

The Tackle
by Glen Jackson

He'd studied enough game film and taken enough downs to know when even the most deceptive center-quarterback combination was going to trigger the start of the play.

The skill of anticipation usually gave Jerry Baldoan the edge to beat the men he faced, and allowed him to position himself exactly where the opposing offense did not want him to be. It helped a 347-pound man defy gravity and the will of others to make him one of the best at his position, for in the game of professional football, the meaning of the word athlete had been stretched as far as it had been for baseball, bowling, and golf. Men whose body fat percentage exceeded their age were able to play an important role in a game alongside men who could challenge a horse to a test of speed and make it a close race. So Baldoan, with his head almost directly over the ball, listened carefully to the cadence of the quarterback, and studied the large man's hand gripping the ball on the ground. For the most part his job involved clogging the interior rushing lanes by either pushing blockers back into the hole, or by escaping a block and filling the gap himself. It was a role he had begun to cherish long ago when, back in high school, his obesity dictated where he would be able to play in the game he loved so much. Even then, the inkling of athletic ability was apparent and he would play both sides of the ball as a lineman, something very few of his peers were able to do. He understood his objectives and knew that his role made it possible for the star defenders who lined up behind him to make the big plays. Only he and one other man, Cedric Johnson, performed this task at one time for the Coyotes, and they moved almost in unison whenever the ball was snapped.

The big men who were lucky enough to possess great acceleration, as well as speed, lined up on the outside shoulders of Baldoan and Johnson, and also practiced the fine art of anticipating the snap of the ball. The difference was that their primary goal was to explode into the backfield and hunt down the quarterback like a greyhound chasing a mechanical rabbit. If that wasn't possible, they were expected to contain the play and force the ball carrier up the middle, where the two giant men eagerly awaited his arrival. Baldoan had often heard the men who played defensive end talk about the thrill of chasing down a QB, and the pure ecstasy that was produced when the passer had no idea he was about to be taken down. He knew how good it felt too, and had stepped up to deliver punishing hits on many quarterbacks, even though it was his secondary objective. But it still didn't give him as much pleasure as stuffing a rush, and pushing back a mixed pile of offensive linemen and running backs.

This was why he played football. The exertion of one person's will on another, and the feeling of winning, plain and simple. And games like this, games that meant the difference between staying alive in the playoffs or heading into the off-season downtime, these were the games where he used all the self control he could muster on each and every down to not let up at all. One half-assed play could mean the difference between winning and losing, and he wanted to win. Granted, not all of his teammates felt the same. Many of them looked forward to the off-season and the free time that came with it. Many of them had no conscience and played the downs only for an opportunity to shine as a star, or achieve anything that would help with their upcoming contract negotiations. However, Baldoan wasn't like that. Possibly because he wasn't one of the players who had a shot at the really big money, but more likely because he truly loved the thrill of winning.

Each and every down involved pure concentration. He liked playing away from the home crowd; it helped on those plays where his focus might slip for an instant. It was so quiet

when the home team's offense was on the field that it made his job just a little bit easier. The only thing playing at home did for Baldoan was keep his emotional excitement a little too high, and that led to mistakes. That wasn't a problem today as the crowd loyally stayed quiet so their offensive heroes could try in vain to score against the most solid defense the league had seen in over a decade.

When the Coyotes signed Johnson in the off-season no one was happier than Baldoan. Finally, there was a talented enough tackle to allow him to get away from being double-teamed on every down. Together, these two tackles had created the backbone that had led the Coyotes into the playoffs, and on toward a championship. There were still obstacles to overcome, but they had already gone further than anyone had expected.

It was a perfect day for football. A chill in the air to keep the players comfortable, but not so cold that focusing on the game became a problem. The second year guard who had been the sole blocker on Baldoan during the first series of the game was in for a long day. As the offensive line approached the ball, Baldoan shifted into his three-point stance and kept an eye on the guard as he settled into his nearly motionless position. Baldoan had been told on the bench to stay almost centered on this kid in order to keep his options open, and he had agreed. Doug Fenning, the talented quarterback for the Tigers, called out for complete stillness from his offense, while Baldoan clenched his left fist tightly and swung it back and forth like a wrecking ball as he waited for the moment that he would get his jump. Fenning had been around the league so long that most clever defensive linemen could read his signals well enough to anticipate the snap of the ball, and Baldoan was as clever as they came. He began to lift out of his stance just as Fenning began his third command to hike the ball, and he started to move for the guard's outside shoulder as the ball left the center's hand. The eyes of the inexperienced left guard had already tracked Baldoan's quick jump, and he knew the battle on this down was already lost. The blocker began debating whether to try to get in front of the overpowering tackle or resort to holding him and hope it went undetected, Baldoan rendered both options useless as he brought his left arm down on the back of the guard's left shoulder, causing him to lurch forward for an instant and completely lose the ground between the tackle and Fenning.

Baldoan smelt it now. A clean break on the quarterback was an opportunity that could not be squandered. As Fenning took his five-step drop, his eyes quickly assessed the situation on the line and he saw that he was in danger of taking the sack within the next few seconds. The defensive ends had already gained ground on the outside very quickly, so scrambling wasn't an option. The primary receiver on this play was Tim Edmonds at left wideout, whose quick post pass route would leave him open for an instant about three steps from where he was now. With Baldoan rapidly filling Fenning's field of view, the well-traveled quarterback dished the pass off to his primary receiver while back stepping away from Baldoan as he braced for the impact. The ball sailed just over Baldoan's right hand, but stopping the pass was only a part of Jerry's job on this down. Fenning was engulfed by the shadow of the giant tackle and he turned to one side to protect himself as Baldoan crashed into him. The quarterback's legs buckled from the force of the tackle and offered little resistance. As they fell together, Baldoan bent his legs so that they would offer no support from the impact when they hit the ground, something the big man had taken to doing in wide open tackles in order to utilize all of his mass. Fenning saw the grass fill his view in an instant, and he felt the shooting pain throughout his body as they hit the turf. Both of them heard and felt the slight pop of Fenning's shoulder. Baldoan bounced up from the impact and landed once again on Fenning who grunted in pain as the air was forced from his lungs. The tackle left his full weight on the much smaller quarterback for a few extra moments

before sliding off and leaving Fenning on the ground looking very much like a rodent who had met his end on the interstate.

Fenning knew right away it was a dislocation, but also that the shoulder had corrected itself almost instantly. Even so, it was his throwing arm and even a slight injury would probably render him ineffective for the rest of the day. He rolled onto his back and began to test his range of motion as the team doctor appeared over him.

“What happened Doug?” asked Dr. Zelkavich.

“Think it popped out when we hit the ground.”

Zelkavich’s brow furrowed as he went to work accessing the damage as quickly as possible. He slipped his hand under the jersey sleeve and probed Fenning’s shoulder with his fingers. The swelling was already starting and even a lesser doctor would have known Fenning’s day was likely done. “Let’s head to the sideline for a better look Doug,” Dr. Zelkavich said as he motioned to his assistant to help Fenning, but the second year guard had already stepped forward to lift Fenning off the ground.

“Doug man, I’m *really* sorry.” The left guard reminded Fenning of his 6 year-old son, about to burst out crying at any moment.

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“Let’s look at that again on the replay,” said A.J. McNeil, the former linebacking great turned Sunday chatterbox. He adjusted his headset to position the microphone just below his lower lip for about the twentieth time that quarter. The replay began to role for the third time and McNeil’s eyes carefully scanned every frame of the slow motion feed. When Baldoan lifted his legs to place his entire body weight on Fenning’s shoulder, McNeil piped up again excitedly. “See that right there? That’s an old trick of defensive linemen. Put all the weight you can on the little QB.”

“Well, they must normally disguise it better than that A.J., because it’s not often I notice the intent to injure like we saw just there,” said play by play man Craig Davids as the replay finished and the field camera with the view of Fenning being helped off the field went live.

“No, you’re exactly right Craig. The big games tend to bring out those kind of reckless actions I’m afraid. Players endangering their opponents and themselves like that...” McNeil trailed off and made a ‘tisk’ noise as a conclusion to his unfinished statement.

