



HOLD THAT TIGER!

By JOE ARCHIBALD

When Tigers meet Gophers there are more fouls than in a henyard, and more crooked work than in a box of pretzels!

THE Sweetroot River made twins out of the towns of Hattisburg and Shingletown, but the association between the two settlements had never been considered heavenly, even before professional football became a rage in the county. With the pigskin fever came open enmity and bigger police forces on both sides of the river.

Hank Peckham was Mayor of Hattisburg. He was president of the Moose, head of the Chamber of Commerce, owner of *The Hattisburg Bugle*, and the Oleo Rendering Plant. As if that was not enough,

Hank was manager and part owner of the Hattisburg "Gophers," county professional champs for almost seven years.

Hank Peckham was not too ethical when it came to putting a bunch of pigskin performers on a gridiron. Anybody with a rep at Dopey Teachers or YooHoo U. could find work at the Oleo Rendering Plant, no matter if he had never seen a vat stewing up defunct live stock. If an applicant could run or pass, and happened to appear in Hattisburg between September first and December fifteenth, he had a job with Hank. Most of Peckham's players quit at

the plant when snow fell. Hank, it should be said, was quite a judge of football players.

On the other side was a citizen who had heard of the Golden Rule and who was old-fashioned enough to believe that virtue brought its own reward and that righteousness would prevail in the end. Most of Shingletown disagreed with Wilbur Finney, but largely behind closed doors and out of earshot, for Wilbur owned the Shingletown Pulp Mill and employed a good fifty percent of the population. Wilbur was owner of the Shingletown "Tigers" and was also head of the County Parole Board. It was a known fact that Shingletown had contributed its share of incorrigibles to various institutions, and loving relatives depended on Wilbur to put in a good word for their prodigal sons.

It was August, and already both towns were talking about football. Hank Peckham already had his team practicing on the empty lot next to the rendering plant, and Shingletown, when the wind was in the right direction, hoped the smell coming across the river was a fair analysis of the Hattisburg Gophers for the coming season.

WILBUR FINNEY, however, was doubtful. He sat in the office of the pulp mill beating the gums with four of his cronies.

"That old crook will come up with a ringer or two," Wilbur said, rolling his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Always does. I'm standin' pat with the team I had last year with the exception of Arkie Gremp. Arkie went to Pulser Normal 'fore he got into that airborne outfit, and he played football over in France, an' looks pretty good."

"You'll never win no games, Wilbur, from the Gophers. The Golden Rule, huh? It says you should do unto others like they do unto you. Hank is doin' unto you."

"We got pride in Shingletown," Wilbur sniffed.

"And plenty of poverty," George Neff, the banker said. "Our folks ain't finished payin' off on that last football game. I'm holdin' more notes than the belle of a grammar school, Wilbur. An' we tryin' to finance that buildin' development 'fore Peckham does. Whoever solves the housin' shortage first, will get a nice class of people in."

Wilbur Finney sat back in his swivel-chair, his little hands folded over his fat stomach. He frowned. Two miles down the river, where it made a perfect S turn was sixty acres of property owned by Miss Sophronia Devlin. The real estate was just beyond the limits of both townships and both townships were feverishly dickering for it. Sophronia had a sister in Shingletown, and a brother in Hattisburg. She, herself, hived up in Meechamsboro sixty miles up the river. She was essentially a character, and read the sports pages the first thing in the morning.

"Well, I got to drive up to the big house this afternoon," Wilbur said. "I'll stop in an' see Miss Devlin, boys. She's bound to decide one way or the other, with the price right on both ends."

"You better make that deal, Wilbur," the banker said.

Wilbur stopped in to see Sophronia on the way back from St. Cloud. The old doll was close to eighty, but as spry as a kitten full of catnip.

"Come in, Wilbur," the old girl said. "Take a load off your rompers. Just read where the Brooklyn's beat the Giants ag'in. You'd think Ott would buy a good pitcher oncet in awhile."

