



Before Hal Lorney could take more than one stride, he was nailed in his tracks

## FUMBLEFIST PLAYS THE GAME

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

*Despite His Slippery Fingers, Hal Lorney Rises to an Emergency  
When the Star of a Rival Team Uses the Wrong Tactics!*

**T**HE coach's whistle sounded, and the pile unscrambled. As he walked to his position at right end, Hal Lorney had no false ideas about his presence there. He knew well that he was playing on the Denville College first team not because of his exceptional

playing ability, but because of the manpower shortage.

Hal Lorney had spent three seasons with the scrubs and second team, being used as a sort of punching bag by the regulars, and had been glad to take the punches if it helped the team get into

condition. But, until now, he always had been overlooked when the coach, "Big Ed" Bannis, listed the players for a major game. This had irked Hal considerably, for he had an ambition to play in at least one big game before he quit the Denville campus forever.

He often wondered what made him fall just a little short of qualifying for the first team. He had plenty of weight and speed. He didn't flinch at a collision or slow down before going into a furious scrimmage. He obeyed orders and never had to be disciplined.

But, when an emergency came, he was slow in thought. Some time before he had been nicknamed "Fumblefist" by some thoughtless friends. The name had stuck to him like a cockle burr to the hide of a burro. A man with a nickname like that was like a baseball player with two strikes against him and a bat broken in the middle when he stepped up to the plate.

Hal Lorney would have been wearing Uncle Sam's Army uniform now instead of football togs except that, when he had been called up for induction, the fussy Army doctors had discovered a little something wrong with him. But a minor operation had corrected the physical fault and he'd been listed as I-A again. Inside a couple of weeks he was due to report for an examination. He knew he would pass this time.

At least one of his ambitions would be realized before he was inducted into the Army—he would play as a regular in the Denville squad out this afternoon for a last gridiron struggle with Upstate University.

It would be Hal's last chance to distinguish himself on the football field, for this was his Senior year at college. When Uncle Sam was finished with him, he would have no time for football.

He would accept the engineering job he had been offered, which would be held

open for him until his return, and start his career in the post-war world. Also there would be the little matter of getting married and settling down to a normal and useful life.

**I**T WAS the last practise before the big game. The Upstate squad had arrived the evening before, acting like a bunch that felt sorry for their opponents. They had used the Denville field for practise that morning. Big Ed Bannis had called the Denville squad out this afternoon for a last warm-up and to have the men run through some new signals.

Hal Lorney crouched now in his position at right end. He turned his head slightly to grin at Joe Piper, the right half-back and Denville's star player. When it came to Joe Piper, Hal indulged in a mild form of hero worship.

Joe Piper was almost a genius at coordinating thought and action. His mind seemed to work like a streak of lightning. His muscles were like steel springs which responded instantly to the orders of his mind. Joe Piper would start for an Army training camp in a few days, too.

The team captain signaled for a play around right end. The second team, composed of players almost as good as the regulars, knew what was coming. But Hal Lorney took out the opposing end without any trouble and cleared a path, and Joe Piper raced around outside him and headed for the distant goal line.

"That was playing it, Hal," Piper yelled as he slowed down to turn back. Hal glowed at the praise. He was wondering again just what fault kept him an ordinary player instead of him being a brilliant flash like Joe Piper.

Given a thing to do, Hal did it properly and methodically, working like a human machine. He had weight and power. When a signal was called, he could be depended

on to do what was expected of him.

But the unexpected always seemed to a catch him asleep or astound him into inaction. Confronted with an emergency, he paused to think out a course of action. By the time he had it thought out, it was too late to act.

He had been given the nickname "Fumblefist" because it seemed he never could catch and hold a ball, either from a kick or a pass. He generally juggled it, and while he juggled three or four of the opposing team would fall upon him.

"Hit the showers, boys," Coach Big Ed Bannis was shouting at the squad now.

The players left the field and raced through the stadium runway and into the dressing rooms, shouting and laughing. The men began getting out of their playing clothes. Hal dropped on a bench and grunted as he bent over to unlace his shoes. Joe Piper sank down on the bench beside him. .

