankled from that early season loss, and now they were saying that tailback or not, the coach better not lose this one.

Across the field in the stands another person wanted a victory. Frank was what this town called rich and was willing to take a chance. Nobody knew how much he had bet. They all made wild guesses: $50, $100, $500, or even more. Frank watched the game with intentness, never missing a play, and speaking only a few short sentences to his wife, next to him, who was bound in a fur coat with a blanket around her legs. They all looked at him at least once during the game, but nobody really knew.
The game had been scoreless through three and a half quarters. Always in front of the home bench a tall, slim, young-appearing man strode back and forth in his storm coat. If his job was riding on the result of this game he showed it no more than the desire to win showed on him in every game. He occasionally turned quickly and pointed at a substitute, having him warm up and then go in for a few plays, occasionally shouting to a defensive man, giving him instructions. He didn’t seem to notice Jim on the bench, at least he tried not to. Doc had explained Jim’s injury, explained the mechanics, the danger, and the odds. He walked to the end of the bench, kicked at a small piece of dirt, then walked toward the other end.

“Warm up, Jim!” A minute later he slapped Jim on the back and sent him in. The brunette cheer leader led an extra big cheer. Few noticed the slight limp for Jim covered it well. Most thought he looked OK, and some said he should have been in there sooner. On the second play he swept the end for a touchdown, as everyone had wanted and expected. Used as a decoy on the extra point, he was creamed in a pile-up. No one noticed his limp as he came off the field. All that they knew was that Jim had broken the game open. The brunette led the largest cheer when he stopped in front of the bench. And when it was over the crowd was too happy to realize that Jim was leaning heavily on a team mate on the way down to the locker room.

Frank collected, and nobody ever knew how much. Bob buttonholed anyone that came close to tell about Jim’s run, how he’d faked out the halfback right in front of him. The tall, slender young man who had paced in front of the bench had won the game.

But he slept little that night. He was thinking of what Doc had said about Jim’s injury, the mechanics, the danger, and the odds.

—John Chambers, Ex. ’57