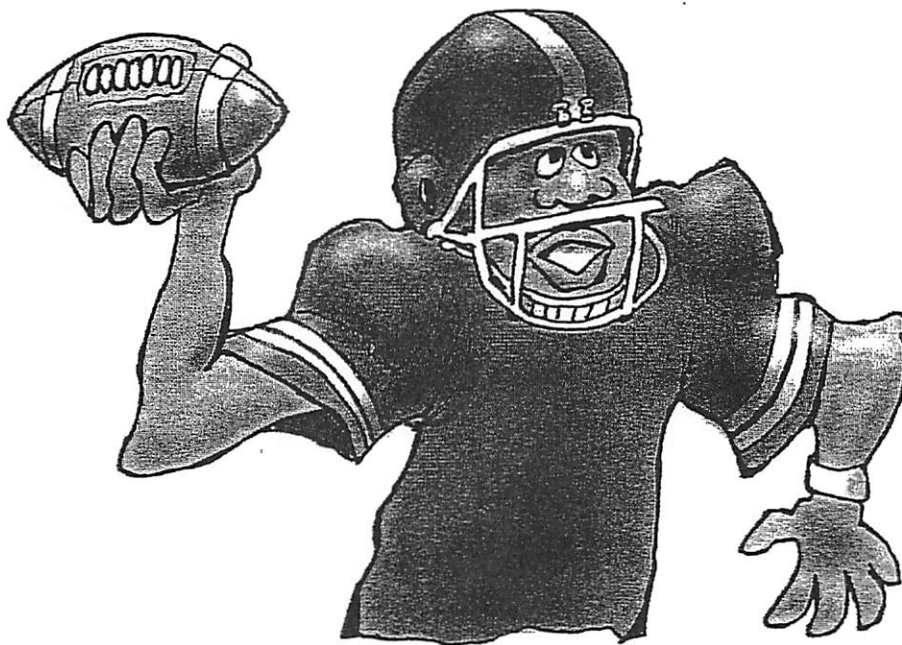


# The Ticket Out

Dad was my first coach, back when I started Peewee football: “Okay, Tyler,” he’d cry with unstinting enthusiasm, “throw it nice and easy—put a smooth spiral on that ball—you can do it.” So I learned to throw the ball nice and smooth, hitting Dad smack in the chest every time. He cheered, “That’s it, Tyler! You’re going to the pros!” Then, turning serious, he knelt down to look me right in the eye. “Football can be your ticket out, Tyler—you just have to work hard at it.”

Dad cheered me all through elementary school and into middle school, when I decided to compete for the starting quarterback position. He supported me constantly, even when we lost, but he really cheered those beautiful, soaring passes that I nailed more and more often for touchdowns. “That throwing arm of yours will be your ticket out,” Dad would say—only his voice got more hoarse and wheezy every year from the crud in the mines where he worked, until now he isn’t here at all to cheer me or coach me.



We're hot this year, really sizzling. I have scholarship offers to three fancy prep schools, the kind that only take rich kids—Dad would have been so proud. Playing on any of their varsity teams will get me into the kind of college where winning big means my ticket to the NFL—just what Dad dreamed. But I'm not sure I can do it without him. Not just without him cheering me, though I miss that—but how am I supposed to leave Mom and the other kids without Dad to support them? He left a pension and a little savings, but not enough for a family. So when this swarthy guy accosted me after I passed for five touchdowns in the last game of the season to get us into the playoffs, I listened.

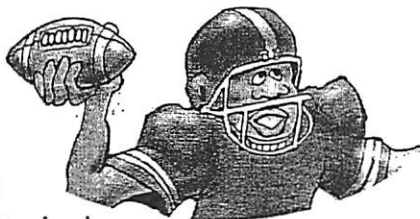
"I know it's just middle school ball," he said, his voice low. "But I've got friends with big bucks riding on the playoffs—lavish spenders who'll be delighted to compensate you if you guarantee the right victor."

"Sure," I stammered. "I mean—I always play to win."

He sneered. "That's the point," he said. "My friends want the other team to win." Then he whispered how much compensation they meant before adding, "This could be your ticket out, Tyler."

I know Dad would have said, "Do what's right, Tyler." When Dad was alive, doing

what's right meant playing the best I could, which always meant winning.



Now, maybe my ticket out is doing what's right for my family—getting enough money to take care of everybody. After all, the fancy prep schools wouldn't jerk their scholarship offers just because I lost one game, even a playoff, would they?

When I run onto the field with the rest of the team for the second half of the playoff, I look up to see Mom in the stands, right where Dad used to sit. And not too far behind her sits the guy who offered me the cash. He's smiling, because it's been a close game but the other team's ahead. They're still leading by four points at the end of the fourth quarter. The clock's running out, but we have the ball and enough time for one last play. I fall back to pass, see my receiver open. There's no time for a field goal—besides, three points aren't enough to win.

Pass complete for the touchdown and victory; aim an apparently perfect pass to land just incomplete and pocket the bribe. The cheering deafens me as I launch the perfect spiral Dad taught me, and win my ticket out.