

Hair was football's crowning glory, raw meat the training fare in 1893, when these University of California huskies juggernauted through a two-game schedule undefeated and unscored on. The author, in striped jersey, sits at ball carrier's left.

We Really Played Football in the Gay Nineties

By JAMES HOPPER

A gridiron star from the era of the flying wedge—when there was no forward pass and no substituting—tells why today's "greats" give him a pain in the neck.

I WAS a football player in my youth, long, long ago, and now and then I am asked, not too respectfully, "What kind of a game did you ginks play then?"

Well, we played a game that differed in some respects from the game played today. I might add that the game played today makes me very tired at times as I watch from the grandstand. I feel that way, for instance, when I see a star back who has been held swaddled and blanketed on the bench a long time, finally step out upon the field with an air of do-or-die, run three plays, maybe four, then be snapped back to the bench, the blanket and the swaddle, as if too, too precious a jewel to be risked any further.

In our day a man who had been taken out couldn't go back in. The simple result was that our coaches never took us out. We, the eleven who started the game, were held bitterly in it to the very end. It was a long game too. It wasn't divided into quarters, only into two halves, each forty minutes long when I entered my career, and still thirty-five minutes long before I finished it—which is long.

Also the ethical standards of that idealistic period of the world's history demanded that we stay in the

game even if sprained of ankle, twisted of knee, dislocated of shoulder or goofy in the head. What period of world history is that? The nineteenth century, of course. I've never played in the twentieth. Thanksgiving Day of the year 1899 is the date of my last public appearance.

But I was already playing long before 1899; therefore am I able to describe for you the flying wedge, a play still vaguely famous in men's minds. Unlim-

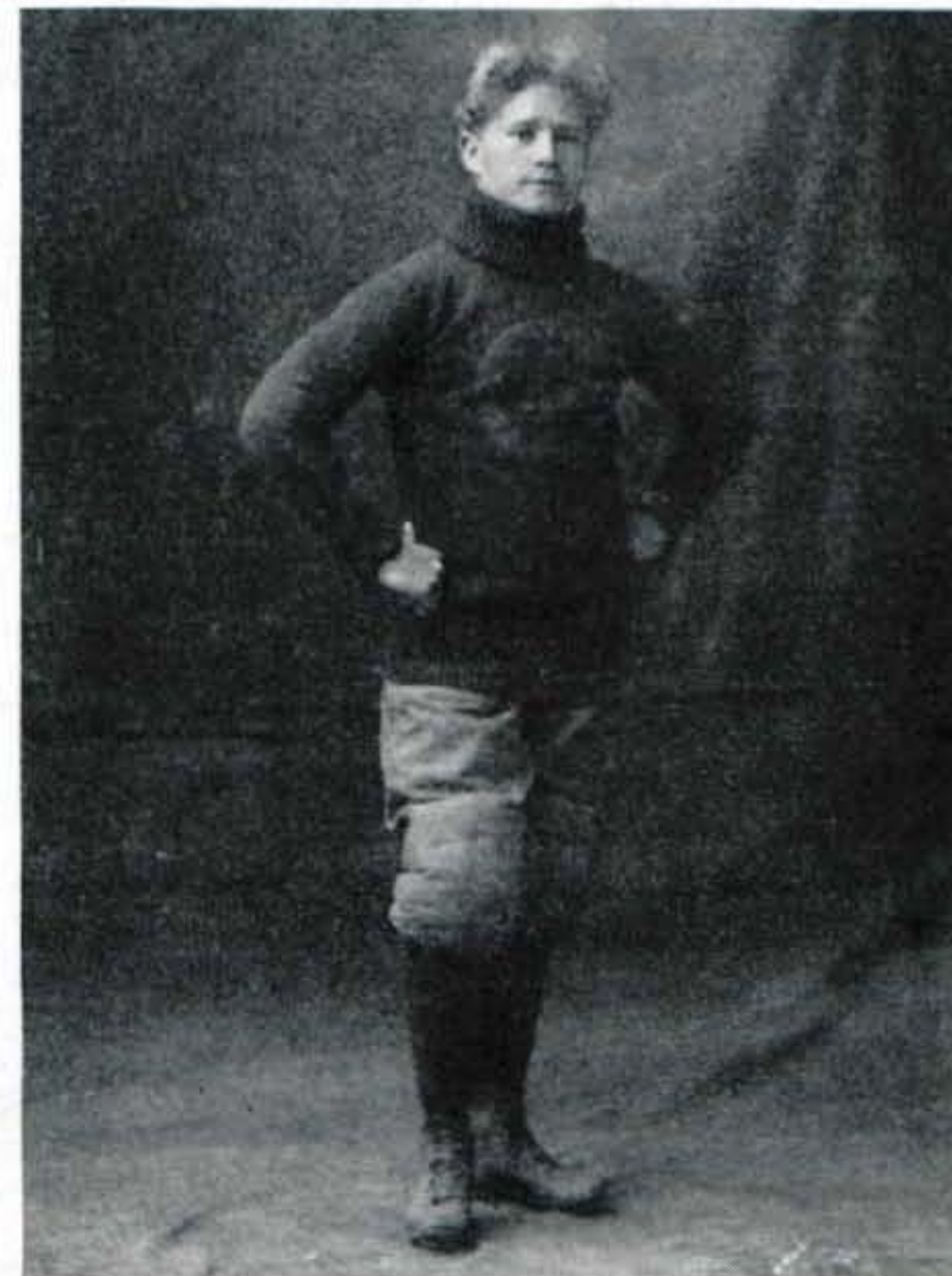
bering this heavy gun, we left the ball on the ground in charge of the quarterback and strolled back some thirty yards to get a good start, the joke on the defensive team being that it couldn't stir as long as the ball remained on the ground and wasn't put in play. Leisurely we formed ourselves into a solid v-shaped wedge and got agoing, gradually picking up momentum till we were rumbling along like a juggernaut. At the last, last moment, our quarterback whisked the ball back to us, thus freeing our opponents just as we mightily crashed into them. It was a cute play.