"Hal, my lad, something whispers to me that much will be demanded of us tomorrow," Piper told him. "You know how unbalanced the team is. You know the regular right end is in a Navy uniform and that you're in his place, and that Edwards is laid up, and the old backfield is all shot."

"Yeah," Hal muttered.

Edwards was the regular left half, almost as good on the playing fields as Joe Piper. He and Piper usually divided the ball carrying and kicking, and presented a double threat to the enemy. But Edwards was in the hospital now, waiting for a surgeon to remove his appendix, and a second string man was playing his position.

"We'll probably have the biggest share of the work to do tomorrow at our end when the team's on the offensive," Piper continued. "That's all right with me, as long as I can stand up under it. And you'll

be there helping."

"You betcha!" Hal said.

"I never have to worry about you getting signals mixed. You know what to do when you get a signal, Hal, and you time your moves perfectly. But, if the least thing unusual happens, you go haywire."

"I know," Hal said, miserably. "Why?"

"Maybe I've got the answer, Hal. I've been watching you work. Say a kick comes your way. You don't concentrate on getting the ball and tucking it away and starting off. As the ball comes at you, your glance shifts around too much. You try to watch the ball and maybe half a dozen men who're charging you at the same time. You forget you've got team-mates who'll give you all the protection they can while you make the catch."

**H**AL nodded. "That may be it," he admitted.

"Maybe you're thinking of the crowd, too, and that's always a bad thing. You realize that everybody is watching you, and it makes you nervous. You may have a touch of fear that you'll make a bad play, and worry about what the crowd will think of it if you do. Forget the crowd."

"Yeah," Hal said.

"Think of the ball and nothing else until you have it safe. Grab it and start away, or down it as the case may be. But always grip it, and never let it go. You got your nickname from fumbling, remember."

"I'll do the best I can tomorrow, Joe," Hal said.

"You'll be all right. Play hard, and try to get mad. You never do. I don't mean hot, flaring mad, the kind that makes a man see red and blinds him. I mean cold, fighting mad, the kind that makes a man determined to wipe out all obstacles. This is a big game. But don't let that bother you. It's only another game. Think of it

that way.”

“I heard that Lou Stoman will be in the Upstate lineup,” Hal hinted.

“That’s right. He came with the squad. Upstate will have their star men,” Piper answered. “He goes up for induction in the Navy, but won’t have to go to boot camp for a week or so yet, so he can play.”

“Since some of the sports writers mentioned him as a possibility for the All-American, he thinks he’s the only man in football,” Hal said.

“Let him think it, if it gives him fun. He’s good, all right, and a triple threat man,” Joe Piper admitted. “I give him credit for that. But he’s not so good personally. His middle name should be Arrogance. I’d like to tie a few knots in him.”

“I don’t like the way he sounds off about you sometimes,” Hal declared.

“Let Lou Stoman sound off, if he feels like it,” Piper said, as they started for the showers. “I can stand it. He’s always sounding off about something. Most of his team-mates don’t like him, either. But the Navy will take all that out of him soon enough.”

They went to the showers. When they finally came out and dressed, they found Big Ed waiting to say a few words to the squad.

“Take it easy until game time tomorrow, boys,” the coach ordered. “We’ll have a little skull practise before the game.”

As they strolled out of the dressing room, Joe Piper linked arms with Hal and walked beside him.

“Hal, we’ll both be in the real Big Game in a few days,” the star halfback said. “Wish we could go through it side by side, but probably we’ll be far apart. Just a little tip, Hal - don’t ever play ‘fumblefist’ with a hand grenade, and never juggle one. I understand they’re bad stuff if juggled

too long.”

Hal Lorney grinned and Joe Piper laughed as they stopped on a street corner.

“I suppose you’re going to the Soda Bar now to see Lucy Marks,” Piper said. “Lucky lad! Lucy’s a fine girl. Going to get married before you go to camp?”

“I haven’t asked her yet to marry me,” Hal confessed.

“What? Everybody on the campus thinks you two have been engaged for a year or more. You never look at another girl, and Lucy never dates another man.”

“Just never got around to asking her.”

“You’d better get around to it, my lad, if that’s what is in your mind. Don’t play ‘fumblefist’ with your happiness. Things like that should be settled. Get her promise. Tie her down. Make her sign on the dotted line.”