"Yeah," Wilbur said. "I should think so." He knew no more about baseball than an Eskimo knew about raising figs. "By the way, Soph, how about that real estate? You know Shingletown will build better houses

than Hattisburg will. If that crook, Hank Peck—”

“I’ve decided what I’m goin’ to do, Wilbur,” the spinster said. “It’ll be fair all around. Whoever wins the county football championship, gets the land.”

“Fair? Look, Sophronia, we never beat the Gophers since George Washington listened to Long Island Sound.”

“Well, take out the lead, Wilbur, an’ git a team that can. I’m a sport, and am givin’ a sportin’ chance. How about a snort of dandelion wine?”

“No, I’d better be goin’ along.”

“Look out Peckham don’t steal your watch on the way home, Wilbur,” Miss Devlin said before going back to look up Ted Williams’ batting average.

Wilbur Finney drove back to Shingletown, went to his house, snapped at his housekeeper, kicked his hound dog, and locked himself in his den. He was still fighting with his conscience at six-thirty when the housekeeper rapped on the door. Wilbur let her in.

“Made you two sandwiches,” she said. “An’ I brought you the evening paper.”

“Set ‘em down, an’ leave me alone,” Wilbur snarled.

“I wisht there wa’n’t no game of football,” the angular housekeeper sniffed. “Every fall this starts in.”

Wilbur munched a ham sandwich and eyed the paper. More UN news. Another atom bomb spy apprehended. Iran and Iraq irate over the oil situation. Well, here was some news that hit nearer home. Wilbur read:

THOMSON, CITY, Aug. 17th (CP)—Authorities are still puzzled over the escape of LeRoy “Baldy” Kipp, notorious safe-cracker, from the penitentiary here last Wednesday. Kipp, police say, must have had outside assistance at the very moment he got over the wall although the countryside was combed thoroughly less than ten minutes after his escape without confederates being apprehended. Officials of the prison are at a loss to

explain how Kipp got a message outside the walls, as he has been watched carefully by the guards.

Police are searching for a big black sedan that was seen going through Busk Junction at a high rate of speed not long after the break. Kipp was serving five to ten years. He is about five foot, ten, one hundred eighty pounds, bald-headed, and loves Tierney pictures. Searching policemen have been warned that Kipp is dangerous and must be approached with caution—

“That lemonhead,” Wilbur said. “I don’t understand crooks. Maybe he’d stayed on good behavior, he’d been paroled in two, three years. Now he’ll do the limit if they catch him. An’ speakin’ of crooks, I wonder if Hank Peckham has hired some new help lately. I figure to go over there an’ see the Gophers practice tomorrer.”

THE Gophers were cavorting about at four-thirty the next day. Hank Peckham was sitting on an old bench next to the board fence when Wilbur minced in.

The owner of the Shingletown Tigers sucked in his breath and almost swallowed his cigar.

There were about two dozen football players prancing around and the smallest one could have doubled for Tarzan. The one who had just torn the tackling dummy loose would not have seemed out of place with a horn on his nose. He was the biggest specimen of the genus homo Wilbur had ever seen without paying outside a tent for the privilege.

Hank Peckham grinned like a jackal invited into a slaughterhouse.

“Come over to scout us, hah? Well, it is all right with me. I wish I’d put Notre Dame on our schedule, yep. You know, Wilbur, the Packers refused a practice game with my Gophers.”

“Two of these gland cases I never saw before,” Wilbur snapped. “Ringers.”

“Nobody stoppin’ you from hirin’ help, you tight-fisted old coot.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Wilbur

said. "We shouldn't put nothin' but native talent in local sports."

"Huh, I think I'll build them ulter-modern homes on that Devlin property," Hank Peckham said, flickering an imaginary mote from the sleeve of his loud plaid suit. "Glass on two sides and hangars fer helicopters."

"Whicht reminds me," Wilbur Finney snapped. "It was you put broken glass at the end of the dressin' room las' year, where there was no light bulbs. My players all limped when—"

"I don't hear you talkin', Wilbur. What was it we beat you by last fall? Eighty-nine to nineteen?"

