

The Football Game

by Ralph Henry Barbour

Thanksgiving recess began the following Wednesday, to last until Friday evening, and many of the boys whose homes were near by departed by the noonday train, superciliously sympathizing with less fortunate friends whose turkey and cranberry sauce were to be eaten in the school dining hall. Paddy and Don had both received boxes of canned and sugared delicacies from home, and a supplementary feast, to follow the six o'clock repast in the hall, was arranged to take place in Paddy's room, and that youth, who was to break training after the St. Eustace game, promised himself to atone for two months of healthful diet by a veritable orgy on indigestible luxuries.

Wayne, Don, and Dave, together with more than fifty other Hilltonians, boarded the morning express and were transported to the little down-river town of Marshall, where their arrival was enthusiastically welcomed by several score of St. Eustace fellows, headed by a brass band, who escorted them twice through the village, and finally left them, to recover their breaths before lunch at the hotel. Hillton's band was already on the ground, having accompanied the football team the evening before, and with the arrival of the wearers of the crimson a day of hard work began for it. The band's repertory was limited, but its energy tremendous, and the Marshall population gathered in front of the hotel to hearken to it and to be mercilessly gayed by the Hilltonians who thronged the broad veranda.

The game was to be called at 2.30. An hour before that time Don and Wayne—Dave having taken up with a St. Eustace acquaintance for the while—started across the bridge to the far side of the river, where, hidden almost from sight, the rival academy nestled amid its trees. The field was already bright with blue banners when the boys arrived and the St. Eustace band was busily at work.

"What I don't understand," said Wayne, "is why we don't have to pay any admission."

"That," answered Don, "is because Hillton, when she signed the athletic agreement with St. Eustace six years ago, made it one of her terms that no charge should be made for admission to any of the athletic events between the two schools. Instead, a number of invitation cards are printed. The home school gets two thirds of them for distribution and the visiting school the balance. Of course, it puts the cost of keeping up the eleven and the nine and the other teams on the fellows and the grads, but they seem willing enough to meet it. And, besides, as I know from personal experience, it makes the captains and coaches think more about economy; and we don't very often travel in parlor cars nor put up at the swellest hotels, but we've managed to turn out a winning eleven two years out of every three for a long time."

"But other schools charge admission," objected Wayne.

"I know. St. Eustace does for every game except this one. But the idea is 'Wheels's.' He thinks that playing football or baseball for the gate receipts smacks of professionalism; 'sport for sport's sake,' says 'Wheels.' And I think he's right. Look at the big colleges; some of them make from ten to fifteen thousand dollars as their share of an important game."

"But why shouldn't they?" asked Wayne.

"Because they're not professionals; they're college fellows—the players, I mean—and have no

business going around country like a lot of—of—circus folk, showing off for money. And, besides, it's bound to hurt college sport after awhile. If a captain of a big team knows that by having a winning eleven he can secure a game with another big college, and get eight or ten thousand dollars, why, in lots of cases it's going to make that captain careless about little things. He isn't going to inquire too closely into the standing of the fellows that make up the team; he's going to excuse a lot of laxity as regards training; and he's going to overlook lots of dirty playing, and all that hurts the college in the end. No, I think 'Wheels' is right; and so does Remsen and lots of the old fellows."

"But, look here," argued Wayne. "When a team makes eight, or ten, or fifteen thousand dollars, you know, that money doesn't go to the players, does it?"

"Gracious, no!" exclaimed Don. "It's generally turned into the general athletic fund, and helps meet the expenses of the crews and other teams that don't pay their way. But don't you see that it's a big feather in a fellow's cap if he can say that he made fifteen thousand dollars for the athletic association! And the oftener a college team makes a big pot of money the richer the association gets, and the first thing you know it's sending its football and baseball teams around the country in a private car, with a small army of rubbers and coaches and a cook who prepares all the meals, just as though they were one of those foreign opera companies! It's all wrong, Wayne. It isn't good, honest sport; it's—it's tommyrot—that's what it is!"