But what is really interesting about the wedge, of which exaggerated stories have been told, is the fact that it could be stopped. Sure, you could stop it! All you had to do was sling yourself very exactly at its precise apex. It then went up in the air and shattered like a house of cards. At least that is what you were told had happened when you woke up twenty minutes later.

After the wedge had been legislated out, weakened adaptations of it (Continued on Page 43)



Turn-a-flip Al, the team's trainer, whose heroic remedy for water on the knee was roasting it out.



Quarterback Hopper, who sparked California's behemoths in the days of mayhem and mass plays.

WE REALLY PLAYED FOOTBALL IN THE GAY NINETIES

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trailed along for a while. For a time we could draw back two big guards and add them to the backs to put a little lead into our line bucks. Then when this also had become forbidden, we still could pull back one tackle. But even when they had caught up with us and forbidden that, still the game wasn't like today's.

The difference came out of the absence of the forward pass. There being no forward pass, and hence no fear of a forward pass, the team on the defense lined up tight, its line a solid wall, its backs close up. When you lowered your head and bucked that, you bucked a fortification. You had help, though. The help was not so much ahead, in the form of blocking, as it is today; it came from behind. As you bucked, your whole team massed at your tail and enthusiastically shoved you through. Through you went like a straw driven through a fence by a Middle West cyclone.

Once through, the ethics of the period demanded that you continue. Even asprawl you went on, clawing the earth for a possible half inch, while the fellows on the other side piled up on you one by one, and your own fellows, trying to help, piled up on you one by one, until the referee, a skeptical fellow, at last became convinced that your progress was truly halted and blew his whistle.

Under there you lay very quiet, knowing that this was the only kind of rest you got in this game, holding your breath because there was no breath to breathe, tucking your hands under you to escape the prowling of still ambitious cleats, and holding the ball tight in your armpit, for always, at that time, some sly sucker would be trying to steal it from you.

In my last game we had in our equipment a maneuver that deserves special description. We called it the Kangaroo and it was built about our fullback, a rangy customer named Pete, who was fast and springy. As the center snapped the ball to me, Pete would already be on his way toward the line at a deceptively careless trot whose every step, as a matter of fact, had been carefully calculated. I handed him the ball as he reached a certain spot, also accurately predetermined, and he then leaped up into the air. At the same moment, I grabbed the seat of his pants, and gave a mighty upward heave while the two halfbacks grabbed each a thigh and gave a mighty upward heave. High through the sky Pete went sailing, to alight well behind the enemy line.

The only inconvenience about this play was that, landing on the other side, Pete landed entirely alone. Before our protective intentions could get to him, he usually had been well worked over already by an irritated foe who questioned the honesty of this sudden arrival out of the air.

We were, as a matter of fact, honest folk in those days. Honest, direct people. We used few trick plays—we considered them unprofitable in the long run. Our idea was to hammer, hammer and hammer. You hammered a chosen spot of the other side till it was a bit pulpy, and then you hammered it some more. The plays came fast one on the other. There were none of the delays that now follow incomplete forward passes, since there were no forward passes. We took time out but rarely. One never asked for time out for hurt or discomfort, unless the matter called for a shutter or a door. Also, the officials were not the

into the correct hole if it was a line play, led him and blocked for him if he was setting sail for an end run.