“Well, the league will have something to say about this I’m sure,” Davids said after giving McNeil the usual three Mississippi count he had learned to offer in order to prevent the vocal fender benders that the broadcasting duo had been prone to the season before.

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The crowd of over 80,000 people had become silent, and isolated outbursts from the hometown fans were clearly audible.

“Alright Doug! Shake it off buddy!” screamed a middle-aged man attired in an authentic Tigers jersey covering what looked like his high school shoulder pads, dwarfed by his out of shape frame. The look of concern on his face mirrored that of many of those in the stadium. For three hours a week, for seventeen to twenty weeks a year, the devoted fan base of these teams united and became a part of something important to them, whether it was at the stadium or just the local bar.

When their team won they felt euphoric, as if they had actually performed the actions necessary to win the game. However at times like this, when things went wrong, all they could do was watch helplessly and become frustrated at how ineffectual they really were in these events.

As a collective they watched Doug Fenning make his way off the field, wincing in pain. It was apparent that he would be out for the rest of the game, and the Tiger fans knew exactly what that would mean for their team's playoff hopes. Their first visit to the post-season in over a decade and, after a bad start, the game would be entrusted to a rookie quarterback who had taken only three snaps in a game all year. Of course, none of the three were passing plays.

Many of those in attendance turned to their beverages and fatty foods and began distancing themselves from the team. "Can you believe their offensive line? Practically rolled out the red carpet," said a young man with his face painted in team colors.

"No doubt man, truly sad," replied his friend.

Fenning stepped over the sideline chalk and was directed straight into the locker room tunnel to be examined. Fans around the tunnel clapped in support for their fallen hero as he became engulfed by its shadow.

Dennis Kirting sat on the opposite side of the field amongst the other fans, and with the aid of his binoculars he was able to see a frustrated Fenning throw his helmet against the wall outside of the locker room door. Fenning then disappeared through the door, and Kirting was left with only a slightly interested security guard to look at. He turned his attention to the Tiger bench, specifically Coach Wisestrom. The coach was talking into his headset and rubbing his forehead hard enough that it appeared he might penetrate his frontal lobe at any moment. The young coach suddenly looked ten years older. Kirting drew the logical conclusion that he was getting the preliminary medical report on Fenning, and that it did not bode well for the team. With the fans around him either emotional about what had happened, or completely retreating into their beer cups, Kirting had a look of concentration that seemed a little out of place. He turned his magnified view of the field to the Coyote huddle where Baldoan and the other defenders had just regrouped to hear the next play's formation. Kirting squinted a little as he studied Baldoan. Cedric Johnson gave Baldoan a congratulatory punch in the arm and both men had a beaming smile as they broke from the huddle. Kirting knew that not only had Baldoan intended to hurt Fenning, but that he also knew that doing so had most likely won the game for the Coyotes. The intent to injure Fenning was obvious to Kirting, even more so because he had spent the previous week scouting the Tigers' playoff opponents. Kirting let the binocular strap around his neck do its job and let out a frustrated sigh.

He and the other 80,000 fans in attendance shared the mood on the Tiger bench. Even Fenning's teammates felt that without their starting quarterback, the game was already lost.

The Tiger offense took the line with their backup passer calling the shots.

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"...the day started out bad for the Tigers and it quickly went to worse when Doug Fenning took this monster hit from big Jerry Baldoan early in the first quarter," the 15 minute sports update echoed through Kirting's modest apartment for the fifth consecutive time. He had seen the clip of Baldoan's hit over a dozen times that day already, and it still angered him with each viewing.

“Fucker.” Kirting managed to squeeze out the occasional curse towards Baldoan and the Coyotes as he moved around the apartment.

“From that point on it was all Coyotes as they romped all over the hapless Tigers on their way to a berth in the big game.”

Kirting rubbed his forehead and turned down the television. Sirens wailed from the Firehall across the street and quickly faded to mix in with the other sounds of the city.

Dennis Kirting would not have been classified as poor in almost any nation in the world. However in a city full of wealthy, thirty-something professionals, he often felt like there was a hill in front of him that he would never be able to climb. He was adequate in both his warehouse and bowling alley clerk jobs, but his real ambitions had nothing to do with the labor that earned him a paycheck. A look around his apartment was all that was needed to see what had driven him all his life.

Photographs of Kirting in a football uniform, standing alongside groups of teammates at various ages, lined the North wall of his apartment behind the television. However, the team pictures were not the only carefully organized tribute to Kirting’s devotion to the sport he loved. There were also two bookcases that housed numerous trophies and a few autobiographies of sports legends along the East wall. Not only were championship trophies abundant on the shelves, including city championships in 1973 and ’76, but awards for individual achievement as most valuable player took up more than half the shelf space on one of the bookcases. The South wall of the main room contained various pennants for the Tigers as well as framed autographs, game programs stacked along the base of the wall, and posters of Tiger heroes including one of Fenning holding the football high above his head in a throwing motion while his free hand pointed the way to his target.

Perhaps the most impressive part of the room was what covered the last remaining wall of Kirting’s living room. Ticket stubs from every Tiger game he had been to, starting in the top left corner of the wall with a game between the Tigers and Houston Bolts from September of 1969. Dennis Kirting still remembered that day quite well, especially surprising considering he was only six years old at the time. John Kirting had begun to mold his son into a competitor at a young age, but that wasn’t abnormal for Red Tree, California at the time. Football and Baseball were played almost year round for all age groups. John Kirting had enrolled his son in the flag football league at only four years old, and while the majority of the other parents laughed with delight at the clumsy exploits of their young children, Dennis’ father would study the game and all of the situational choices his son had made. John saw that Dennis had the same glimmer in his eye that had made the senior Kirting an ace pilot in Korea. John Kirting rarely missed an opportunity to teach or challenge Dennis to succeed, but it was always done with genuine love for his son, even if that love was possibly, at times, subject to certain conditions. As far back as Dennis could remember his life had been molded around the game of football.

The rest of the ticket wall contained well over 200 stubs, with accompanying box scores taken from the Los Angeles Herald, for both home and away Tiger games. Playoff games were distinguished by a solid black border drawn around the ticket, along with the accompanying box score. Amongst the tickets was an ominous gap in stubs for games that took place between 1984 and 1989. Just less than half of the wall remained free for future ticket stubs, and Dennis had chosen to leave the available space completely barren.

Behind Kirting’s television, on the North wall, were some framed pictures and letters that were not visible from anywhere else in the room save for right beside the space behind the set. The pictures featured Kirting with gelled hair that defied gravity, wearing the baby blue and gold

of the University of California at Los Angeles. His size dwarfed a good number of his teammates, and in the picture labeled 'Senior Year', Kirting's pride from being on that squad emanated from the photo. To the right of that senior team photo, completely behind the television, was a framed letter and newspaper article.

The letter seemed to have not nearly enough words to justify the frame that held it, or the official looking parchment it was typed on. It was short and to the point:

December 6, 1983

Mr. Dennis Kirting,

This letter is to inform you that all access, special permissions, and privileges that you have been privy to in the past at the University of California at Los Angeles have been immediately and completely revoked.

In light of the events of the past weeks we ask that you please honor and accept the University's wishes and avoid school property as well as her students and faculty in order to avoid legal action.

Sincerely,
Dean Richmond Hamilton

The article from the newspaper bore the title 'UCLA Football Fiasco' with the sub-title 'Local Football Star's Stellar Performance Marred by Disturbing Discovery'. The story began with the game statistics posted by the 'superstar senior linebacker Dennis Kirting who led his school's defense to an impressive shutout victory over Notre Dame, collecting twelve tackles, one and a half sacks, a forced fumble, and an interception returned for a touchdown.' The author of the article was quick to point out that Kirting's performance in the UCLA win had diminished importance after it was discovered that Dwayne Norstrom, Notre Dame's star sophomore running back, was found locked in the trunk of his car on a quiet road outside of the city. Norstrom had been hit over the head and was tied up with duct tape covering his mouth. Unfortunately for the young athlete, the heat exhaustion from being in the trunk during the day had caused him to begin vomiting. With his mouth sealed shut, the nasal passage took the excess stomach contents and clogged his only breathing passage. Police said that Norstrom had been in the trunk for over fifteen hours before he was discovered, and that they had some leads they were investigating. The article went on to say that after Norstrom failed to show for the game, team officials had become concerned and contacted police, who later came upon the stranded car. The bottom of the article featured a press photo of Norstrom with the caption, 'Promising star found dead.' The article was dated December 2, 1983.