Joe Piper slapped him on the back and turned toward one of the frat houses. Hal went along the street toward the Soda Bar, where he knew Lucy would be working at this hour.

The Soda Bar was a favorite hangout of undergraduates. It supplied the student body with soft drinks, sandwiches, candy and magazines. Lucy Marks’ father owned it, and he and Lucy operated it. Both “Pop” Marks and Lucy were great favorites.

Hal Lorney’s romance with Lucy had been a natural thing. They had become friends and the friendship had ripened into something stronger. No actual words had been spoken regarding love and marriage, but Hal felt they had an understanding. He intended to marry Lucy when he knew how everything stood. He had decided against rushing into marriage before being inducted.

**T**HE Soda Bar was crowded when Hal reached it, and some of the Upstate players were there with a

scattering of their supporters. Upstate was only a short distance from Denville, and the two groups of students knew each other fairly well. Tomorrow's game being the last of the season, training would be broken, and a dance was to be given in the Denville gymnasium in honor of the teams.

When Hal walked into the Soda Bar, several friends called to him. Lucy was busy at the soda fountain. And Lou Stoman, the Upstate arrogant star, was sitting on a stool at the end of the fountain trying to focus the attention of everybody on himself.

"It'll be a ragged, one-sided game," Lou Stoman was saying, speaking with the air of an expert. "Both teams have been wrecked by Selective Service, but Upstate has a little the best of it. I'm glad I have a chance to play this last game before going into the Navy."

"Makes it a little tough on the admirals," a Denville student called. "But they can stop the war and hold everything until you get there."

"Funny man!" Stoman commented. "It's my' idea that Upstate will win tomorrow by at least three touchdowns. I don't look for Denville to score at all. Sorry, but that's how it is."

"Oh, we've still got Joe Piper," somebody shouted.

"Piper? Oh, yes! He's a pretty good half, but not strong enough to carry the team. Edwards is laid up, and Piper has a second string end working with him."

"I'm the second string end," Hal said, thrusting his way through a group. "Maybe Upstate won't have it as easy as you think."

"Well, if it isn't old Fumblefist in person!" Stoman howled. "Understand you're slated for the Army, Fumblefist. That's a tough one for the generals."

"I'll manage to get along," Hal said.

"So you don't think much of Joe Piper, huh?"

"Oh, I didn't say that," Stoman protested. "Piper's a good player. A little slow and cumbersome at times, but fair enough."

"Slow?" Hal roared. "He can run circles 'around you. He can outdodge you. He thinks twice as fast as you. He can outpunt you."

"Whoa!" Stoman begged. "If he's that good, maybe Upstate better pack up and go home. No sense in wearing the boys out trying to play."

Stoman laughed, winked at some of those nearest him, and pretended to be glancing at a magazine. Hal felt his temples throbbing. If he didn't get away from there, he was liable to take a smash at Lou Stoman, and that would ruin everything. It might be said he picked a fight deliberately in an attempt to injure Upstate's star player. Big Ed, who did not stand for brawling, would bench him if he had to play the game with ten men.

His face purple with wrath, Hal turned away deliberately and walked down the room toward the end of the fountain. Lucy gave him a swift glance. She had overheard everything as she kept busy mixing sodas and making malts. Her glance seemed to rebuke him for his outburst at Stoman.

The coeds were talking about the football dance. Bets on the game were being made quietly, for Pop Marks did not like wagering in his establishment. Students surged in and out, but the crowd was thinning as time for the evening meal approached.

Hal decided to wait a few minutes, thinking he might have a word with Lucy, and that possibly one of the team members would drop in and he could go to the training table with him for supper. He straddled a stool down toward the end of

the fountain, glanced at a magazine he had picked off the rack.

The Upstate band went marching past, on its way to the campus to serenade the old president of Denville. Almost all those in the Soda Bar hurried out to the walk. It grew suddenly quiet in the place. Hal heard Stoman talking, and glanced up from the magazine to find him in conversation with Lucy, who was busily washing glasses at the end of the fountain.

"How about it, Beautiful?" Stoman was saying. "Going to the dance with me? Good neighbor policy, and all that. Binding Upstate and Denville closer together."

