



The Game Guy

By Carroll John Daly

Tod wanted more than anything to be a game guy. And he was one, although nobody realized it. But there came a time when a game guy was needed and when not any sort of a guy was available—except Tod. Well, that was a time when several thousand people saw a real crisis in football.

THROUGH his childhood and right up to his junior year in Hillcrest Prep School, Tod Raymonds carried his one unfulfilled ambition. He wanted to be a game guy, and he wanted his companions to recognize that trait. Over-anxiety to make good had been Tod's downfall. He was a "fliv," and as yet the only one in the school who did not recognize it. He didn't have the strength of body nor the physical heart to make good. The fighting heart was there all right, and the will to do was pitiable in its useless efforts to force his frail body.

Tod had started wrong the day he entered the school. He had been defeated by the class bully—not licked, you understand. Tod was never licked in anything. He was willing to fight that bully just as long as he could put up his hands, or even stand upon his legs for that matter. He never cried quits. Someone had to pull his opponent from his prostrate body. Tod Raymonds didn't know what the word "quit" meant.

To the others he was just a silly little fellow, to be smiled at, and good-naturedly looked down upon. He didn't have much sense, was the boys' verdict. He was always making a fool of himself, tackling obstacles that he didn't have a chance of overcoming. But Tod gritted his teeth and clenched his hands. Someday he would make them see his worth. He was going to be a game guy, and the school would recognize him as such.

On the athletic field he was a standing joke. Each spring brought him out as a candidate for the baseball squad, and a week later found his hopes shattered and Tod, in his running togs, beating his way laboriously around the cinder path. He just couldn't quite fit in anywhere. He didn't have the speed for the sprints—his legs were too heavy for that—and he didn't have the endurance for distance. His wind wasn't good enough, and his

heart wouldn't carry him along.

But if it was an open-school event, Tod ran just the same—one lap, or two, or three behind—it didn't make any difference. Others might give up hope, but Tod would stagger along behind the pack, falling and rising again until he crossed the finish line, or was led from the track, a dazed and struggling boy who wanted to go on.

"I'm not quitting," he would keep muttering through clenched teeth. "They won't think I'm game."

And then one day in a pleasant, beneficent moment, the football coach sent a great shoot of hope through the agonized heart of Tod. Just a passing word when he met the boy patiently kicking a football about the campus.

"You've got a good pair of legs on you, Raymonds," he said in passing, and then seeing the bright flush of pleasure that mounted to Tod's cheeks, paused, bent down, and ran a hand along those thick, heavy legs.

"Good, sturdy pins," he nodded. "Ought to make something out of them." That was all—just that the coach was pleased with the coming squad and the fall schedule. He never suspected the new hope that welled up in Tod. Here was a field that even Tod had not thought to enter. That was the beginning.

The following Monday, when the football team went out for practice, Tod Raymonds showed up on the scrimmage line. The boys didn't know he was there at first—and when they did, the practice became a joke, and Tod the butt of the flying backs.

"Pop" Edwards, the coach, saw the danger to the awkward boy and the bad effect on the morale of the team, and sent Tod from the field. But somehow he had gotten it into his head that football was his game, and that his "sturdy pins" would yet

bring him fame. After that, every spare moment found Tod out on the field, kicking that old pigskin around.

And he could kick—Pop Edwards stood until long after dusk one evening and watched the boy dropkick that ball down the field. Then he took him in hand and gave him a few pointers. After that, Tod Raymonds was almost dog-like in his devotion to the coach, and Pop Edwards felt that he was paying the price for a moment's big-heartedness. The soft, hopeful, blue eyes of Tod Raymonds haunted him. Not that the boy ever said anything—ever even hinted that he would give his life to make the team—but the hope in his eyes was as plain as print.

The boy could kick—many a night Pop Edwards stood silently in the shadow and watched the pigskin sail high and clear above the goalposts. But when others were there, when the coach stood beside him, Tod couldn't make a go of it. Over-anxiety to make good, was Pop Edwards' verdict. And he was right. But though he could find the cause, try as he would he couldn't find the cure.

"Foxy" Dargon's father was sent abroad and Foxy left school. On top of that, Dick Gorman got sick and would be laid up for weeks. Pop Edwards had something to worry about. At first he forgot all about Tod, then he thought of him quite seriously. There was only one good kicker left on the team—Frank Stanley—and the season was going to be a very rough one.