Kirting's kitchen was a moderate sized alcove on the edge of his living room. The only other room in the apartment, besides the bathroom, was his curtained off bedroom, which simply contained a twin bed and dresser. Kirting slid the curtain aside and reentered his living room dressed in sweat pants and an undershirt. His economy-sized microwave beeped out that his food was ready, and Kirting took the pasta and chicken dinner, along with a fork, and headed for the recliner in front of the television.

The All Sports Network featured its high profile debate show which Kirting enjoyed watching while he ate his dinner on Sunday nights. Sports analysts, former players, and others with intimate knowledge of how the business of sports worked all debated hot topics in sports for

that week. Kirting only recognized the names of two of the four panelists for this week, but the show always seemed to find the perfect people to keep things interesting.

The title screen for Head to Head disappeared and the charismatic host and former baseball player, Roy Jeffries, welcomed the viewers and introduced the panelists for the week. They included an assistant coach from the University of Maine basketball program, retired back catcher John Francis, pro hockey enforcer Bennie Jones, and the recently retired boxer Toni Jumbata, who was forced into early retirement after a vicious knockout loss to the world champion eight months earlier.

“We have a full plate for our distinguished panel today, starting with this hit from today’s conference final game,” Jeffries talked over the image playback of Baldoan’s sack that had knocked Fenning out of the game. “First off, was the hit legal, and do you men feel there was intent to injure?”

“Damn right,” Kirting mumbled under his breath.

As if to wait for Kirting to finish, Francis paused before being the first to answer. “Well, the hit was possibly legal, although it might be a case where the league should take a look and consider a suspension, but the intent to injure part is just too difficult to decide. I mean, it’s a big boy’s game, and people are going to get hurt when you have men that large flying around in a contained space.”

“Difficult to decide?” the coach from Maine began, repeating the words of Francis indignantly. “It looks really obvious that he took an opportunity to take Fenning out of the game. I mean, in the clip you can see him put every ounce of his body weight on Fenning’s shoulder on the way down. No doubt in my mind that he saw an opportunity and went for it.”

“Look,” began Francis, “sports that revolve around physical confrontation, like football, are going to have these situations arise; it’s inevitable.” Francis’ tone seemed to suggest he was taking a shot at basketball for some reason.

“Why do you say that?” asked the host, sensing the need for a spur in the debate.

Francis continued, “pro sports has a ‘win at all costs’ mentality, and in the heat of battle a player may react with their animal instincts.” The other panelists each had a slightly different reaction to the statement, but they waited their turn to speak. “Can any of you honestly tell me that if a contact sport involved players using guns to achieve certain side goals such as shooting targets, that athletic homicide would never occur?”

“Well, that may be true, but that is why we don’t give the athletes weapons,” interjected Jones.

The coach from Maine chuckled at this, “you, of all people, should know better than to say something like that. How many times has a hockey player brandished a stick as a weapon to try to hurt another player?”

A sly grin formed on Jones’ face, “do you mean how many times have *I* used a stick as a weapon?”

Laughs from the other men followed and Jeffries took the opportunity to break for commercials with a smile. “No one is accusing anyone of anything, we’re all friends here and we’ll be right back with more on the always persistent violence in sports debate.”

Kirting had lost track of his meal during the first segment of the show and took the break to eat as much out of his bowl of pasta as he could. Being the experienced viewer, he flipped channels to catch sports highlights during the Head to Head commercial break.

“...and action from the Michigan Open Tennis tournament with top seeded teenage phenom Angela Mastiff, squaring off against eighth seed Devonne Jacobs in their quarter-final

match.” The sports anchor talked over some highlight clips from the match, which showed that Mastiff had control from the outset. “With the match easily in hand late in the second set, a bit of weirdness took place,” explained the anchor as a clip showing some milling about in the stands behind the two players who were sitting for a short break played. “A spectator rushes up to the front aisle in the stadium and heaves a canister of red smoke onto the court near the players. Mastiff and Jacobs were whisked away by security and the match was later finished. The spectator, shown here being taken into custody by security, was arrested and taken in by local police for questioning.” The clip ended and the young anchor man turned to face the camera with his broadcasting partner looking on. “Everyone was okay, but it kinda makes you think.”

“Yes, that could have turned out to be a much worse situation, but luckily it looks like it was a harmless prank,” the co-anchor chimed in with his comment.

“Still though, that guy will likely be facing a stiff penalty for that stunt. And on to other sports from the day we go. We start with the conference final involving our hometown Tigers squaring off against those wily Coyotes...”

Kirting tuned out the announcer and stared blankly at his self-promoting shrine behind the television. The UCLA senior year team picture always drew his attention more so than the others. He stared at it for a few seconds before the ticking of his kitchen clock brought him back to the present, and he flipped back to the All Sports Network just before the final commercial of the break finished.

“And we’re back!” bellowed Jeffries as he turned to face the guest panel. “Before the break John Francis made the statement that in contact sports, excessive violence is unavoidable. Why do you think that is John?”

“Well, I’m not saying that it is guaranteed that excessive acts of violence will definitely happen in any contact event that gets competitive, only that there is a good chance of these things happening. Men getting ears torn or eyes poked in a Rugby scrum, hockey players slashing an opponent out of frustration, Baldoan’s borderline hit today in football, and even incidents in my old sport with pitchers pegging off players, sometimes for more than just crowding the plate, and collisions at home where us poor old catchers become the target. We’re all human, and sometimes we get caught up in the moment and the path to achieving your goals becomes cloudy, and in the heat of the moment we lash out with our animal instincts,” as Francis spoke he had the undivided attention of the other men.

Jones was the first to offer a retort, “Yeah, but don’t you think that that is what is expected of the athletes? The fans pay for the tickets, and the violence is all just part of the excitement for people.”

“But do you feel that the various leagues should control and prevent these occurrences of extreme violence in which the sports just provide an excuse for someone to behave that way? To protect the players and all that,” the coach from Maine offered.

Francis shifted in his chair before quickly replying, preempting any of the other’s possible comments. “Athletes don’t suddenly get thrown into a dangerous situation. They grow up with these sports and by the time they reach professional levels they are prepared for what can happen, and even if they aren’t prepared, they know the risks.”

“Yes, but should sports boil down to an outlet for people with violent tendencies to release their fury on others?” asked Jeffries. Mumbles and quiet grunts came from the panelists and the host’s attention turned to Tony Jambata. “You’ve been awfully quiet Tony, what are your feelings on this?”

Jambata calmly looked to Jeffries, and then to the live camera focused on him. “No matter how you want to dress it up, people have ugly tendencies. We are a species built on violent conflicts and clashes. It seems even more prominent here in North America than in other cultures, but it still exists everywhere. We all have a basic need to aggress or watch others aggress. To blame the athletes for acting irresponsibly is hypocritical. That is like handing a loaded revolver to a young child and not expecting something bad to come of it,” Jambata paused to look at the panel, but all were intently listening, with Francis nodding in agreement. “Violence in sports will never go away, and perhaps it is only an issue in sports with physical conflict, but a great many sports fall into that category. Athletes are essentially modern day gladiators, but the stakes aren’t as high as they once were for the great champions. I come from one of the most violent sports of all, and it has left me with physical discomforts that I will have for the rest of my life, but I wouldn’t change anything that has happened to me. Competing for the chance to come out the victor is the only kind of living that I can ever have imagined. I’ll miss it very much and only wish I could step back in the ring.”