Lucy laughed. "Oh, I don't know," she said. "I may be busy here."

"If you can't leave early, I'll call for you whenever you say," Stoman replied.

**L**UCY hesitated a moment, glanced at Hal swiftly once.

"All right, Mr. Stoman," she said. "I'll be ready at nine."

"Call me Lou, Beautiful. Nine it is. Going to the game tomorrow?"

"Of course. We close for the game," Lucy said.

"Keep your eye on me, Beautiful. That puff of smoke you'll notice sweeping down the field with the rapidity of a streak of light—that'll be me."

"Fancy yourself, don't you?" Lucy asked.

"Mere statement of fact," Stoman assured her. "I'll be here for you at nine."

Stoman swung off his stool and hurried out to the street to join some of his pals. Hal got down and walked slowly along the counter and tossed a quarter down. He showed Lucy the magazine, indicating the quarter was in payment.

"So you're going to the football dance with Lou Stoman?" Hal asked.

"He asked me, Hal, and I said I'd go

with him."

"I thought you'd go with me."

"You never asked me," she reminded him.

"Maybe not, but I thought you'd understand."

"Can it be that you take me too much for granted, Hal?" she asked. "A girl thinks a lot of little attentions sometimes."

"Well, gosh, I thought you knew. So you're going with him? Is he the best you can pick? That swelled-up windbag?"

"Hal! Are you jealous?"

"Of Lou Stoman?" Hal said. "Any girl who prefers him to me can have him. Hope you have a fine time."

He stalked out of the Soda Bar, thrust his way through the crowd on the walk, and started toward where the evening meal was waiting.

He was boiling mad!

He was still mad the following afternoon as he dressed for the game. But not boiling mad. His rage was the cold and determined variety Joe Piper had mentioned.

Big Ed Bannis was walking around talking, as he always did when the men dressed for a game, giving bits of advice and making last suggestions. When the entire squad was dressed, Big Ed called them to attention.

"In this game, anything may happen," Big Ed told them. "The breaks will decide the game, so watch for the breaks. Don't let Stoman get away and down the field. I know he isn't liked personally, but he's a smooth player. Piper!"

"Yes, sir?" Joe asked.

"You're in the pink. A lot depends on you today, with Edwards laid up. The team's behind you. Keep trying every minute you're in there."

"Yes, sir!"

"Out you go, now. Give me a win."

The team cheered the coach, who

stood aside with the trainer and team doctor, then the trot out upon the field began. Joe Piper was at Hal Lorney's side.

"Don't be nervous, lad," Piper said, as cheers greeted the team's appearance. "It's just another game. We'll do our best. Watch for tricks."

Intensity was written in Hal's face. But it wasn't caused by nervousness.

It was the result of a determination to upset Lou Stoman somehow before the game was done.

Upstate kicked off. Stoman did the kicking and got away a fine punt. The breeze caught and swerved it, and the ball came down straight at Hal.

"Lorney, take it," the field captain shouted.

Hal set himself for the catch, hoping and praying that he would not fumble this one. His team mates were running to get into position, and Upstate players were charging at him.

"Fumblefist," the Upstate rooters began howling, to bother him. "Fumblefist!"

Hal tried to think of nothing but the ball. The wind swerved it slightly again, and Hal almost missed it. He did not take it easily. It struck his breast and bounced, but he got his hands on it again. But, before he could take more than one stride, he was nailed in his tracks.

"The wind fooled me," Hal muttered, as he got into the huddle.

"Think nothing of it," the team captain said. "They'll be watching for Piper to carry the ball, so we won't let him take it. Left half off tackle. Let's go, gents."

**T**HEY trotted to the lineup, and Hal and Piper put on a great show of expecting to make the play. Lou Stoman started toward them when the ball was snapped. The left half made a couple of yards, and Stoman looked disgusted.

Denville tried a smash through guard and got another yard. Then, Piper got the ball for an end run. With Hal guarding and the others of the interference coming along, Piper ran almost straight across the field. It was impossible to cut in. Every point was guarded by the strung-out Upstate players. Piper swerved down the field a few feet from the sideline, and made a first down. The Denville side of the stadium rocked with cheers.