The quarterback was the general, the brain trust. He shaped strategy, and ordered every play, screaming out cabalistic signals, face to the sky like a coyote. Above everything, he was the driver, the whip, the adrenalin. He was always a bit suspicious of the big stolid fellows of the line. He suspected them of playing along comfortably at 99 per cent of their capacity, whereas his idea was 135 per cent. Many a time have I reached that 135 per cent by dancing up and down behind my line, vigorously pinching anatomical portions, of center, guards, tackles and ends offered to me as they crouched.

On the defense the quarterback stood back, gathered in the punts, ran them back, and thus filched further public acclaim. I was not that kind of quarterback, I am sorry to say. I was used otherwise because I was built like a

We learned to dodge by dodging the other guy. In short, we thought that football was best learned by playing football.

And so, we played football. Every afternoon we played it—one hour, two hours, three hours—the squad split into teams that were hurled at each other. It was dog eat dog, too, for out of this daily melee gradually evolved the final choice. The way to make the Team, the big one, was by consistently discouraging rivals in your own particular specialty, and the best way to discourage them, of course, was to kill them off.

The coaches stuck their noses only moderately into this grinding process. They were the children of an uncomplicated era, and disdained details and intricacies. The tendency was to rely on pure emotional exaltation. Without cease, they prodded us toward the desired state of illumined ferocity.

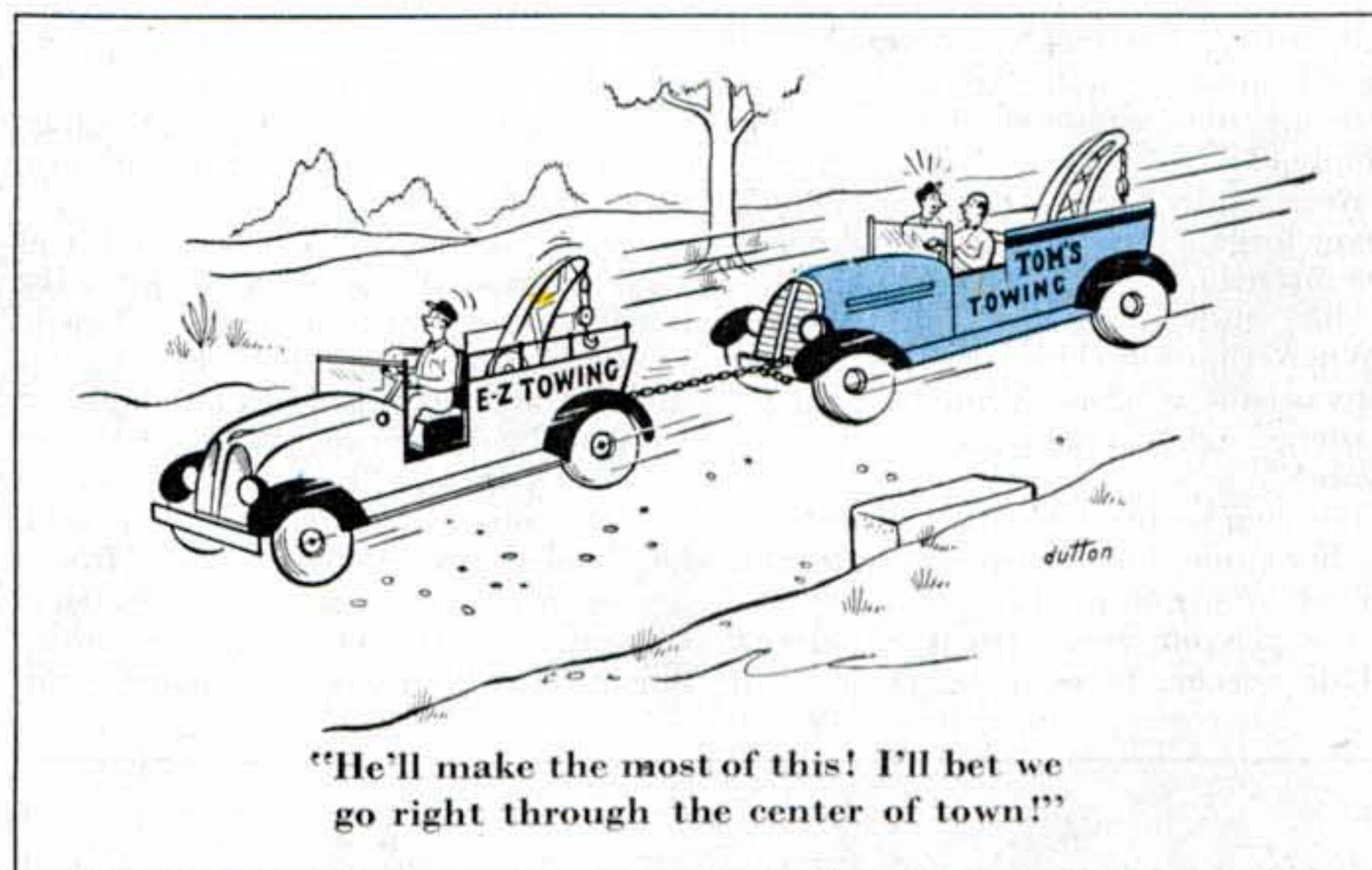
Mostly, through the long afternoons of scrimmage, they stood behind our struggling lines and yelled, "Hard! Hard! Ha-a-ard!" they yelled. "Low! Low! Lo-o-ow!" they yelled.