"My best halfback also et bad oysters before the game," Wilbur said. "An' your brother-in-law runs that lunchroom."

"I never saw a more suspicious nature," Hank said. "You look out I don't sue you for slander. I wish you'd sell your franchise to Ollie Niles up at Logan City. We are gettin' tired of pushin' you bums over."

"He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword," Wilbur said, having nothing else to say. He sneaked a gander at the prancing Gophers and wished he had not. They looked another foot higher per man. He wondered if Hank did not feed alfalfa to three of the characters.

"You'll get plenty of opposition," he said, beating a retreat. "Don't start eatin' your chickens 'fore they git out of the incubator, Hank."

"Anytime you want to bet a thousand, Wilbur, I'm willin'."

The Shingletown Tigers had their first practice three days later. Outside of Arkie Grempp and two sizable linemen, the team was strictly from hunger. George Neff, the banker, and Bernie Stouffer, owner of the Shingletown Hotel, sat on a bench with Wilbur, and both citizens exchanged glances. Neff nodded his head.

"Wilbur, you are fired," the banker

said.

"You can't fire me," Wilbur protested. "I am part owner of these Tigers."

"I hold a note of yours for five grand, Wilbur," the banker said. "Your part of the Tigers, maybe from the sacro-iliac to the tail, is the collateral, remember? You got five grand?"

"You know I ain't."

"Okay, I am manager, Wilbur. I am goin' out to find Shingletown some football players."

"Look, George. The Tigers never had no other manager. Where would you git another one that Hank and Hattisburg would hate like they do me? Attendance will fall off, George!"

"I think he's right," Stouffer said.

"I always think up the strategy," Wilbur argued, wiping sweat from his face. "Awright, George, if you'll accept the responsibility for gettin' the ringers, I'll stay manager."

"It is a deal," George said. "After all, it is different this year, Wilbur. The welfare of Shingletown war vets is at stake. If we don't get that real estate, you think Hattisburg will invite our vets to buy houses there? You know we have got vets living in old hencoops and up over the firehouse."

"Why, I never thought of that, George," Wilbur said. "The ends justifies the means, don't you think? But no matter how many football players you pick up, that Peckham will go us one better. I don't see how we can lick him."

"If we don't, there is a new manager next year, Wilbur."

GEORGE NEFF was gone for a week. One Sunday afternoon he drove up in front of the Shingletown Hotel, his station wagon loaded with an assortment of bulky citizens. They piled out and Wilbur Finney and several associates clumped down the

steps to meet them. A big tow-headed man grinned wide at Wilbur.

"Tell us where we eat?"

"Not one under two-hundred pounds, Wilbur," Banker Neff said. "They came over to Pike County to pick apples. Okies, maybe. Three of them played pro football. The others can learn to hold a line. Let's get busy and find them jobs."

"Yeah," a big redhead with hands like Swift premiums said. "We figger eight bucks a day for pickin' 'em apples."

"I'll put three of 'em at the pulp mill, George," Wilbur said.

George Neff introduced the players.

"Willie Grabowsky, a fullback. Played for Ypsilanti Teachers. Joey Milch, who played end at Accidental. Herb Wischmanoscovitch, ex-Great Lakes guard. Danny Sopfko, Verman Guppy, Otto Schmaltz, Pete Igo."

"Glad to meet youse," Milch said. "Where do we eat?"

"An' how about the housing situation, George?" Wilbur asked from down deep.

"We can get Army cots and board them around," the banker said.

It was midnight before the Shingletown Tiger supporters had the banker's ringers housed and fed. The word reached Hattisburg around breakfast time, and Hank Peckham called a meeting of his birds of a feather. Two hours later, Hank was running up a telephone bill, calling all the football scouts he had ever done business with. Forty-eight hours later, a visitor arrived in Hattisburg. Just twenty-four hours after that, Wilbur Finney and George Neff drove across the river and got on the roof of a building a block from the Gophers practice field. Wilbur carried a pair of field-glasses. The Gophers, in their blue and red jerseys were lined up for a scrimmage, and Wilbur's glasses picked up a huge giant stomping around behind the Gopher line. Wilbur handed the glasses to

the banker.