A trick play at left end carried the ball to the middle of the field with no gain. Joe Piper carried the ball again in a playoff tackle, and Stoman came through to nail him. The play netted only a yard. The substitute left half got another try. In his eagerness, he fumbled, and an Upstate player recovered. Upstate had the ball on Denville's forty-yard line.

Upstate took charge of the game like a bunch of boys out for a wild holiday. Stoman passed, and Upstate made a first down. A second pass sent them to Denville's twenty-yard line. A trick play sent Stoman over for a touchdown, with the first quarter only half gone. The Denville rooters groaned. But they had one bit of good fortune. The tricky wind carried the kick wide of the goal posts, and the score remained at six points. Denville chose to receive again.

Upstate's next kickoff was run back better, the ball carrier being down in Upstate territory. Piper made a first down after a long end run. A pass failed. And then ill fortune seemed to descend upon Denville. Every move was blocked. They had to kick. The kick was bad, and Upstate ran it back into Denville territory.

The second quarter opened with the ball in Upstate's hands on Denville's forty-yard line. Lou Stoman faked a pass and got away for a broken field run. Twisting, dodging, reversing the field, the Upstate star went over the goal line again

for the second Upstate touchdown.

Upstate's rooters screeched their approval. Denville's were glum. But again the wind carried Stoman's try for goal wide of the mark. But the first half ended with Upstate having twelve points.

In the dressing room, the Denville players had little to say. But Big Ed Bannis said plenty.

"So they've got twelve points," he roared. "So maybe you think this isn't Denville's day. It always gives the crowd a thrill to win a game in the last half, and especially in the last quarter. Two touchdowns will tie them. Get a goal kick on just one of 'em, and you win."

Big Ed stood with arms akimbo and looked them over. They avoided his glance.

"You'll kick off," he said. "Put the ball down in the coffin corner, Piper. The wind will be with you. Then, tear into 'em. Run wild. Watch for the breaks. Try everything. With both teams shattered, smooth team work isn't possible for either. Take a good look at those Upstate guys. Maybe they're brown and slant-eyed, huh? Maybe they're Japs. You think so for the time being, anyhow, and go after 'em accordingly. Let's go!"

Piper kicked to the coffin corner, and Upstate was held on its twenty-yard line. Stoman passed, but the pass' was not completed. A line charge netted Upstate only a yard. Stoman tried an end run, and Hal smashed him to earth.

"Well, if it isn't Fumblefist," Stoman said, as they got up. "Overplaying yourself today, huh? I'll tell your girl about it when I'm dancing with her tonight."

A completed pass sent Upstate fifteen yards down the field, and an offside penalty on the next play set her back five. The Denville team was smashing at everything now, fighting the attempt of Upstate to start a march down the field.

Upstate's center made a bad pass, there was a fumble, and Denville recovered the ball.

They were about in the middle of the field.

Joe Piper called for a pass. He spotted an eligible receiver far down the field at the last moment, and arched a speedy pass into the man's hands. The Upstate safety man charged and tackled, and failed, and Denville had a touchdown.

That made everybody feel better. With the wind in the right direction now, and quiet for a moment, Piper kicked the goal for the extra point.

"Another touchdown, and we've got 'em," Hal said.

"Providing they don't score again," Piper reminded him.

**A**FTER the touchdown, the third quarter ended. The wind would not be in Denville's favor now. And Denville had to make the kickoff and put the ball into Upstate's hands.

The kick wasn't so good. As the two teams lined up, Hal saw that Lou Stoman was furious. He had been hoping to keep Denville scoreless and roll up a big score for Upstate himself. Stoman was playing for headlines today, and it began to look like he wouldn't get them.

The ball was snapped, and Stoman faded back to pass. Hal charged past the opposing end and went at him. Stoman had to get the pass away in a hurry, and it was incomplete.

"I'm seeing too much of you, Fumblefist," Stoman growled.

"Trying to scare somebody?" Hal growled in reply.

They battled until the middle of the last quarter, with Upstate managing to retain the ball, but with Stoman unable to get away for a broken field run. Many of his passes were going wrong, too. And



Lou Stoman was growing ugly. Upstate was penalized for offside play, and once Stoman was warned against unnecessary roughness.

