

*It was the very first Saturday after joining the squad. We loaded into the school bus taking us over to Wheaton, the first game on our three game schedule, to play on the historic Red Grange Field in practice uniforms. No cheerleaders, no band, no announcer, no spectators except for us on the team who were sitting on the bench. It was a warm, sunny day. The grass was sparse and brown from the trampling of a hundred thousand practice sessions. The field slanted up at one end. For half the game, one of the teams would be running uphill. That was okay, as each team would also be running downhill when we changed ends after every quarter.*

*If I ever got in the game, I would play defense because I'd not been schooled in the blocking assignments associated with each play, essential information for offensive linemen. (It wasn't that the linemen were offensive in the sense of smelling bad or something. It meant they played when we DG Ponies had the ball, when we were trying to score a touchdown.) But it wasn't in the cards for me. I was relegated to defense only. So I would have to content myself just crouching and crashing, looking for a ball carrier to tackle.*

*It was an honor to tread the gridiron the legendary Red Grange had dominated in high school before he moved on to the University of Illinois and then to the Chicago Bears. I'd read about him. He was fast and shifty. Nobody could catch him. In the first twenty minutes of the Michigan game, he returned the opening kickoff 90 yards for a touchdown, ran for three more touchdowns of over forty yards each, passed for a fifth TD, and, for all I know, kicked the extra points. Fans filled the stands to see him wherever he played. He got his strength and endurance working as a boy on an ice truck delivering forty-pound blocks of ice.*

*So, like Dad and me, he always had a job. Birds of a feather. Certainly, some of Grange's football magic would rub off on everybody playing on that field. Red Grange, the Galloping Ghost. It never occurred to me that I wouldn't make the football team, that I'd be cut, that I was too small. I'd started out late, but that was a freak accident of not subscribing to the Downers Grove newspaper, that's all. Yes, I was stuck playing guard on the umpty-umpty string of the freshman squad, but it was a temporary problem. The Galloping Ghost. What nickname would I ultimately be remembered by?*

*It was a slow, uneventful game. As the whistle sounded to end it, Coach Riddlesberger gathered the team for an announcement. "Good game, men. We can't win them all. Better luck next time and all that. I've agreed with Wheaton's coach that we'll extend the game for a fifth quarter to give everybody a chance to play." He assembled a team from among those of us who hadn't yet seen action.*

*"Crane, get in there at right guard." My heart leapt as I clamped the helmet over my ears. My day in the sun. The referee whistled to start the quarter. Wheaton huddled, broke, lined up. I crouched for action, staring at the dirt, ripe for genuine bone-crunching contact. Every star begins somewhere. Even the Galloping Ghost only played "seventh team" for the Wheaton High Tigers at first. Then he went straight up to stardom. I looked up and across the line into the eyes of my Wheaton opponent, then to the rest of him. He was a shrimp. Like me. And oh my, oh God, oh yes, he was missing an arm. No kidding. My balloon farted. Birds of a feather? Ha. Truth had out. Boola-boola.*