It was clear to everyone that Jambata was finished making his point, and that he wasn’t the type to debate the merits of his opinions, despite the type of show he was on.

“Well said Tony,” Jeffries spoke with a respecting smile for the retired boxer. “We’ll be right back to talk about the baseball realignment and what it means to tradition and rivalries.”

Kirting again flipped to the sports highlights on the other station and turned up the volume while he brought his dinner dishes to the kitchen to wash them.

“...and from that point on the Tigers didn’t have much of a chance to get back in the game. Looks like they might want to retool their lineup before next season. Rebecca Nielson was on location in the Tigers locker room after the game and files this report,” the young anchor delivered each phrase as if he had been watching sporting news his entire life.

“The Tigers haven’t been to the championship game in over fifteen years, and it was apparent early in today’s game that they would have to wait at least one more year for another chance,” Rebecca Nielson looked more like a video jockey than a sports reporter, however she too had clearly studied the sportscaster handbook. “Veteran star quarterback Doug Fenning, the man behind the Tigers unexpected rise to the top of the standings this season, didn’t even get a chance to make an impact in the game before Jerry Baldoan steamed through the offensive line and delivered a crushing blow on Fenning. One that many consider a deliberate attempt to injure the quarterback. I spoke briefly with Fenning after the game and had a chance to ask him what he thought of the hit and find out the extent of the injuries he sustained.”

The clip changed to one of Fenning inside the Tiger locker room with ice on his right shoulder and several microphones positioned under his chin.

Fenning responded to the leading question that had been posed right before the current shot, “I don’t know if I would call it a dirty hit, but yeah, maybe he could have let up a bit at the end.”

“Thanks for your time Doug.”

The next shot was of a middle-aged man wearing a golf shirt with the team logo. ‘Dr. Allan Zelkavich’ appeared on the bottom of the screen as Nielson asked her question off screen, “Dr. Zelkavich, can you tell us the nature of Doug Fenning’s injury?”

“Yes, Doug suffered a shoulder dislocation on his throwing arm, and a shoulder contusion on his other shoulder. The extreme amount of weight that came down on him with his throwing arm in an awkward position caused these injuries.”

“Did you see the hit that caused the injury doctor?”

“Yes, yes I did. Both live and on replay.”

“In your opinion, did you think the hit was legal?”

Dr. Zerkovich furrowed his brow as he responded, “well, I’m not sure if it was legal or not, but I sure hope the league takes a closer look at it. I mean, letting players using excessive violence on each other isn’t good for the league, especially when star players get hurt.” Zerkovich answered the question while looking directly into the camera, as if to emphasize his statement.

“Thank you doctor.”

The next shot was of Nielson standing just outside of the Coyote locker room. “Although Doug Fenning didn’t accuse Jerry Baldoan of any wrong doing, many other Tiger players and officials made comments about the hit off camera. I went to talk to the man who caused the injury to hear what he had to say about the incident.”

A sweaty Baldoan filled the screen, still wearing the padded pants and sweat soaked undershirt that he had worn for the game.

“Jerry, some seem to think that you intended to injure Fenning on the play, what do you have to say to these people?” Baldoan was already shaking his head in mock frustration. “Did you in fact try to injure Fenning?”

“Na, that’s totally ridiculous. It’s a big man game and some of those smaller guys will get hurt. They had to sub in a backup blocker and I took advantage of the situation. I’m sorry he got hurt, but I can’t control everything,” Baldoan took a towel to his face to clear the sweat as he uttered the last sentence.

“There has been some speculation that the league might take some action against you. Do you feel that is at all warranted?”

“What?” Baldoan was obviously a bit surprised. “Now that’s just stupid. This is a physical sport and the strongest team wins. Players go down all the time, it’s not my damn responsibility to try to hit someone nicely so they don’t get hurt. I only know how to do one thing, go hard and fast and make every hit and tackle that I can.”

“Thanks for your time Jerry,” Nielson finished.

“Ya,” Jerry responded, still looking annoyed at the thought of the league punishing him for playing the game.

Nielson was shown again back on the field with the stands completely deserted as the camera did a slow zoom in on her during the last part of her segment. “Whether the hit was an attempt to injure or not, one thing *is* certain: Doug Fenning getting injured cost the Tigers their chance at making the championship game. And so the Coyotes look forward to another game while the Tigers go home. This is Rebecca Nielson at Juricom Stadium.”

“Thanks Rebecca, tough break for the Tigers,” the young anchor said in a weak attempt to hide the fact that he really didn’t care about the outcome of the game one way or the other.

Kirting grimaced and turned the television volume down a touch, now that he was finished with his dinner. He looked around his modest apartment at the memorabilia from his playing days.

He had been good enough at the sport of football that almost everyone around him encouraged or allowed him to place the sport above all other pursuits, most of all academics. With his assertive father structuring most aspects of his upbringing, the young Kirting had little outside of ability standing in the way of his becoming a successful athlete.

He had come to grips with the events in his life that led him to where he was now. It was, by many people’s estimates, that of a failure. However he didn’t think that was the case at

all. He felt that the only losers in life were those that never gave their dreams a shot, who never gave everything to doing something they loved to do. For Kirting, that meant playing football and, more importantly, winning.

He looked down to the gym bench, which sometimes doubled as his coffee table, to where a folder with a flashy logo lay. He had purchased the ticket to the championship game three weeks before and, once he had the ticket, the airfare and hotel arrangements soon followed. All together the trip had already cost the majority of Kirting's nest egg. However, for the chance to see his Tigers play for the championship it had been a no-brainer to buy it through a friend of a friend who had connections. He opened the folder and flipped through the itinerary inside, and then gently stroked the game ticket for about the hundredth time since he had obtained it. He remembered the high he had been on after picking it up.

Kirting let out a big sigh just as the phone rang.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Where are ya?" the coarse and familiar voice of Carl McCleod, owner of the Bowling Bonanza Alleys, blurted out.

Kirting looked at the clock on the wall and realized he was already five minutes late for his night shift at the bowling alley. "Ah shit, sorry Carl! I'll be right there," and before McCleod could reply Kirting hung up the phone, turned off his television, and headed out the door for work.

* * *

A short five minutes later and Dennis Kirting was strolling through the doors of Bowling Bonanza and heading for his post behind the counter. McCleod was busy with someone, so Kirting waited until the customer was gone before saying anything. McCleod handed the customer his shoes and pointed the way to the lane where he and his friend would be playing, and before he even realized Kirting was standing behind him, he heard another apology from his employee.

"Sorry about being late Carl."

"No problem my good man," McCleod was never one to be pleasant unless something had gone his way, and even then the mood was usually short lived.

A faint smile formed on Kirting's face as he watched McCleod hum foolishly to the rock music playing in the alley.

"So, I'm sorry to hear about your Tigers losing," McCleod's words seemed appropriate for someone talking to a diehard sports fan who had suffered a great heartbreak, but his mood only seemed to rise to another level as he said this.

"Ah, thanks Carl. I'm pretty upset about it."

"So," McCleod began carefully, "looks like I'll be going away next weekend after all, huh?"

Kirting instantly realized why the old man was so happy, and combined with everything else that had gone wrong during the day, it caused the anger to swell up until he felt he might have trouble taking in his next breath of air. "What do you mean?" he asked, knowing full well what McCleod intended.

A look of confusion appeared on McCleod's face. "Won't you be skipping the championship game now that the Tigers aren't in it?"

He waited a moment before responding, but when Kirting did speak it was apparent he had just become sure of what he wanted to do. “No Carl, I’m still going to go.”

“Ah damnit! I see. Well, I don’t see why you want to go.”

“Well Carl, even if I wanted to sell the ticket, I’d be stuck with paying for the hotel and flight, so I might as well go and take my first vacation in years.”

McCleod’s pleasant mood completely disappeared and, much to Kirting’s relief, he was back to his usual self. “Well, alright then. Suit yourself.”

“Can I get some help here please?” a pimply-faced teenager asked, looking like he had been waiting for hours.