"We've got to get the ball," Joe Piper said to Hal. "They're on our thirty-five yard line. It's a long way home. They'll start playing for time, and that'll ruin everything."

"Stoman's too eager to make another touchdown," Hal said.

Upstate came out of the huddle with a snap. Signals were called. The pass was delayed slightly. There was some sort of trick reverse, but both Hal and Joe Piper saw that Stoman got the ball eventually and was going to try a sneak end run into the open and then a break down the field or a lateral.

Two more Denville players caught the play, too. The four charged at Stoman, smashed his interference and got to him. Piper made the tackle, then came the pile-up.

The referee's whistle shrilled and Hal lurched to his feet. The others got up, all except Joe Piper. He was twisting and writhing with pain. The whistle sounded again, and the doctor was motioned to the field.

Hal knelt beside Piper as the doctor came trotting with his little black bag.

"What happened, Joe?" Hal asked.

"Somebody—used a knee on me."

Hal got up as the doctor knelt quickly beside Piper. Hal saw Lou Stoman standing a few feet away, his eyes glinting.

"Tough for Denville," he heard Stoman say. "But anybody's liable to get hurt now and then. We had the game on ice, anyhow."

Hal looked straight at him, and Stoman sneered and turned away. Hal felt sure Stoman had hurt Piper deliberately, that he had been trying to do it for some time. Icy rage came to him. The little affair about

Lucy and the dance had been enough. But now, since Stoman had deliberately hurt Joe Piper, Hal Lorney was speechless with fury.

He passed close to Stoman as the men milled around.

"Keep out of my way, rat," Hal muttered.

Piper was carried away with a cheer for him ringing across the field, and a substitute came into the game. Over on the sideline, Big Ed was striding back and forth shaking his fists. The referee ordered play resumed.

Upstate still had the ball on Denville's thirty-five yard line. Less than six minutes of playing time remained. To win, Denville had to get possession of the ball and make a touchdown. That would give them one point to the good, and another goal kick would make the margin two points. With a substitute in Piper's position, it looked hopeless.

Upstate tried an off-tackle play which gave them two yards. They huddled again, came to positions, and Hal guessed that Stoman was going to try a pass, try for another touchdown. The ball was snapped, and Stoman faded back to pass. Hal charged forward with the others. The opposing end delayed him a little. But the Denville right tackle got away, made a wild spring into the air, and intercepted the pass.

Hal was away and running by that time, some distance to the tackle's right. The tackle tried to run, but saw he was going to be pocketed.

"Hal!" he called.

Hal charged on, realizing that the tackle was going to throw a lateral. If he caught the ball and kept on, nobody but the Upstate safety man would be between him and the goal line. Here was a chance to wipe that nickname of Fumblefist off the slate.

**H**E SAW the ball coming at him like a bullet. He did as Joe Piper had told him—concentrated on the ball. He forgot the charging enemy, the crowd, did not hear the yells that came from the tiers of seats. The ball thudded against him, and he clasped it, lurched aside an instant, then was away.

He heard the cheers now, the wild howls of the Denville rooters. Hal knew speedy Upstate men were behind him, and that his team-mates could give him little help. Also the safety man ahead was watching him, getting into position.

He ran as he never had before on the football field. Something gave him extra speed. The goal line seemed miles away. He heard feet pounding the earth behind him, and swerved and a tackler missed.

His heart was hammering, his breathing became painful. He saw the safety man as if through a red haze. The collision was coming in an instant, unless he could avoid it.

The safety man was rushing in, set to make a flying tackle. Hal stumbled, was off balance an instant, then gathered himself and went on. The stumble spoiled the safety man's timing. His fingers brushed Hal's leg, and Hal staggered slightly again. Then he was going on, and the safety man was sprawled on the ground behind him.

He heard a tempest of cheers, saw the goal line coming nearer. He stumbled again, and fell. But the touchdown had been scored.

Team-mates helped him to his feet, slapped his back with broad palms, shouted into his ears.

"Fumblefist!" the Denville rooters were howling. "Fumblefist!" But Hal smiled at the howls. They meant the nickname in a friendly spirit now.