"Well, maybe it is," answered the other boy thoughtfully. "Anyhow, I shan't kick, you know; it's saved me a dollar, I dare say."

"No, it hasn't, Wayne, because you'll have to pay that dollar, and maybe another like it, into the crew's pocket, or the baseball nine's pocket, or the track team's little treasury in the spring."

"Oh, I see. The idea is to have the school—that is, the fellows and the graduates—meet the athletic expenses, and not to ask the public for help."

"That's it," answered Don heartily. "But here comes Hillton."

A little squad of youths in crimson sweaters, headed by Gardiner and followed by the Hillton band, defiled on to the field, and the occupants of the stand where Wayne and Don sat were instantly on their feet cheering lustily. The band paraded with ludicrous dignity about the field, and at last found seats near by and for the fifth time began its programme. A moment later the St. Eustace players entered and were greeted with acclaim from hundreds of wearers of the dark blue and their friends, and received a cheer from the rival contingent. The two teams and their substitutes went busily to practicing, and Wayne watched Paddy, large of bulk and quick of action, snapping back the ball and forming the apex of numerous little wedges that grew and dissolved under the tuition of the coach.

The seats about the broad expanse of faded turf were filled now, and many spectators had taken up positions on the ground just inside the ropes that guarded the side-lines. Blue was the prevailing color, and only on one small section of the stand did the crimson of Hillton flutter. Presently the substitutes trotted off the gridiron and squatted, Indian-like in their blankets, along the sides, a coin was tossed, the teams took their positions, and Paddy sent the new ball corkscrewing toward the St. Eustace goal, where it was gathered into the waiting arms of the St. Eustace full-back on the thirty-yard line and advanced by him over two white bars ere the Hillton ends downed him.

During the six years in which the athletic agreement had been in force between the two

academies Hillton had won three of the football contests and tied one. Last year, and again the year before, her eleven had triumphed over the blue, and St. Eustace, with two consecutive defeats rankling in her memory, was this year determined upon victory. And it was the very general opinion that she would win it. To be sure, Hillton had played the usual number of games throughout the fall and had no defeats behind her. Westvale Grammar School had been beaten to the tune of 27 to 0; the local grammar school had been whitewashed by a monotonously big score; the neighboring military academy had managed to play a tie; and Shrewsburg High School had accepted defeat after a close and exciting contest, in which Greene had snatched a victory by a spirited forty-yard run for a touch-down. But those who knew shook their heads when the subject of the St. Eustace game was mentioned, and talked vaguely of a "lack of the right stuff," a term which conveys nothing to the mind of any one save a football player, but which means everything.

The preceding Saturday evening the four friends, with numerous other boys, had obtained permission to go to the village and learn the result of the Harwell-Yates game, and when, in the telegraph office, the report that Yates had been the victor greeted them Paddy had sighed dolefully.

"That settles it," he had said. "We don't always win from St. Eustace when Harwell wins from Yates, but we've never beaten when she hasn't. It's St. Eustace's game." And no amount of argument could shake his conviction.

Wayne and Don voted the first half of the game dull. The teams were apparently evenly matched in defensive playing, and nearly so in offensive work. The ball oscillated from one twenty-five-yard line to the other, Hillton and St. Eustace both looking for an opportunity to send a back around for a run and finding none. Line-bucking made up the most of the play, and at this each team held its ground stubbornly when on the defensive, and attacked gallantly when it had the ball. It was only at the end of the half that anything exciting occurred. With but three or four minutes to play, and the pigskin near Hillton's thirty-yard line in St. Eustace's possession, the backs drew away from the line, and amid a tense silence the ball was passed to full for a try at goal. But Paddy it was who frustrated the attempt by breaking through St. Eustace's line and receiving the ascending ball on his broad chest. Don and Wayne were sitting on the lowest tier of seats so that the former might lead in the cheering, and as the ball disappeared under a heap of wildly scrambling players he was on his feet, cap in hand, and the Hillton section was responding nobly to his appeal; the fellows delighted at a chance to applaud something worth applauding. The half ended with the ball in the arms of the Hillton full-back.