Kirting stepped up to help him while McCleod grumbled and started tallying up a stack of receipts. A few minutes later the pimply-faced customer was off to bowl with his friends, and Kirting stepped back from the counter to watch the television that hung overhead. He turned up the set when he saw that Fenning was being interviewed. According to the information on screen, the interview was taking place live at the Ridgemount Medical Center, which Kirting realized was not far from the alley.

“So Doug, what’s the prognosis?” asked a young sports reporter.

Fenning was sitting on a diagnosis bed with a large ice pack attached to his right shoulder, “looks like the off-season came just in time,” Fenning cracked. His wry smile disappeared, “I’ll be fine for next season though.”

“A lot has been said today on whether Baldoan’s hit was dirty or not. Did you think it was a legal hit?”

Fenning chuckled, “I’ve only been asked that ten times today. I will say this about the hit, it’s all part of football. Guys hit hard and do whatever it takes to win. Personally though, I don’t like when players deliberately try to hurt each other. It’s a sport, not a free for all battle to the death or something,” Fenning paused and took a breath. “Yes and yes,” he said simply.

“Excuse me?” the puzzled reporter asked, pressing for clarification.

“Yes I think the hit was dirty, and yes I think it was legal, barely. I wasn’t going to say anything, but after seeing Baldoan talk about the hit after the game I realized I might as well be honest. Jerry Baldoan saw a chance to take me out and went for it. I’m not complaining, it happens, but I believe what goes around comes around.”

“Really? What do you mean exactly?”

“Next year we’ll whoop those Coyotes good,” Fenning slyly answered as a charismatic smile crossed his face.

The reporter chuckled before finishing up facing the camera, “well there you have it folks, this is Dan Asiago with Doug Fenning from the Ridgemount Medical Center.”

Kirting stood motionless for a moment, then started heading out from behind the counter. “I’ll be back in an hour, sorry Carl.”

“Dennis wait!” McCleod pleaded hopelessly as Kirting disappeared out the front door. “Ah shit.” McCleod slipped back into the chair at the counter.

* * *

The medical center was only about a ten-minute drive from the Bowling Bonanza, and Kirting could not pass up this opportunity. He circled the parking lot surrounding the center once to scope out the best spot to park at and wait.

Not long after he stopped the car, Kirting saw the van from the local sports news pull away from the building. He didn't have to wait much after that to see Fenning, who appeared in front of the building only a few minutes later. Kirting left his car in the deserted parking lot and briskly walked towards the main doors of the medical center where Fenning had placed a gym bag down on the ground, in order to awkwardly light a cigarette at waist level.

He had never spoken to Doug Fenning before, but Kirting wasn't completely new to talking with members of the Tigers. Any devoted fan got the opportunity to address their heroes from time to time. Even so, Dennis was extremely nervous as he approached the star quarterback. He was feeling like he was doing something wrong even though, technically, he wasn't.

"Damn it!" Fenning cursed at his injured shoulder that was preventing him from lighting his cigarette successfully.

"Can I give you a hand Mr. Fenning?" Kirting asked, reacting deftly to the opportunity to open dialogue with Fenning in a natural way.

"Sure, thanks man," Fenning said as he handed his lighter over to this rather large stranger, and then placed the cigarette between his lips. Kirting flicked the lighter and held it under the end of Fenning's cigarette while he waited for one of the most prolific passers in league history to inhale.

Not wanting to seem too eager, Kirting waited until Fenning addressed him again before he said what he had come to say. The moment to speak came more quickly than Kirting had expected, as a pleased Fenning brought his cigarette to life and nodded to Dennis in appreciation. He almost stumbled on his words as he realized it was time. "Uh, here you go," was all he could say as he returned the lighter to Fenning.

"Thanks," Fenning nodded in appreciation as he inhaled all the smoke his lungs could hold. Kirting watched him closely and then began to speak as the smoke was returned to the night air.

"I think what happened to you today was just not right." Kirting delivered each word very carefully, and then waited for Fenning to respond.

"Ya, you and me both man," was all he said back to this intense stranger standing before him.

"I mean, it was obvious Baldoan was trying to knock you out of the game," Fenning nodded silently and took another pull of the cigarette as he listened to Kirting. "So now his team is playing in the championship, while the Tigers miss their big opportunity. An opportunity that probably won't be around again anytime soon."

Fenning was quick to jump in at this point, "well hold on now, we still have a solid core of players for next year..."

Kirting cut off the man destined for the Hall of Fame. "You're losing three out of four of your starting linebackers to free agency, and Tiger management has already said they won't be able to spend the money to keep them." This got Fenning's attention, especially since the stranger was correct in the statement, and more importantly because it hadn't even become widely known that the Tiger ownership was reducing expenses so they could sell the team next season. "On offense you'll be losing your two favorite targets, Edmonds to free agency as well, and Lewis to retirement. Not to mention that none of you are getting any younger, and the last four drafts have been full of busts for the Tigers."

Fenning smiled, it wasn't often he could talk to someone who knew at least as much he did about the business side of team operations. "No, I can't deny any of that. But there is still a chance we might be able to find some good producers on the free agent market."

"Ya maybe, I guess," Kirting paused and reflected on how well things were going so far. He was having some second thoughts now about what he had decided he was going to talk to Fenning about. If he said goodnight to the all-star quarterback now and walked away, it would definitely turn out to be a pleasant and impressive talk with one of his idols. Kirting was able to stop himself from thinking of things in this safe and cowardly way, however.

"Anyhow, the league probably won't do anything to punish Baldoan, and it just isn't right," Kirting had thought about this line a few times, it was intended to leave the door wide open for what he wanted to tell Fenning.

"Ya, but it's part of the game I guess," Doug Fenning conjectured aloud as he reached the halfway point of his cigarette.

"Well, where does the game end though Doug?"

Fenning quickly looked at the stranger, not so much for his words, but for the slightly menacing way in which he had said it. He'd dealt with many strange people during his career, and his whack-job alarm was starting to warm up for this guy.

Kirting saw the look on Fenning's face, and spoke quickly to try to get his all-important audience of one back. "What I mean to say is he tried, and succeeded, to hurt you. There is enough middle ground in the game that this type of thing happens all the time, and will continue to happen. There was no reason for Baldoan to try not to hurt you, except for maybe his conscience stopping him. And then, after the game he made it clear that he felt he did nothing wrong even."

"Ya I guess," Fenning looked back through the glass doors of the center and felt somewhat relieved when he saw two or three staff at the reception desk, just in case they were needed. "But what did you mean when you asked where the game ended?"

"Well, just what I said really. If someone tried to hurt you on the street there would be repercussions, and everything in life comes down to a competition, a game." Fenning casually took a step back towards the medical center. "I've been a Tigers fan all my life, and it feels like they are *my* team. I would do anything I could to help you guys win. I have season tickets, and I try to have my ideas for the team direction get through on those talk shows even," Kirting laughed. "That sounds ridiculous doesn't it?"

"No, not really, I can understand loving the team that much," Fenning had learned a lot from movies and he wasn't going to disagree with a potentially dangerous person. Besides, he was interested in hearing if this stranger was saying what he thought he was saying.

Kirting evaluated Fenning for a moment before continuing. "Well anyhow, I just think it's wrong that he got away with that, but what would be even more wrong is if the Coyotes won it all now. Especially if Baldoan was a part of it."

Fenning took a gulp and suddenly realized how dry his mouth was. No wonder I don't smoke cigarettes in deserted parking lots more often, he thought.

"It does suck, but it's just a game in the end. Things have a way of working out," Fenning instantly realized that was probably not a smart thing to say to this stranger.

Kirting's eyes lit up, "Yes exactly, karma."

"Uh, ya, I guess," Doug knew it was too late now. Not only had the stranger made it sound like he was threatening that fat bastard lineman who had taken him out of the playoff game, but Fenning had practically validated this weirdo's view on things.

“Well, not to worry Doug, just think of me as a member of the team that makes sure the things get done that should get done,” Kirting realized this last statement made him possibly sound a little strange.