"Tell me you see what I do, George. Maybe I got that stigmatism."

The banker looked. His cigar plopped out of his mouth.

"It's a new one, Wilbur," he gulped. "Peckham must have found him in a cave. That mop of black hair, shoulders like an ox fed on them radio breakfast cereals. I wonder does he live in a tree."

Wilbur looked again. The big back was donning his helmet. He was fading back. It looked as if he was going to kick.

Klop! The Gopher ringer booted. The ball went up and up. It went out of the playing field, hit the roof of the rendering plant, and bounced out into the street. Wilbur shivered. It was not possible. A kick of at least ninety to a hundred yards.

"George, I just saw a nightmare."

"So did I," the banker said. "They could play us with six men and win by field goals. We'll have a football team bogged down inside the five-yard line all afternoon when it comes time to play the Gophers."

"Maybe the wind'll be against him," Wilbur said.

"It was this time," the banker said. "You better think up some new strategy to stop that human mule, Wilbur. Let's go. I can't bear to look no more."

Wilbur got a phone call the next day. "This is Hank," a grating voice said. "You heard about my new kicker, huh? Elmer Sprang? I won't use him till the game with Shingletown, Wilbur. He don't need to practice, as all he does is kick. I just showed him to some of my friends so they'll know how much to bet. G'bye."

Wilbur slumped down in his chair, still seeing a football hopping off the roof of Hank Peckham's rendering plant. There had been a puff of dust, a piece of paper the pigskin had dislodged, flying in the breeze. Wilbur could not get it out of his mind.

The season opened on Saturday. The

Gophers were to entertain the Meechamsboro Lions. Shingletown was going up to Schweppes Falls to play the Badgers.

WILBUR did not accompany the team because he was suddenly called to St. Cloud to sit in with a parole board. A citizen named Freddy Bitz had been a nice boy for over a year and society was considering giving him an out. Wilbur got back late in the afternoon, and just as he reached his house, George Neff called.

"Hello, Wilbur. We beat the Badgers sixty-four to twenty-five. It looks like we got a team."

"Yeah? Look, George, Hank's Gophers win here seventy-two to fourteen without that gorilla playin'."

"Wilbur, the Lions are the weakest team in the county. How did you make out?"

"Oh, not bad. I took a look at the big house, George. I never saw such high walls. An' I was thinkin'—"

"I got to go, Wilbur. To catch the train. You know Grabowsky scored six of the touchdowns?"

"His feed bill is worrying me, George."

With each Saturday afternoon, Shingletown's spirits rose. The Tigers kept rolling over the opposition, keeping pace with Hank Peckham's rampaging Gophers. Three days before the game with the Canton Falls Pumas, however, Hank got a touch of the jitters. The Pumas, with five new players signed up, had smeared the Meechamsboro pro outfit fifty-four to six. Hank sent a hurry up wire to Elmer Sprang.

While Shingletown was beating the Lions forty-seven to three, the Gophers were having a rugged afternoon with the Pumas. They finally came through in the last quarter when Elmer Sprang drop-kicked three goals from his own forty-six, forty-eight, and thirty-five yard lines

respectively. The exultant crowd tried to mob Elmer but he just made the bus that took Hank's warriors to the hotel.

Wilbur Finney and George Neff went over to Hattisburg to get a close look at the great Sprang. Hank Peckham was sitting in the lobby when they walked in. Hank grinned widely.

"Well, we got by the Pumas. It is up to you to do it next week. Then, if you do, you only got to beat us. No use you hangin' around to try and buy Elmer off me when I ain't lookin', Wilbur. He's gone to bed. He traveled a hundred an' fifty miles to git here, an' he's a delicate feller." He got up, went over and told the desk clerk. "Don't you dare let anybody see Sprang while I'm not around, see?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Peckham."

Wilbur sat down and looked through some comic and girlie books. "I got to run along, Wilbur, or there'll be fireworks over home," the banker said.