During the intermission Dave turned up, and the three boys stamped about the ground to keep their feet warm and sang "Hilltonians" vociferously to show their joy. And the band did wonders.

"Looks like a tie, Dave," said Don.

"Well, I don't know," responded that youth, with his usual caution. "Paddy's dreadfully used up; he's been playing center and left-guard and right-guard and half the team. And if Paddy goes out—well, we might as well go home and read about the game in to-morrow's paper."

"Bowles seems to be running the team well," mused Don.

"Yes, he's braced up wonderfully; he's all right. Gardiner's delighted with him. Two weeks ago he couldn't hold a snapped ball."

"Oh, have you seen Gardiner? What's he say?"

“Nothing, but he looks cheerful. That’s a bad sign. When Gardiner looks cheerful, it means that he’s worried. Hello! here they come again. Let’s get these stuffed images to cheer.” Dave turned to the seats: “Now, fellows, you’ve been doing some of the worst cheering that I ever heard outside of a girls’ school. We’re going to win, but we’ve got to use our lungs. So let’s give ’em nine long Hilltons, as though we were glad we’re living.”

The response was all that Dave desired, and he and Don and “Pigeon” Wallace, president of the senior class, kept the cheers going until the ball was aloft and the game was on again.

St. Eustace forced the playing at once. Down the field they came by short rushes, and ere the watchers on the stand knew what was happening, the ball was on the Hillton ten-yard line and the blue-stockinged backs were massed close behind their line for a tandem on guard. A yard resulted from this play. “Second down!” cried the referee. “Four yards to gain!” The Hillton boys were on their feet, cheering at the top of their lungs. Another massed attack, and but two yards was needed by the St. Eustace eleven. But those two yards were beyond accomplishment, for Paddy led the crimson line in a sturdy, desperate resistance, Hillton took the ball on her seven-yard line, and a moment after it was sailing down the field from Grow’s nimble foot, and Wayne, Dave, and Don were yelling frantically and pounding each other enthusiastically over the head.

But back came the ball as before, St. Eustace’s steady short rushes being supplemented once by a stirring run around Hillton’s left end that brought the blue’s champions to their feet in a mighty burst of noise. Past the middle of the gridiron went the charging St. Eustace players, and the ball was down on Hillton’s forty yards ere another five minutes had flown by. Then the whistle piped shrilly and Dave clutched Don’s sleeve.

“Paddy’s laid out!” he cried hoarsely.

And so it was; and there was a deal of anxiety in that little throng until the plucky center climbed to his feet again and broke away from the trainer’s hands. Then all Hillton shrieked joyously and the game went on. But it was plainly to be seen that Paddy was suffering, and it was equally evident that there was good reason; for he had not only to play his own position, but to help the guards as well, and now, to make his difficulties greater and to increase his troubles, the opposing team had decided upon a plan of play that made Dave writhe impotently in his seat, and which caused even Wayne’s careless good temper to revolt. Time after time the full force of the St. Eustace backs was thrown upon Paddy. For long he stood it doggedly, holding his temper in check under every fresh assault; but there is an end to all endurance, and now, with fifteen minutes of the second half gone, Paddy was visibly weakening, and every successive plunge at the center of the Hillton line resulted in a greater gain.

“There’s slugging going on there, Don!” cried Dave. “That St. Eustace right-guard struck Paddy then. You watch this time!”