“Alright man, thanks for that support. I gotta get back in here to finish up with the docs. Goodnight.” Before Kirting could utter another word Fenning was sliding back into the medical center and down the hall past the reception desk. Kirting smiled to himself, it had gone pretty well as far as he was concerned. As he turned to head back to his car he noticed that Fenning had left his gym bag on the ground in front of him. Kirting smiled as he moved the bag away from the curb so that a passerby would not grab it, another star with bigger things on his mind than a simple gym bag, he thought. Kirting jumped in his car and started the drive back to work. He was only about a mile away from the medical center when a police cruiser entered the parking lot to be greeted by Doug Fenning, with his recently retrieved bag.

Kirting finished sweeping up the last of the Bowling Bonanza near enough to closing time that he was able to switch off the equipment and lights right at 5 a.m. He was eager to get back to his apartment and pack for the flight to Florida the following afternoon. He planned to make the most of his first vacation in six years. A vacation that didn't include only movie rentals that is.

The unavoidable, but undeniably comforting heat of southern Florida was just different enough from California that Kirting didn't have to try very hard to feel free from his worries back home. He'd been here four days, and the thoughts of home were finally fading away. Would he still have that second job at the alley when he got back? Would it be another month that ended with six days of eating discounted, questionable groceries? Now his only worry was whether the rest of his modest nest egg would get him through the last few days in Florida. He bent deep into one of the garbage bins at the stadium practice facilities and emptied the contents into the large rolling bin he was wheeling around.

Dennis Kirting was not one to forget a teammate. Over the years he had tried to keep in touch with each of the players he had gone to war with on the gridiron, all except for the five years he had spent in prison that is. Not only had he kept in touch, but he always made helping those teammates any way he could a top priority. Of course, for Kirting this didn't mean financial support, but his fellow players had learned that almost any other kind of help they needed could be found with him. Jacob Iyago was one of those fellow teammates who had counted on Kirting on the field when they were both with UCLA, but also off the field only a few years earlier when his younger brother had died mysteriously at his home in California. Jacob had called Dennis and told him about it, and how the police had stopped making progress with the case, and he asked if Kirting could help him find out what happened.

Kirting called another fellow teammate from high school who had gone into private detective work and together, he and his high school friend were able to find evidence that pointed to an ex-coworker of Jacob's brother. Kirting and about a half-dozen other players from the East Los Angeles Griffins went to confront their suspect. Being presented with the information they had found was all that was needed to turn the killer into a blubbering child.

Although the Griffin Alumni wanted to give the murderer an appropriate send-off to prison on Jacob's behalf, the pathetic state of the slight man had somehow moved them to some form of compassion.

It was difficult dealing with the loss of his brother, but this resolution to the murder was very satisfying for Jacob, and not something he would ever forget. So when his old friend Dennis called and asked if he could set him up with a job at the field for the week, he was eager to oblige. Kirting had explained that he couldn't refund his ticket even though the Tigers wouldn't be playing in the game, so making some money while he was here, and getting to see the players practice, would mean a lot to him. Jacob was the stadium manager's assistant and he was able to get Kirting a temporary maintenance job; what with there being more to do than usual at the field anyhow.

In the past four days Kirting had watched the players from both teams come and go, he had walked through the locker room and heard them laughing heartily, enjoying life and the chance to increase their salaries with a MVP performance in the big game. He had even seen Jerry Baldoan, and had quickly averted his eyes to some refuse on the ground as Baldoan approached him.

"Hey buddy, you know where I can get some more towels?" the giant defensive lineman had asked.

Kirting had nervously frozen up, only to be rescued by the room attendant who had overheard Baldoan. "Mr. Baldoan, I can get those for you right away."

"Uh, thanks," Baldoan had said before looking back at Kirting, who had found a spilt soda that needed mopping up. As Kirting was burning a hole through the ground with his stare, Baldoan had meandered back into the locker room to pick up a clean towel from the attendant.

A few minutes later Kirting was back in the maintenance room, thinking over the encounter with Baldoan and how he had choked. He wasn't too worried about it since a professional athlete would chalk up the reaction to star worship anyhow. Kirting was positive that if he had looked Baldoan in the eye, he would have surely betrayed himself.

* * *

"What's with you man? You're so damned intense now," Jacob and Dennis had spent each night that week doing something or other, and he had been trying to figure out why Kirting had been so quiet and distant all week.

"Just got a lot on my mind, on work," came Kirting's short, and completely inadequate response as far as Jacob was concerned.

"We go back a long way, and I owe you so much, and if you need help with anything..." Jacob began in another direction to find out what was up with his friend.

"No, no Jake, you got me this gig this week which was great," Kirting was trying to cruise through the conversation tonight, and he suddenly became aware of the fact that he wasn't doing a good enough job when he looked up at Jacob. "It's just that I'm in a position to do what is right for some of my teammates, and I can't decide how far I should go for them." Kirting felt good saying it, even if what he had said was full of half-truths.

Jacob smiled a familiar smile, "well if I know you, you'll do anything you can to help out your friends. Do I know these guys? What team were they on?"

"Na, you don't know them. I go way back with them, back to when I was just a little kid," Kirting shifted uneasily, he didn't like being dishonest with friends.

Jacob's brow furrowed in thought as he wondered who Kirting had played with when he was a kid, but when the waitress brought the next round of beers he quickly concluded it must have been some pee-wee teammates.

"Well, I'm glad you came out to see the game even though your team didn't make it, it's been great visiting with you. Cheers," Jacob said as he held up his latest beer for Kirting to christen.

Kirting's intense state grew stronger for just a moment until he managed to bring his glass up to Jacob's with a wary smile, then he tilted back the glass for a big sip of his drink.

* * *

"How do you plan to combat the Coyote's strong defense tomorrow?" A young television reporter had cornered the quarterback of the San Antonio Hawks as he snuck out of an exhausting two-hour press conference.

Richie Parsons was tired of answering questions, and he looked like a man just caught stealing as he replayed this reporter's question in his head, a question he had already answered five times today. "Well yeah they have a solid defense, but we've got a lot going for us too. I have an experienced blocking line, and a great group of receivers to throw to, not to mention the best running back in the league. It's going to be one hell of a game tomorrow," Parsons had some unexpected reserve energy left to use on this reporter, so he tried to answer the question completely, and escape quickly.

The reporter stumbled for a second, what with the possible follow up question about the offense around Parsons eliminated. "Are you worried about the forecast tomorrow? Rain and wind that might force the Hawk offense to work the running game."

Parsons winced for just a second, this one had only been asked three times, "The Coyotes are a good team, and so are the Hawks, and it doesn't matter what weather conditions we have, it's going to be a great game." He had been told that these watered down answers pleased the league commissioner quite a bit, and they had the added bonus they were easy to churn out. "Now I'm sorry, I've got to go."

The reporter had been trying to come up with a killer question, but Parsons was out the door before he could even object to the termination of the impromptu interview. "Well there you have it folks, Richie Parsons sounds as ready as ever to face the league's top defense, anchored by big men Jerry Baldoan and Cedric Johnson."

* * *

Parsons looked a little like an Olympic speed walker as he headed for the door that led to the locker rooms, not that there was a guaranteed escape from the press in there either. It was just that on this day most members of the press were courteous enough to get what they needed at the conference, with all of the star players and coaches in the championship game present.

He burst through the door and headed down the long hall to the common area between the two team's locker rooms, noticing a few of the Hawk defensive players having an energized conversation with some of the Coyote players about the latest models of six-figure cars. As Parsons passed, a few of them looked his way and nodded as he made his way towards the Hawk dressing room.

It wasn't often he took note of others that didn't impact him directly, but as he passed by the garbage outside of the Hawk room he noticed that the maintenance guy looking in it seemed a bit odd. He was staring into the garbage really strangely while facing the Coyote locker room, although staring into a garbage barrel was a bit odd on its own. Before he had passed, Parsons took a look at his identification tag and filed Dennis Kirting's name away.