"Sure," Wilbur said, trying to think of something he could not seem to. He picked up a movie magazine, riffled the pages. Something caught his eye, and he read a paragraph hurriedly. He looked at the clerk and saw the man's back was turned. He pocketed the magazine and left the hotel.

Wilbur Finney was in high spirits the next Saturday afternoon. Two of the Puma ringers had quit, having failed to hike up the stipend they wanted for finishing the season. Grabowsky and his pals took the Pumas in for a thirty-eight to twenty score, and the stage was set for the Tiger-Gopher classic.

They talked nothing but football in the twin towns from that hour on. There was an epidemic of fights on the streets and in the taverns, and many clams were bet on the line. Shingletown supporters had to put up three to win two. Wilbur Finney, goaded to fury in front of the Shingletown Hotel by Hank Peckham, bet his house and lot on the

Tigers. George Neff put up at least two grand. Many other Shingletown citizens dug into their pokes and covered Hattisburg lettuce, and it was a foregone conclusion, that if the Gophers won, there would be need for U. N. R. R. A. to move in on Shingletown and deal out some groceries.

Citizens from surrounding towns swarmed into Shingletown and Hattisburg. Some pitched tents on the outskirts of both townships. The big game was to take place in the old Shingletown ball park, seating capacity, seven thousand, four hundred and fifty-two.

The board of strategy of the Tigers met behind closed doors in the Elks' Building, and George Neff, the banker, seemed to be sweating it out.

"Leave me plan the strategy," Wilbur said. "Didn't I play a year at Kibosh University?"

"Up to this year, we never needed no master mindin'," Al Nasal, the town's leading barrister opined. "Only stretchers and a doctor. That Sprang ain't human."

"He only looks bigger than he is, believe me," Wilbur chirped with a grin. "Well, we can rush them all right. The difference will be in puntin' and kickin'."

"How far can Verman Guppy kick?"

AN EXPRESSION of deep gloom overspread Wilbur Finney's face.

"About fifty yards with a wind," the owner of the Shingletown pulp mill admitted. "But in one of these games, past performances don't count. Now, I must be excused as I have to take my coupe down to the garage an' get it fixed up."

"He ain't actin' right," George Neff said when Wilbur went out. "He's been through too many of these games, I guess. I can't stand no more, I don't believe. You think he's gettin' his car out to see if he can find Sprang and run him down?"

"That wouldn't be bad strategy," the lawyer said. "He should of used my car though, as it is heavier. What chance you think we got, George?"

"I can go an' live with my son-in-law up in St. Cloud, I figure," the banker said.

"How much is this social security you get if you kin dodge the sheriff long enough to collect it?"

"Gentlemen, let us have another drink."

"Make it two," the hotel owner choked out.

On Saturday afternoon at two o'clock, Wilbur Finney drove up to the widest exit gate at the old ball grounds. There was a little freckle-faced sprout sitting in the car with him.

"I hope I can trust you, Louie," Wilbur said. "You got my five bucks an' give me your word of honor."

"Look, I promised faithful, Mr. Finney—!"

Wilbur got out and walked past a gatekeeper and onto the playing field. The place was a Bedlam. Fights were already under way in the wooden seats. The Gophers and Tigers were on each side of the gridiron going through their plays. Every once in awhile a football would bounce off a player's head, or something even harder. Wilbur walked under the uprights to the Tiger bench. In five minutes the fireworks would be touched off and the crowd was demanding that they throw the bums in there.

"We got a genteel crowd, Wilbur," George Neff said, leaning over a wooden rail. "I don't see Sprang yet."

"It is funny about that, George. Hank don't ever spring Sprang until the last half. The big slob is a primmer donna maybe," Wilbur said.

The whistle blew and the Tigers trotted to the home bench. Wilbur picked his starting lineup. Milch and Schmaltz at the ends, Sopfko and Guppy, tackles.