When the first game of the season came around, the school had something to laugh at. Tod Raymonds, in a bright, new, and unsoiled uniform, was on the sidelines. And there he stayed, except upon occasions when more than one player was hurt and Tod gave a hand with the water bucket. He was good at that.

Also, there was joking reference on the campus that Pop Edwards was holding Tod in check for the big game on Thanksgiving Day, when Hillcrest Prep played its greatest rival—Townsend Hall, from across the river.

The Hillcrest team went through the season without a defeat—but they had some pretty close calls, and Frank Stanley's kicking had nothing to do with their victory. Somehow his foot had gone back on him. It was then that Pop Edwards would look down at Tod Raymonds, squatting by the water bucket on the grass, and sigh. If the boy

knew anything about the game and could keep his head!

But he couldn't—and Pop was worried. The Townsend Hall team was also undefeated, and they had run up higher scores than Hillcrest against the same opponents. Besides, the Hillcrest backs wouldn't rip their line wide-open. Not by a jugful, they wouldn't. That Townsend Hall line held like a wall.

Pop was worried. It was his last year at Hillcrest, and he wanted to make it a banner one. Besides, there was a big college, and Pop knew that the Thanksgiving Day game would have much to do with his future. Field generalship would win that game—nothing else. Pop was beginning to know the meaning of nerves and over-anxiety. If he had had one real kicker through the season—well, his boys wouldn't have been under such a strain.

Thanksgiving Day came, and the game was on the home ground. If the Hillcrest team was keyed up with boyish enthusiasm which knew only the confidence of victory, Pop Edwards was fearful inside. On the surface he was the same confident, clear-eyed man who cheered his boys on to victory. But now he talked to them seriously. He told the boys what they already knew—that the game meant everything to the school. And he told them, too, what they didn't know—that the game meant everything to him.

"It's my last game with you, boys." And he shook each player by the hand. "There's the glory of the team and the honor of the school—and I want you to fight a little for me today. It's the first time I've ever asked you for a personal victory, and—go in and win!" There was a little gulp in Pop's voice, so he said no more. His last game at Hillcrest, after eight years! Athletically, he had made the school. What a feather in his cap and a swelling in his heart if he could leave an undefeated team behind him!

For the first time Hillcrest got a look at the Townsend Hall boys, and for the first time misgiving passed, among the spectators at least. The home team was outweighed nearly ten pounds to the man. It looked like a group of schoolboys playing against a college.

But the Hillcrest boys didn't know that they were outclassed, and that stood them in good stead. Townsend, in overconfidence, took a leaf from one of the big colleges and started the game with

second-division men. To hold the Hillcrest team with subs would take the heart right out of them. At least, that's the way the Townsend coach figured things out. He had seen the morale of more than one team break in the apparent utter lack of respect he held for their ability to compete with his regular team.

And that was the first mistake. Pop Edwards took advantage of the lesser lights pitted against the boys, and finding the weakness in their line, played it steadily. By the time the Townsend coach woke up to his mistake, the Hillcrest boys had carried that ball down the field to their opponents' ten-yard line.

The Townsend regulars rushed in all right, but they were cold, and didn't get into their stride before "Bull" Henderson, the Hillcrest fullback, had carried the pigskin across the goal line. Frank Stanley made a pitiable mess of the kick, but the score stood six to nothing in favor of the home team.

After that, "Hold 'em, Hillcrest," rang steadily through the stands. Even the most enthusiastic realized that once the Townsend line had warmed up to action it was impregnable. Time after time the huge bulk of Bull Henderson was thrown against that mass of unyielding flesh. But there wasn't a hole any place and the solid wall held like a stone barrier.

Then the superior strength of the Townsend boys showed itself. Three times in steady line drives they forced that ball down the field, only to lose it within five or ten yards of the Hillcrest goal. The home boys seemed to be possessed with a supernatural strength when the time came to push the pigskin over. They fought it out in inches then—but their fast-tiring and badly crippled line held.

It couldn't go on. Even the most sanguine recognized that it was only a question of time, and at the end of the third quarter it came. The Townsend backs just forced the ball over the line. Then with a superb kick the ball sailed straight between the goal posts. The score was seven to six in favor of Townsend Hall.