* * *

He'd forgotten how long he had been standing there, standing over the garbage and staring at the doorway. Kirting had watched the routines of the players all week and he knew that in the next fifteen minutes, Jerry Baldoan would come back from his workout for a shower. He was one of the first ones to arrive in the morning, and one of the last to leave at night. Kirting almost admired his dedication, but he told himself it was probably just because he had contract negotiations or other considerations in the off-season.

The last of the players for both teams were wandering around and chatting with each other, regardless of team orientation. That was something that Kirting could never get used to. When he played the game it was all about your own team, and winning with that team. Rarely were any pleasant words exchanged with opposing players. The group of players in the hallway between the two locker rooms started down the hall towards the exit and Kirting could hear their echoing laughter hitting him like slaps to the face. He regained his composure and grabbed up the garbage bag that he had been hovering over, replaced it with a new bag, and then headed for the maintenance area where he would dispose of it.

The garbage enclosure was hidden from what little light dusk was providing, and Kirting moved quickly to dump the bag he was carrying. He gave a quick check of the laneway that provided access for the garbage truck, but the area was completely deserted. A number of the garbage bins surrounded the blue metal dumpster and Kirting rolled them aside with purpose. He stopped in front of the last bin against the wall and looked inside. Relief flooded his face as he saw a few small boxes lying in the bottom of the bin. He reached in, scooped them up in one arm, and then crouched near the ground behind the bin to open them. A few moments later he was walking back into the building gripping the metallic lumps in each of his front pockets, as much to cover them up as to feel comforted by having them finally in his possession.

Kirting thought back to the most important lessons that he had learned from his coaches over the years. There was one coach in particular that he always thought of, and that was Coach Kundrick. He had told a young and impressionable Kirting that football was just like life. That you determined the right path to take, then gave everything you had to get to that goal. That the team was more important than any one player. That if you weren't prepared to sacrifice, then you weren't a deserving member of the team when success was achieved. And finally, that you had to keep your eye open for opportunities, and when those opportunities presented themselves, you had to go all out and make an impact. Those were Coach Kundrick's mottos to live by and whenever Kirting faced a challenge he thought back to them, for they had served him well in football and, as far as he was concerned, in life as well.

He had seen the opportunity for what he was about to do very clearly, and he was going to commit himself fully for what he believed in. The last of his doubts were dripping off of him with each step that he took towards the Coyote locker room. With the other players gone, he was expecting no obstruction whatsoever, and that was just what he got. He entered the double doors to the Coyote dressing room, and the sound of the running shower at the other end of the room

became audible. Kirting was completely focused on the sound as he slowly walked towards the showers, his hand slipping into his right pocket to feel for the handle of the gun that he had stolen from Jacob's home. He had lied and stolen from his friend, and because of that he had had to sacrifice the friendship in order to achieve his goal. He didn't feel good about it, but he felt that with changing teams came changing allegiances.

Doug Kirting was far too focused to have noticed Richie Parsons toweling off within the Hawks dressing room, but Parsons had noticed the odd maintenance worker again. It suddenly made sense to Parsons what he was doing. Kirting was walking so slowly that the guilt seemed to engulf him. I bet that bastard is stealing shit from the players, Parsons thought. He headed over to his locker to get dressed, and his next stop would be the security desk outside of the hallway leading to the locker rooms to catch the guy in the act. Parsons considered for a moment that the guy might just be weird and that he was just doing his job, but he had a feeling about him, and also that confronting this guy was not something he wanted to do. Best to leave that for the security guys, he thought as he hurriedly got dressed.

Kirting slowed the already tortoise like pace of his walking as he neared the corner into the shower. The sudden realization that he hadn't thought about exactly how he was going to do this presented a moment of panic, but that quickly faded.

He still hadn't decided where he would shoot Baldoan. His primary goal was to prevent him from playing the next day, but ending his playing career would also help the Tigers in the long run. A person with only one kneecap might have troubles playing football, he suspected. That brought an ironic smile as he thought about the Nancy Kerrigan, Tanya Harding incident. He hadn't considered how the press would look at this before now, but those thoughts were quickly swept aside, and Kirting once again focused on what he was here to do.

He slowly peeked around the corner into the shower and saw that Baldoan was indeed the only person there, and currently had his back to Kirting as he washed his curly brown hair. Kirting pulled the gun from his pocket for the first time and a rush of adrenaline and anxiety overtook him for a second. He stepped over the edge of the doorway into the large shower room and placed his foot down on the wet tiles, making sure the foot was steady, and then slowly brought his other leg in.

He smelt it now. Nothing stood in the way of his objective.

Kirting raised the gun slowly and pointed it at Baldoan. He wanted to make sure he took out his knee properly so he waited for the big man to turn around. It felt strange to be holding a gun to the man who had ended his team's hopes for the season. To be so close to unleashing his revenge, but not to have done it yet, created an uneasy tension that he couldn't tolerate any longer.

"Hey," he blurted out, louder than he had expected to.

Baldoan nearly jumped off his feet and swung around, completely startled. "What the fuck?" he screamed even before he saw the strange maintenance man pointing a gun at him. When he saw the gun, his eyes fixated on it and he raised his hands up immediately in a passive manner. "Okay man, please don't shoot." Baldoan suddenly felt like Robert Redford's character in *The Natural* and, as the mind often does, the big man relived the entire movie in an instant despite the situation he was in, or maybe because of it.

Baldoan's request fell on deaf ears as Kirting immediately lowered the gun to point it at his right knee and squeezed the trigger once. The impact of the bullet produced a large, fine spray of blood that hit the tiles on the shower wall.

Kirting saw right away that the bullet had missed the knee cap and penetrated the outer edge of Baldoan's thigh. He knew that would be enough to keep him out of the game as the giant defensive tackle fell hard on the shower floor with the loss of support from his right leg. He grabbed for his wound and screamed in pain, then looked up at the man standing over him with the gun, "what the *fuck!* Why the hell did you do that?"

Kirting relaxed a little, but kept the gun trained on Baldoan's torso. "You should know better than to try to injure other players. This is payback," Kirting spoke loudly so that his voice wasn't drowned out by the sound of the showers. He wanted Baldoan to know that this had happened as a direct result of what he had done in the game the previous week.

Baldoan was now clearly convinced Kirting was insane, but that didn't make his leg feel any better. He couldn't contain his anger, "so you fucking shoot me? I hit a guy hard and he gets hurt so you fuckin' shoot me?"

"Yes," Kirting didn't know what else to say.

"You're a fucking nutbar! Do you understand it's just a fucking game that we get paid to play?" Kirting looked at him blankly. "Ya, that's right fruit cake. The fans usually care more than the players!" Saliva dripped from Baldoan's mouth as he screamed at his assailant.

Kirting couldn't believe how pathetic Baldoan looked as he waffled around on the floor of the shower. He only wished that this was being shown on the big screen at Tiger stadium so everyone could enjoy seeing him like this, especially Fenning. He wondered what Baldoan's point was with his comments about professional athletes. Nothing he was saying was new information to Kirting.

The defensive tackle sat up and looked at his injury. He was relieved to see that it looked like the bullet had gone right through soft tissue and into the shower wall. Baldoan screamed in a mixture of pain and frustration. "You asshole. I played my whole career for the chance to play in the game tomorrow, and you stop taking your pills so you think it's a good idea to shoot me."

"You got what you deserved," Kirting said and took a step back from him. It was time to start thinking about his escape, if that was going to be possible. As he began to turn he felt a jarring blow to his torso and the gun flew out of his hand and into the far corner of the showers. He could see a shoulder covered in blue fabric and realized that this must be the security staff. He wasn't expecting to escape punishment for this, but it was still disappointing to be caught immediately. The guard stayed pinned on top of him, and he saw Richie Parsons now standing in the doorway of the shower looking at Baldoan in complete shock.

"Holy shit Jerry!" he yelled as he ran over to his aide.

"I can't believe this shit," Baldoan was almost crying now that help was here. He looked down at his bloody leg and realized his dream of winning a championship had just been taken away from him.

Kirting started to try to use his strength to get free from the guard and possibly make one last attempt to run for it.