Wischmanoscovitch and O’Gatty, guards. Willie Grabowsky, fullback. Arkie Grempe, right half. Stan Rukijek, left half. Pete Igo, quarterback. Muzzo Frezิปani, two hundred and fifty-nine pound center.

The Gopher captain won the toss. He pointed to the northern goal, right in front of a wide exit. Grabowsky kicked off to the Gophers and then the fur began to fly. The Gopher fullback picked up the ball on his five, and screened by six of Hank Peckham’s bruisers, belted his way to the twenty-nine yard line.

Four players got up slowly. One felt of his teeth.

The Gophers struck. They used a T formation, a tandem, a double wing, anything. The Gopher spark plug, one “Horse” Smansky, reached the forty in three plays, his jersey in strings. Smansky’s running mate, Bull Himperhoff, a ringer who once played for the Packers, slapped Wilbur’s right guard to sleep on a cross buck. The Tigers asked for time out, and they used it to take a swipe at Himperhoff. Rukijek hung a pretty one on the Gopher quarterback, and the officials huddled.

The whistle blew. The Tigers braced and held. Himperhoff went on his ear for a spinner and lost six yards and the ref caught Wilbur’s left guard grinding something into the soft sod. It was a pair of brass knuckles. The officials shook their fingers at O’Gatty.

Smansky spat on his hands, and sharpened his cleats on a bare spot. He came driving in and hit a stone wall and a knee that came up fast. Smansky sat down and pointed to stars floating around his head. He forgot he had the ball. When he got his marbles back, the Tigers were heading toward the Gopher goal.

“Our boys look good,” Wilbur said to George Neff.

Arkie Grempe slugged his way through the line behind Rukijek, the blocker. He

straight-armed Smansky in the secondary and he had a fist on the end of it. Again Hank Peckham’s back stood on his ear. Arkie was picked up and heaved out of bounds on the Gopher thirty-yard line.

THE officials ran back to the forty-six to pull Milch off Himperhoff.

“Look in his pants,” Joey Milch yelled. “This punk has got a knife.”

“Pro football is more rugged than college, ain’t it?” a cupcake in the stands asked her escort.

“I don’t know, Baby. This is the only kind I ever saw. Watch the game, will ya?”

Wham! Boof! Grabowsky and Grempe tunneled through the swinging Gopher line for another first down. Himperhoff landed on the Gopher twenty after the play. Frezิปani remembered seeing Sammy Baugh once. He faded for a pass.

A Gopher tackle got close and he slapped him down with a rabbit punch and fired to Schmaltz. Schmaltz had it but Smansky tore it out of his hands and tried to run. A Tiger end took it away from Smansky after two of his mates had clipped Smansky from behind. There was a horn on the play. The ref said there was an offside to begin with.

The whole Tiger team swarmed over the ref. The decision was reversed. The Gophers were penalized half the distance to the goal post for illegal use of the hands. Cops lined up between the Tiger team and the visitor’s cheering section as Arkie Grempe got set to go from a fake pass setup.

Whoomp! Arkie bounced back. He saw Willie Grabowsky out toward the sidelines and lateralled. Willie was hemmed in. He started running back to the forty. Reaching midfield he reversed his field, stopped and threw a pass to Schmaltz. The end caught it on the forty-six, and ran back to the Tiger forty where he was tackled.

“Somethin’ went wrong on that play it

looked like,” Wilbur said, leaning against a field box.

“Ho-o-ld that Tiger!” Hattisburg pleaded.

It was first down for the Tigers with about forty-nine yards to go. The Tigers huddled, came out of it, and lined up, elbows and fists swinging. Haro-o-om! Willie Grabowsky came slamming through. He was dropped on the Gopher thirty-six where he fumbled. Himperhoff started running across the field, stopped and fired it to Smansky running the other way. Joey Milch intercepted it and ran the rest of the way, and the Tiger rooters went completely psycho.

“Heads up football,” Wilbur said, and could hear Hank Peckham gnashing his teeth on the other side of the field.

Then the battle really started. Back and forth, back and forth. The half ended with the Tigers out in front 34 to 33.