The line-up was directly opposite the boys’ seats and but a few yards from the side-line, and they watched attentively as Paddy was helped to his feet and groped his way to his place. “Tackles back!” called the St. Eustace quarter, “78—36—76—16—” Then the two lines met with a shock, there was a rasping of canvas, and ere the Hillton line gave and the St. Eustace backs piled through, a clinched hand rose and fell twice, and Paddy fell weakly to his knees and slowly stretched himself out on his face. Not only the three boys saw the blows struck, but almost every fellow in the immediate

vicinity, and a veritable wave of hisses drowned the applause of the St. Eustace cheerers. And at the same moment Wayne, with blazing cheeks and angry eyes, leaped from the stand, darted through the throng about the rope, and strode menacingly toward the St. Eustace right-guard. But before his upraised fist reached the surprised player his arm was seized and in a moment he was struggling in the grasp of two of the Hillton team. Half of the Hillton crowd had impulsively followed Wayne's lead, and now an indignant horde broke through the ropes and invaded the field with loud cries for vengeance.

It was a time for action, and Gardiner, Greene, and several more of the wearers of the crimson resolutely stemmed the tide, pleading and threatening in a breath.

"Fellows! Fellows!" cried Gardiner. "Go back! It's all right; don't disgrace the school!"

"Get off the field, fellows!" shouted Greene. "I swear I'll knock down the first fellow that comes any nearer! You're acting like a lot of kids!"

"Make 'em take him off, then!" was the reply from dozens of throats, as the crowd wavered and gave back unwillingly.

"Yes, it's all right—it's all right," said Gardiner soothingly. "Only go back to the stand, like good chaps."

The boys withdrew beyond the wrecked ropes again, but did not immediately return to their seats. Many St. Eustace fellows had drawn near and were glaring threateningly toward them. Wayne, in the grasp of his friends, was dragged off the field, trembling with anger and doggedly promising the offending St. Eustace guard a licking after the game. Paddy, with a badly bruised eye, was supported to a place by the ropes, and the belligerent St. Eustace player was ruled out of the game. The Hillton contingent cheered lustily for Paddy and groaned derisively at his assailant, and went slowly back to their places, while the St. Eustace fellows were dispersed by some of the older lads. Then some one caught sight of Wayne, held in his seat by Don and Dave, and shouted, "Bully for Gordon!" which cry was taken up by others and prolonged until Don jumped up and faced the stand.

"Fellows," he pleaded, "shut up, please! Everything's all right now. Only keep still, will you?"

Laughter and cheers greeted him and good humor came back to the crowd. A small junior shrilled, "We'll beat them, anyhow!" and the sentiment was applauded to the echo.

But victory for Hillton was too much to expect with Paddy no longer in line. Burton, who took his place, was a fair center, but far from heavy enough to stop the opponent's triumphant advance down the field, and though Hillton worked desperately for the next ten minutes the ball was at length within scoring distance of her goal, and again the St. Eustace full-back dropped back for a punt.

"Can't be done from there," whispered Don breathlessly. "It's forty yards, I'll bet." But Dave shook his head.

"That full-back's a wonder, they say, and I wouldn't be surprised to see him do it. If only we can get through!"

But the St. Eustace line held like a wall, the ball sped back, the full caught it neatly, and with admirable care poised it in his palm before dropping it. Then his toe caught it on the rebound and up it

sailed, straight and unwavering, cleanly between the posts and over the bar! And blue flags waved and cheers for St. Eustace filled the air, and Dave and Don looked sorrowfully at each other and groaned in unison. Only Wayne in all that throng seemed not to heed or care; he was watching vindictively a boy who was waving a blue sweater on the far side of the field.

There was no more scoring done, although the Hillton team, to all appearances undismayed, returned to the game with hammer and tongs, as it were, and forced the ball to her opponents' twenty yards ere she lost it for holding, and afterward stubbornly and heroically contested every inch of turf ere yielding it to the victorious foe. But the whistle soon sounded, the two teams gathered breathless in mid-field and cheered each other, the St. Eustace band paraded the gridiron, followed by a shouting, dancing train of ecstatic youths with blue flags, and Wayne, still pining for vengeance, was dragged willy nilly to the village and on to the train and borne back to school under strict guard and in dire disgrace—a disgrace that did not deter many a mistaken fellow from clapping him on the shoulder, and whispering a hearty “Good boy, Gordon!” into his ear.

Source:

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