"Don't move!" the guard yelled sternly. He reached for the shoulder radio to call for backup and found that the water was interfering with its operation. The guard looked again to make sure the gun was out of his reach then turned to Parsons. "Watch him, I have to go to the phone to call for backup."

Parsons forgot about how important he was for the moment and responded with a nod as he left Baldoan's side, turned off the shower and positioned himself over Kirting. The guard eased off of Kirting slowly and told him once again not to move, then headed over and picked up the loose gun to take with him. He hurried out of the shower to go get help.

Parsons had been so focused on Kirting that he hadn't noticed Baldoan struggling over to where his attacker sat until it was too late. "Take it easy Jerry," he instructed, but Baldoan ignored him as he reached his right fist far back and unleashed everything he could onto Kirting's jaw, whose head quickly snapped back and then upright again, a small pool of blood forming in the corner of his mouth.

"Prick," Baldoan sneered and pulled his fist back again.

Kirting suddenly became aware of the fact that Baldoan obviously didn't understand that his being shot was justified. If he didn't know that, then chances were that others wouldn't either when they heard about this, and that was definitely not acceptable.

Kirting's hand slipped into his left pocket and pulled out the hunting knife that he had been carrying in his pocket, unsheathed. With Baldoan still pulling back his torso to prepare for another crushing punch, Kirting swung the knife forward with his left hand and jabbed it into the left side of Baldoan's chest as hard as he could. Baldoan's right arm dropped down to his side, and his complete surprise wasn't visible in the silent look on his face.

"Oh shit!" Parsons yelled as he rushed forward to pull Kirting back away from Baldoan. The knife was in his chest almost all the way to the hilt, but Parsons had seen it for an instant before it had been thrust into Baldoan and it hadn't looked too long, if that was any consolation for the stunned Baldoan.

The guard reappeared in the doorway to see this new development. "Oh no," was all he could say before he rushed over to the now prone Baldoan to try to stop the bleeding from his chest. The defensive tackle's face almost immediately became pallid. "Hold on Mr. Baldoan, the ambulance will be here in a minute."

Jerry Baldoan was struggling to breathe now, and it was the strangest feeling he'd ever experienced. He looked around the shower and his head suddenly became too heavy for his neck to support. He could faintly see Kirting looking at him, and looking proud. "Bastard," was all he could get out.

* * *

Time had nearly come to a stand still in the small, windowless cell that Dennis Kirting had been placed in two days before.

He had talked with a number of detectives who all seemed to have problems believing that he had tried to kill a man because he had tackled his favorite team's quarterback. A psychiatrist had come to talk with him as well, and she seemed to find everything Kirting had said very interesting. Finally, there had been a few visits with his lawyer who was already starting to advise his client that an insanity defense might be the best way to go. Kirting told him he might consider it if he gave him some details on the championship game that had taken place the night before. The lawyer obliged with a newspaper article about the game, which the Hawks had managed to win by six points. The euphoria that Kirting felt from impacting a championship game seemed to give his impending prison term diminished importance.

* * *

A few of the stragglers wandered into the precinct's recreation room to see that they had only missed the panel introductions for the Head to Head sports debate show. The main topic for debate tonight was the Baldoan attack and what it meant for sports. Not only did it occur in their

district, but it had also received so much public attention that the entire nation seemed obsessed with the details surrounding the case, not just the officers who held the suspect in their jail.

“So there you have our panel, and now lets move on to the first topic of the night. It’s something that *everyone* has been talking about lately. That of course is the near fatal attack on Coyote defensive tackle Jerry Baldoan, by what many are describing as a diehard Tiger fan with a twisted view of reality. A man who had previously been convicted for criminal negligence in the death of Notre Dame running back Dwayne Norstrom seventeen years ago. One Dennis Kirting stalked Baldoan for almost a week before attacking, and nearly killing him, the night before the championship game. Police have told us that the motive was to seek revenge for the hit on Tiger quarterback Doug Fenning that injured him early in the semi-final game. He also wanted to make sure that Baldoan didn’t play in the championship game, in an effort to see that the Coyotes did not win the game. This has truly been a bizarre weekend, and Jerry Baldoan is still in critical condition in intensive care with the serious chest wound he suffered. Hall of Famer Rick Jerwoski, do you feel that this is the end of innocence with sports?” host Roy Jeffries asked.

“Oh no, I think that any innocence was gone a long time ago. I mean, there hasn’t been a big event like this assault in North American pro sports, at least one that I’ve heard of. But the point is that over the last twenty to thirty years we have seen a big change in sport, where pro athletes are separated more and more from the fans.”

“How do you mean?” asked Jeffries.

“Think back to pictures you’ve seen from old hockey games in the 60’s. When a player sat in the penalty box, he was surrounded by the fans with nothing stopping them from harassing him, and yet they didn’t. Then think back to last month when that player from New York was sent to the penalty box and fans started throwing food and drinks on him. That ended up being a fist fight between a fan and a player!” Jerwoski was becoming more and more animated talking about a subject he had obviously thought about a lot. “Now you’ll probably start seeing the netting over the box that they have over in European arenas to stop incidents like that. It’s just something that seems to keep spiraling out of control. Fans need to stop being so involved in games, stop taking the sport so seriously, and start appreciating sports for what they are. Viewing entertainment, not interactive entertainment,” Jerwoski’s face was red from the speech and the other panelists chuckled at his intensity.

“Preach on! Well said Rick, hard to argue with that,” another of the panelists chipped in.

An unrecognized panelist wearing a suit spoke next, and as he began to talk a graphic appeared explaining that he was Dr. Henry Levine, a sports psychiatrist and author. “Fans always feel that it is *their* team when there is a win, but when the home town team loses it usually becomes just a team for most fans. The difference is the fan that associates themselves with the team through thick and thin. The diehard fan if you will. They take the losses very hard, not only does it ruin their day, but it even causes many of them to become violent afterwards.” Jeffries nodded in agreement before Dr. Levine continued, “and I’m not talking about the men who hit their wives because they lost a sports bet either. That is another matter.

“But these diehard fans, the level of helplessness and frustration that they feel when their team loses, and they are unable to do anything to help, is just staggering. So, in cases like this Dennis Kirting, they take it upon themselves to do more, much more than they should. The line between the sporting arena and the grandstands where the fans sit becomes blurred for them, so I suppose we just have to keep building more barriers between the two areas to prevent problems.” Dr. Levine was well spoken, but it also seemed like he had rehearsed what he said.

“So why wasn’t this a problem in the past then? Is it a case of fans spiraling out of control like Rick Jerwoski suggested?”

Dr. Levine saw an opportunity to offer his expert opinion again. “I don’t think that is the case really. It is more likely a case of our ever-evolving culture changing as a result of the media coverage that is everywhere for sports. And as the good Charles Darwin posited, not every step in evolution is necessarily an improvement,” Dr. Levine gave his fellow panelists a pleasant smile, but his attempt at humor was completely lost on them.

Roy Jeffries looked at Dr. Levine a few moments longer, waiting for him to say something, but he reacted quickly when he heard nothing more from the sports psychiatrist. “It’s definitely a tricky subject that’s for sure. You have athletes who make more money in one year than most people make in their entire lifetimes being worshiped by the fans. It used to be that the athlete’s only concern was avoiding too much attention, but now it looks like they need to be worried about disgruntled fans as well. There were some quotes in the paper stating that Dennis Kirting reportedly said that he didn’t want to kill, only injure Baldoan, as Baldoan had injured Doug Fenning. But what this guy doesn’t seem to realize is that an injury on a level playing field is one thing, and taking weapons to another person with the intent to hurt them is something entirely different. If this keeps up it won’t be long before we have to go through metal detectors in order to get into a sporting event among other things, and all of this reduction in accessibility to the athletes just hurts the good fans out there, especially the kids,” Jeffries paused to let his statements sink in with his television audience. “We’ll be right back,” Jeffries’ steady gaze into the camera never faltered.

The retired athlete, turned sports show host, was clearly someone who made the most of every opportunity he was given.

The End

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