“We got to expect Sprang next half,” Wilbur said to his players. “What is that tucked in your waist, Guppy?”

“A paper-weight, Mister Finney. Bought it for a souvenir when I went to Grand Canyon. I never am without it.”

“Don’t forget,” Wilbur said. “We play hard an’ clean in Shingletown.”

Grabowsky got a tooth loose and tossed it against the side of a steel locker.

“That Smansky owes me one,” the big back growled.

The third quarter began. It was a repetition of the second. Himperhoff, for the Gophers, was going along on his heels. Willie Grabowsky was functioning with one eye blacked out. Arkie Grempe had nothing above his waist but a pair of shoulder pads and a tattoo of a snake and dagger.

The Gophers pulled into the lead 50 to 47 at the start of the final quarter. The Tigers managed to reach the Gopher twenty-nine when they got possession

again, with the help of three straight fifteen yard penalties against Hank Peckham’s mayhem artists. Willie Grabowsky hit the line for seven yards. He hit it again and stayed on the ground talking to himself.

“We better drag him out,” Igo the quarterback said. “He says he is Queen of the May an’ here it is November.”

The crowd cheered as Grabowsky came out on a stretcher. A few seconds later, Smansky belted Arkie Grempe down and stole the ball. Arkie was lugged off and asked if the Army would fly him home in a plane.

Then a tremendous roar came up from the Gopher partisans. A voice yelled through a megaphone: “Number Three Thirteen, Sprang, playing for Hattisburg, for Himperhoff!”

“He’ll cinch it, Wilbur,” George Neff gulped out, and grabbed the manager by the arm. “Where is your strategy?”

“I’m a little afraid of it,” Wilbur squeezed out. “S’posin’ I’m wrong.”

“Then you’d still be batting a hundred percent!”

WHEN the ball was snapped, Elmer Sprang booted it. Wilbur thought the man had a pretty long head. It was shaped like an egg. Klunk! The crowd gasped as the ball sailed high and far to the Tiger seven and bounced out on the three.

Shingletown managed to boot out to midfield with the aid of a wind. On the first play, Elmer Sprang drop-kicked. The ball lifted and sailed over the Tiger goal-posts for three more points. The crowd gasped. Then they screeched their heads off.

“He’ll keep doin’ it,” the banker yelled at Wilbur. “Now we’re behind six, an’ he’ll never let us get out far enough even to pass. You’re fired. I’ll see the board of dir—”

The Gophers kicked off to the Tigers once more, Elmer Sprang booting it into

the end zone. Arkie Gremp, back in, tried to run it out with the help of inside football on the part of his blockers. He got to the nine and was squished into the turf, and the Tiger fans groaned. They nearly burst out bawling when a Gopher player came up with the ball.

The Gopher line had its tongue hanging out. The quarterback deliberately ran back to the forty-five to give Elmer a chance to boot again. Wilbur looked at the clock. Six minutes left. He knew that without Sprang, the Tigers and the Gophers would only embrace each other for the rest of the game and keep each other from falling down. Wilbur waved a handkerchief frantically!

Elmer Sprang took the pass from center. He took a step forward.

The siren wailed and cut through the muffled roar of the throng. Whe-e-e-o-o-o-o-r-u-u-um!

Elmer Sprang stiffened. He looked wildly around him, then tossed the ball away and ran for the nearest exit. Through the panting Gopher line came Guppy, the tackle. He picked up the pigskin on one hop and set sail for the other end of the field. Smansky, irked to distraction, thinking of his week's pay riding on the game, chased Elmer. The other Gophers used up what breath they had left in flattened bellows to join Smansky.

Wilbur was on his hands and knees watching the rhubarb. Across the last line flew Guppy to tie the score for Shingletown. Smansky got Elmer Sprang with a flying tackle just at the exit, and the kicker's helmet flew off. Something else went with it, for when Elmer was lifted to his feet, his bald head shone bright in the sheen of the afternoon sun.

"How was my strategy, George?" Wilbur asked, and handed the banker a piece of folded slick paper. Neff took a fast gander at it, stared blankly at Wilbur.

