

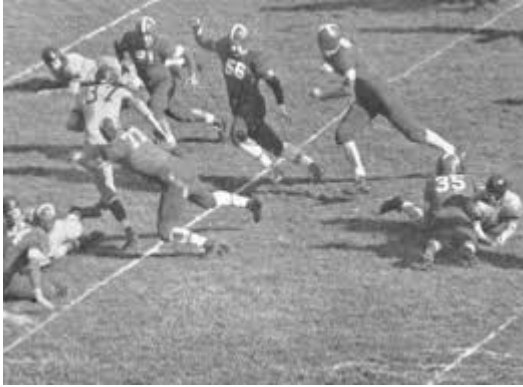
The Football Hero

by Con Chapman

He was the first football hero the town had ever known;
so fast, he ran rings around teams from other towns.
He was the reason people first started paying attention to
the game; Friday nights, instead of relaxing at home,
folks would eat a hurried dinner, then rush out to the
concrete stadium on the edge of town. It became a
social event, a place to be seen, all because of him.



He was good enough that the state university sent a scout,
had him over for a tryout. They liked what they saw, in
those antediluvian days, before you could film the games.
The coaches would sit up in the stands and take notes,
how many yards he gained on each play, and the total.
They offered him a scholarship, all expenses paid.
He was a hero--we knew him when--he had it made.



When he got over to the university he wasn't such a big deal. There were boys from all over the midwest, just as fast as him, all trying for a spot in the backfield behind the quarterback in the new T-formation. He was lost in the crowd. Somebody said, many years later, they saw him sitting on the front porch of a fraternity he'd rushed and hadn't gotten in to. He was drunk, and crying.



There were kids from St. Louis and Kansas City, polished, with no chip on their shoulders, unlike him. He was—who exactly? Oh, a freshman on the football team from—where? Okay, yeah, I've heard of it. No offense—kind of a hick town--right? And he found that he agreed

with them. He went along to get along, and they turned him down, just the same. Every one of them.



He played out his four years and folks around here would look for him in the team picture the university put in the paper in September, at the beginning of the season. There he is, they'd say, but they'd never see him play, or hear his name on the radio. He was a bust, but his name was still on the wall up at the high school, he still held all the records. At least before he left, he was something.

He came home, married his high school girlfriend, got her pregnant,
and they had one kid after another. He got a patronage job, one he
couldn't lose if he tried, and he went in fifty-fifty as a silent
partner in a store. All the glory he could have had was gone.
He was back home, where (he thought) he didn't belong.
He should have gone on to bigger things; something far away, a
place he'd come back from to lord it over every guy who'd sat in

the stands, while he was going crazy on the field, scoring
touchdowns.
Instead, he had to watch while the life insurance salesman, the car
dealer
and the real estate broker all surpassed him. He took his glory
where he
could find it. He rose to the top of a lodge that wore gaudy hats
for
their ceremonies, but he was bitter; bitter that things had turned
out
the way they did, bitter that other men—who once looked up to
him
as a hero—had surpassed him. Bitter that he hadn't done better.

He took it out on his kids; he wouldn't let them go to a high school with a football team—there would be only one hero in the family. He took it out on his wife, keeping her pregnant and haggard keeping up with their children. He took it out on others; if they were new to town, they wondered why. If they'd known him growing up, they understood what had happened. He knew how far he could push people. After all, he'd grown up there, he knew who everybody knew was.

One night, his lodge was going to present the school crossing guards with new yellow raincoats so drivers could see them when it was grey out. They had called a photographer from the town paper to come to the presentation to the two captains from the seventh and eighth grade. One was his son, the other a boy with a speech impediment. As he lined up behind them for the picture, he said to the latter "Smile--don't stutter." The boy grew red in the face, and the picture in the paper had him frowning.

The boy walked home, his face hot in the cold October night, cursing as best as he knew how. He promised himself that someday, somehow, he'd get back at the man, and he carried a hard memory in his heart from that night on.