The last quarter seemed just a hopeless affair—just a matter of how badly the boys would be beaten. Steadily but surely the Townsend Hall players forced the ball down the field. Once they lost it, and for a while Hillcrest saved the day by a kick. Ed Shannon was out—Frank Stanley had

been half-carried to the sidelines—and the rest of the regulars all bore some marks of the terrible pounding. And with it all went the hopeless, terrible feeling that they couldn't win. Ever since that first touchdown the Hillcrest team had been on the defensive.

Once again the steady rush of the Townsend team down that field. Hillcrest fought desperately now, with an occasional glance toward the timekeeper. Seven to six would satisfy them. They couldn't expect to win.

With the fourth down and less than a yard to go, the Townsend fullback slipped, struggled for a moment to regain his footing, and was pounced on by Elly Landis, the little quarterback.

One look at his battered team and another glance at the watch, and Pop Edwards saw that the only hope was to hold the Townsends from another score. There must be someone to kick and—it wasn't big-heartedness nor the wistful glance of little Tod Raymonds on the side line. There was no one else to choose.

He didn't have half a decent kicker on the field, and there was Ernie Brown, the right halfback, squirming on the ground with a badly twisted left arm. Pop shook his head—his boys were taking an awful beating—physically anyway. What gameness though! There was a thrill of pride even in defeat. And his eyes held Tod's a moment, then with a wave of his hand he beckoned him toward him.

"Here's your chance, Tod," he said—and his voice shook. "If you mess up that kick—well—boy, go out and show them what you've got. I know that the stuff is in you."

In silence little Tod Raymonds threw off his blanket and dashed out onto the field. There was no fear, just a great hope—and unconsciously that fatal over-anxiety. But for once in his life Tod was playing in luck. Under ordinary circumstances his kick would have been a fliv. He caught it too much on the end of his toe and the ball went low. But it went hard, too—struck the ground a good ten feet ahead of the Townsend back, who was waiting to receive it, bounced over his head, and rolled almost to the ten-yard line before the player could recover it.

And Tod stayed in the game. Pop Edwards had no one else to put in—half his second-string players were doing duty now, and there was less than a minute to play. Even such a crippled team might hold out for that length of time.

Tod lay far back behind the line when Hurston, of Townsend Hall, made that dash around the end. He saw two of the boys go over before and watched in awe the huge form of Bull Henderson swept aside by the oncoming giant. Then came the realization that he alone stood between the dashing, tearing Hurston and the goal posts seventy yards away.

And Tod made his dash—saw the flashing, hard, gray eyes and tightly-set chin of the heavy back, and threw himself forward. He didn't know how to dodge that outstretched arm, didn't know how to grab those flying legs. But one thing he did know now. His duty to the school and to the team and to himself was to stop that flying figure. Tod was a game guy. He just took a chance and hurled himself in the path of the dashing back.

That he overshot the mark he knew the moment he was in the air. But it was too late to right that wrong, and as he fell he threw up his legs. Came a sudden pain, shooting sharply through his right ankle, a grunt—and the thud of a huge body. Tod sat up. The people in the stands were on their feet, flags were waving wildly, and shouts shook the stadium. The unexpected nose dive of Hurston had been a severe one, and the ball had shot from his grasp. The shouts simply meant that Elly Landis, the Hillcrest quarterback, had fallen on that ball and hugged it tightly to his chest as the boys piled on top of him.

Somehow Tod felt that he was forgotten as he attempted to climb to his feet—there was a dull, aching pain in his ankle, that shot up his leg and made him wince. He half nodded. He was just another victim of the powerful Townsend eleven. They were taking their toll at Hillcrest.

Tod could see his line, the center leaning over the ball, the quarterback getting ready to call the numbers. Then he heard the whistle and saw Pop Edwards dashing across the field toward him. Yes, Tod had been forgotten. As Pop reached him, Tod staggered to his feet. He was a game guy.

"We need you, Tod." He knew that Pop was speaking and that with one arm about his shoulder Pop was walking him up and down the field. "It's thirty-seven yards and the ankle is bad, I know—but it means victory, Tod. I've seen you do it often. You've just got to kick the goal."

Other players were around him now. Somber, sweat-covered, dirt-besmirched boys looked grimly at him, but their eyes held none of the hope of the

coach.