This "low" rates an explanation. It was a religion with us of the 90's to play the game low. Watching from a grandstand today, I am stupefied when I see a burly fullback go into the line standing up—to bounce back deservedly the next moment, and find himself sitting down. When we bucked a line we flashed along never more than about six inches aboveground. Picture an imaginary plane spread over the field about two feet above the grass. It was under this imaginary plane that the real work went on—both the glory and the murder.

We tackled that way too. Lo-o-ow! Hitting the runner hard with the shoulder, and simultaneously snapping his knees together, joint to joint. Bind your knees together tight and then try to run; you'll understand what I mean. We dropped them as if shot, and then piled up on them to make sure. This was very necessary, because in those days a team had to make only five yards in three downs to hold the ball.

And we used the flying tackle, which is now barred. We left our feet when we tackled and flew through the air. We were free! We weren't like the poor over-regimented tacklers of today, tied down by the rule as if by ball and chain. And the stands were spared the sad spectacle so often offered them today, when a runner streaks to a touchdown past the sad noses of eleven stalwarts who vaguely wave little-old-lady gestures at him, aimed at his topknot, his ear or his wrist.

During the daily toil of training, we wore little armor. None of those hard-leather shields that the present grid-iron knights wear inside their silken pants; our pants were of canvas or lowly moleskin. We did carry a bit of stuffing at the knees, a bit of stuffing at



narrow puritans of today. Unless you tweaked your opponent's nose clear off, or walked away with his leg, no whistle was blown. Frugal whistlers they were.

But, above all, there were none of those painful legislative meetings in which huddled gentlemen try to decide after every play what they had better be doing next. In our time this would be settled sharply and without debate by the flaming little tyrant that ran us—our quarterback. "Eight—four—nineteen!" he shrilled, with no huddling; and eight, four, nineteen we did.

He had enormous prestige, the quarterback, and was unlike the amorphous creature—dull blocker usually—who holds his title today. He was nearly always a little fellow because he had to be active as a squirrel and because he had to think fast, and a little fellow thinks faster than a big one. (I weighed a hundred and forty-two pounds.) He was at the start of every play, passed the ball to the right man, pivoted him

fire hydrant. Have you ever brought up suddenly against a fire hydrant as you coursed absent-mindedly along the sidewalk? I was such a fire hydrant, but a mobile one, possessed of an instinct that was apt to place me always at the spot where it would hurt most. Therefore was I played right behind the line on defense, with orders to fill up the holes.

Every time the enemy opened up a hole in our line, I stepped into the hole and met the nose of the mass play aimed through it. You have no idea what a sensual pleasure it is to be a hydrant and to meet people abruptly who don't know you're there.

We had none of the singular paraphernalia you see on the training fields of today. We didn't strengthen our backs by shoving agricultural machines around. We didn't learn to dodge by hopscotching along a field strewn with discarded automobile tires. We strengthened our backs by shoving the other fellow around.

the shoulders, but we ripped all this out before a big game, spectacularly and melodramatically. Helmets were still a novelty; for the protection of our precious heads we relied on our hair. We wore it very long, a bit in the style of the defunct Cleo de Merode. I have a picture of my last eleven before me at this very moment. It looks like a picture of eleven Paderewskis—except that it also looks like a picture of eleven timberwolves, gaunt, desperate and baleful-eyed.