The fullback kicked the goal. Denville was on the big end of a fourteen-to-twelve

score.

"Only time left for the kickoff," the team captain told Hal. "Everybody a little careful, and we have got 'em."

The fullback put a good kick down in a corner, and the Denville players went down the field like a bunch nothing could stop, stopping the ball carrier at Upstate's thirty-yard line. Lou Stoman tried a wide end run. It gave Upstate four yards—and the gun was fired.

Crowds of rooters swarmed upon the field. Hal found himself boosted to shoulders and carried. Big Ed fought his way through the crowd and got to him.

"Good boy, Fumblefist," the coach shouted "You made your one game in the regular lineup count."

"How's Joe?" Hal called.

"He'll be all right. Just a bad bruise on the kneecap."

"I know who gave it to him," Hal said.

Then they were in the dressing room, preparing to shed their playing clothes and go to the showers. Joe Piper was stretched on a cot, the doctor still beside him. Hal hurried to him.

"You came through. Fumblefist," Joe Piper said. "Good lad!"

"Thanks, Joe."

"You got cold mad. That's what did it."

"I had things to make me mad," Hal said. "Stoman hurt you purposely, didn't he?"

"Oh, it's over now. Let's forget it."

"I'd rather do something about it," Hal declared. The others had moved aside, and Piper beckoned Hal closer.

"Don't look Lou Stoman up and smash him because of me, pal," Piper said. "It's not worth it. He'll have that sort of thing taken out of him when he gets to boot camp. They don't like dirty players in the Navy. The Navy will either make a proper man of him or do the smashing and save

you the trouble.”

“Maybe I’ll smash him on my own account,” Hal said.

“You mean because of Lucy?” Piper grinned. “I arranged that, Hal. Thought that if you got jealous you’d get mad enough to play good football, and maybe get an idea you’d better brace up and ask a fine girl the fatal question.”

“How do you mean you arranged it?”

“I explained to Lucy, and told her to make you jealous by flirting with Lou Stoman, if you and Stoman happened to be in the Soda Bar at the same time. She only flirted with him a little, and he asked her to go to the dance with him because he knew it’d make you mad. But making you mad that way was the worst thing he could do. You won us a ball game.”

**Q**UIETLY Hal shook his head in disagreement. “It—well, it was luck,” he said.

“Luck that the pass was intercepted just then, maybe. But it wasn’t luck that you caught and held the ball, and got down the field faster than you ever did before in your life. It wasn’t luck that you weren’t a ‘fumblefist’ at the crucial moment, Hal.”

Hal went to the showers, and dressed. The men were commencing to scatter. Training was broken. Such banned things as soft drinks and pie and cake were on the preferred list now.

Joe Piper was able to stand, and a car was waiting to take him to his frat house, the doctor ready to go along. There was a commotion and a lot of shouting outside. The door was hurled open, and a group appeared, Lou Stoman in their midst.

“Doctor still here?” somebody asked. “Stoman’s got a couple of cuts and several bad bruises on his face. Better fix him up.”

“What happened?” Big Ed asked.

“Oh, he spoke out of turn when he left his dressing room, and a Denville man smashed him down. Just a healthy fist fight, with Stoman on the short end. He can’t take that face to the football dance tonight, though.”

So it happened that Hal Lorney drifted into the Soda Bar that evening a few minutes before nine. Pop Marks was behind the counter.

“A choc malt,” Hal ordered. “Nice and thick and foamy.”

“Heard you covered yourself with glory today,” Marks said, as he started to make the drink.

“Where’s Lucy?” Hal asked.

“In the back room.”

She emerged at that moment, looking mighty pretty in a dance frock. Hal got down from the stool and walked back to talk to her where others wouldn’t overhear.

“I understand that Lou Stoman isn’t able to keep his dates this evening,” Hal said. “He can’t take you to the dance. But I don’t mind playing second fiddle, if you care to drag me along with you.”

“Hal, you’ll never be second fiddle to me,” she said softly.

“And I’ve got something I want to talk to you about, after the dance. Something important.”

“I’ll be ready to listen, Hal,” she said. “I—I’ve been ready to listen for some time.”