"A picture of a movie dame was cut out

of this paper. The caption says it was Tierney. I don't get it, Wilbur."

"I see the cops are holding Elmer, but the Gophers still don't know what for," Wilbur said. "It wa'n't for throwin' the ball game. Well, the Gophers are lining up to try and block the kick, George. They can't hardly keep their chins up. Co-o-ome o-o-on, Arkie!"

The Gophers in the line just waved at the kicker as he stepped into the ball. Plunk! Almost eight thousand rabid spectators struck dumb as the oval spun off Arkie's toe. Right through and over the uprights it went, and the Tigers were ahead 54 to 53.

"Wilbur," George Neff howled. "You did it, but this don't make no sense." But Wilbur Finney was running across the field where Hank Peckham was threatening to jail Elmer Sprang for conspiracy among other crimes.

"You was paid by Shingletown!" Hank yelled. "Own up. Tell it right to this crook's face!" He pointed to Wilbur.

"Get this crook to the lockup right away," Wilbur said, paying no heed to two exhausted football teams pushing each other around on the midfield stripe. "It is LeRoy—Baldy—Kipp, escaped convict. Where is his toopay?"

"Why, I bet it is!" a cop said. "Else why would he be wearin' a disguise, hah?"

"I own up," the bald headed man groaned. "I shouldn't have took chances like this, but five hun'ed a game was the reason. How did you git wise, weasel-puss?"

"Who, me?" Wilbur grinned. "Oh, I got to thinkin' when I first saw you kick a ball onto the roof of Peckham's renderin' plant. Nobody else ever did it, like nobody ever kicked a football over a high big house wall, either. That is how you got the note out to a pal so's he could tell when you made the break, and so he could pick you

up in a fast car. It is funny how dumb some wardens and guards can be, Baldy, ain't it?"

"Aw, baloney!" Baldy said. "You jus' guessed."

BUT the owner of the Shingletown mill only smiled.

"And you cuttin' out that picture of Tierney from that movie mag in the hotel lobby over across the river," Wilbur said. "After that I wired the Big House at Thomason City an' asked was you on the Zebra football team there, which you was. An' even then that warden didn't catch on. Huh, that big black toopay made you at least two inches taller, Baldy. Allergic to that police siren I put on my coupe, wa'n't you? Yeah, I figured the first thing you'd do would be to drop the ball."

"This should happen to me," Hank Peckham groaned, just as the gun went off, ending the game.

"I would rather it did than to an airdale," Wilbur said. "Looks like you are not only insolvent, Hank, but you are liable to be held for harboring a desperate criminal."

"Look, I can get character witnesses," Hank gulped as his battered, bedraggled players shuffled by.

"How?" Wilbur said. "You got no character." Then he hurried across the field to receive the congratulations from his associates.

George Neff embraced him and called him the greatest manager Shingletown ever would have.

"Now our vets will get houses. You are also an altruist, Wilbur."

"Correction—I am a Baptist," Wilbur Finney said. "How many casualties did we have, George?"

"I counted at least seven of our boys who should get observed at the hospital before we turn them loose, Wilbur. Willie Grabowsky still insists he is in a planetarium."

"We should clean up pro football in these two towns, George. Now that Hank Peckham owes his shirt, we can make him see it our way," Wilbur grinned. "What is that you have in your hand, Wischmanoscovitch?"

"Jus' a piece of lead pipe, Mr. Finney. I used it to knock mud off my cleats. If that Gopher tackle had to git his noggin in the way, was it my fault?"

"Look, boys," Wilbur said. "You played a great game. If we give you each a fifty-buck bonus, will you all leave town by sundown?"

"Sure, only we got to carry Grabowsky," Joey Milch said.

The Shingletown crowd was ripping up the goalposts when Wilbur and his cronies left the battleground. Hattisburg die-hards were ripping boards off the seats. The cops were charging in, billy-clubs in play.

"Next year," Wilbur said. "We must try and be a little more dignified, George. We must make Shingletown a city of culture."