Outside of the daily massacre on the field, we lived rather monastic lives. We dwelt together at training quarters and ate together at the training table. The training-table diet was based on a simple idea, which was to make tigers out of us. A tiger, it was argued, if he played football, would make an excellent football player. Therefore were we fed raw meat in the form of raw beef-steak.

I fail to remember ever seeing at the training table any of that green stuff that vitamin fanatics are so wild about these days. Sweets, of course, were taboo—pies, puddings, fruit. Water was viewed with suspicion; we were allowed it only in the form of a thin and particularly loathsome gruel called oatmeal water. Except that, secretly every evening after practice, standing under our showers, we opened our mouths wide and let good old H₂O pour in.

Now and then, the coaches might decide that we were going stale; we'd then get each a bottle of ale at the evening table. It had to be ale; it couldn't be beer. There were always men in the

squad who had brought sad prejudices from a rustic home, they'd turn away from their pints, and we'd seize them, and for an hour or two the somber training quarters would brighten with raucous laughter and loud shouts. There was another custom, also founded upon rock. If the head coach decided that his pet star had gone stale, he took him to the Palace Hotel, and dined him on oysters, lobster, partridge, guinea hen, crêpes suzette and champagne. This was supposed to fix him up for the rest of the season.

We had no doctor. Physicians were feared. They might overcoddle us or turn us into hypochondriacs. Our physical welfare was in the care of the trainer. He was usually an ex-pro wrestler who had turned masseur. He usually treasured ideas all his own on physiology and hygiene. I remember one well, and, strange as it may seem, with affection. His name was Al. He was the idol of the campus and of the grandstands because he could turn back flips.

At the daily scrimmage, at big games, sooner or later the rooters—now called the cheering section, I believe—would start a chant. "Turn a flip, Al; turn a flip," they chanted, insistently, till finally in front of the grandstand, Al turned a back flip to thunderous applause.

He liked me, did Al. Every now and then, instead of the conventional witch-hazel rubdown, he gave me an oil rub, which was his subtle way of expressing esteem of the athlete stretched on his table. But he had moments of regrettable inspiration. One afternoon after

practice, contemplating my right knee, which was swollen with what, in those days, we airily called water-on-the-knee, he said suddenly and resolutely: "I know! We'll roast the water out!"

He picked up a bandage, doused it with something out of a bottle, and wrapped it tight around the knee whose water was to be roasted out. I went away, and after a while the knee began to burn. It burned more and more as I stood it stoically, because stoics we were supposed to be. By nighttime, I managed to get to sleep, but during the night I woke up crying "fire."

It wasn't, as I had been dreaming, the training house that was on fire; it was my knee. Gritting my teeth, I managed to last an hour longer, then, utterly unmanned, tore off the bandage, watching curiously the skin peel off with it.

When I saw Al in the morning, and showed him the knee, jeering a bit because the water was still in it, still unroasted, I asked him curiously what it was that he had put on it. He passed me the bottle so that I might see for myself. What I saw was that he had used turpentine. "Pure and unadulterated," the label assured me. He gave me an oil rub.

I remembered how I protected that roasted knee in the game that came a few days later. I did it with an elastic bandage. But the bandage wasn't on the knee that you think—oh, no! It was on the good knee. And it was so placed that, while it pretended to try to hide itself, it stuck out a few inches, a bait for hostile eyes.

It is extraordinary how often that dishonestly bandaged knee was hit in that game. There wasn't a play when some hostile shoulder didn't come crashing into it. While the other, the really vulnerable one, remained unmolested as I chuckled secretly. Ah, those were great old days!

And thus, through such little adventures, but mostly through a sea of somber toil and moil and trouble, we came to the climax of the season, the Big Game, against our spiciest and legendary Enemy.

We came to it, a team that would be considered today shockingly overtrained. Well, we had lost a good deal of our sprightliness along the way, but—gee—we could last forever! Spiritually we were loaded up to the hilt. And finally, there we were in the dressing rooms beneath the grandstands which creaked and groaned with the weight above us of the multitudes come to watch us, and we were listening to our coach's last solemn harangue.

I still remember the best part of it. It was that passage in which he begged us not to let his mother down. It seems that the little old lady was sitting in a rocking chair, many miles away, waiting for news of our victory, and that she wouldn't be able to bear it if we got licked.

We didn't let her down. Onto the field we surged, hands clenched, teeth grinding, eyelashes beaded with manly tears, determined to shred the foe.

Yes, we were pretty good boys in those days. Perhaps a bit naïve, but certainly consecrate. And they now call it the Gay Nineties!