There was something wrong with Tod's legs. He knew that—felt the pain that made his head dizzy every time he stepped on it. Once the coach looked down.

"Nothing wrong with that right foot?" he asked anxiously, and there was a gulp in his voice.

Tod looked up and through the pain tried to smile. Only one sentence of Pop Edwards' stood out. "We need you, Tod." Tod's chest swelled with pride. It was the first time that anybody had needed him.

"It's all right, Pop." Tod spoke through clenched teeth. "I'll kick that goal—I'm—" And he couldn't say any more. He just lowered his eyes and looked at the ground. What would Pop think of him? What would the boys think of him? Water was forming below his lids and tiny drops were rolling down his cheeks. Tod didn't look up again. He just pushed his way through the huddle and walked over to his place on the field.

Pop took a step—hesitated—then dropped an outstretched hand to his side. Tod was a game guy. Pop was beginning to believe that statement.

Someone said there were only ten seconds to play—Elly Landis was calling out numbers. Tod didn't get them clearly. He only knew that the ball was coming to him—and that the two goalposts stood out mistily distant. Thirty-seven yards was it? It looked like a hundred. He gritted his teeth and stretched out his hands. He hoped the ball would fall into them. Was it the tears? He wiped a sleeve quickly across his eyes. No, that wasn't it. The goalposts seemed to sink farther and farther into the ground—bob up and down a bit—draw nearer and nearer together.

Why didn't he call out and tell the captain that he couldn't see very well? Suppose—and the ball was coming, a misty thing—dirty—hazy—drifting through the air. His fingers moved involuntarily, clutching at the empty air—and then it came. He could have laughed as it floated into his hands. Why, he never could have missed it. It was as big as a balloon.

That right foot! Why hadn't he tried to see if he could move it? And now—he just dropped the ball to the ground and kicked. Every ounce of strength went into that kick. Had he hit the ball? Had he missed it? There was no feeling—a thud as of leather upon leather, but no feeling of contact. But something was sailing through the air—sailing up

and out and toward those bobbing, narrowing, fading posts.

There was no anxiety. He had mentally directed that ball. It just had to obey his aching, pulsing brain. Yes—straight between the posts—a thud—a body—several bodies had struck his. Then blackness.

Out of the darkness came the frantic screams—a shipwreck—a fire. And Tod opened his eyes. People were rushing on the field. Somewhere a whistle had blown. And the shouts of “Hillcrest!” He heard the name plainly. Then another—a name that echoed and reechoed about the vast stadium. And that name was his. Thousands of voices were calling.

“Tod—Tod Raymonds!”

Tod sat up, felt for his cap, and remembered he didn’t have any. Then hands were pawing all over him, faces were looking into his, and Tod felt himself lifted and heard music—the martial notes of the band. Held on the shoulders of half a dozen wildly dancing boys, Tod was being borne down the field at the head of a maddened, happy throng. Out of chaos he got the chant occasionally.

“Hillcrest, nine—Townsend Hall, seven.”

He’d rather walk, though. He struggled a little to get down—someone might see the tears in his eyes. But they were tears of happiness now—not pain. But some might think that Tod Raymonds wasn’t a game guy. And again came blackness.

Someone was speaking—Pop Edwards’ voice was coming out of the ether. Other eager faces—scratched and bruised faces—were bending over a little bed. Tod realized suddenly that he was in that bed.

“You see, there was a fracture of the bone when he made that tackle,” Pop was explaining to the eager listeners. “When he kicked—well, it snapped clean—as clean as a whistle. But it’s a small bone, and we’ll have him back in classes anyway in three weeks. Ten years a coach, and I’ve never seen anything like that. He sure is one of the gamest—”

“A game guy, eh, Pop—just a real game guy,” Tod heard a voice mutter—a distant voice—then suddenly he realized that the voice was his. He bit his lips tightly and soon dropped asleep.

Someone brought the monthly magazine to Tod before the print was hardly dry. And there was the picture—his picture—the one he had had taken and carefully hidden away in his room. Just one copy of that picture had gone to his mother.

Right from the cover Tod’s bright eyes blazed back into his own. And the caption made his cheeks flame and his little chest swell with pride.

“Tod Raymonds—The Game Guy,” was what it said.

Through those nights of fever Tod had let the listeners know his one ambition. And none at Hillcrest denied his right to wear the laurels.