

One Play

Chapter 1

Matt looked at the scoreboard. Only four minutes left until the slaughter was over. It was hard to watch. His teammates were getting pounded on every play. The Raiders were up 38-0. It was obvious his team, the Chargers, were going to lose this one. The Raiders were monsters. All of them looked older than the fifth and sixth graders they were supposed to be.

On the next play Roger dropped back to pass and couldn't get out of the way fast enough as a blitzing linebacker leveled Roger for a loss. This seemed to happen every time he tried to pass. But this time Roger didn't pop right back up. Roger stayed on the ground. Even before the refs could call a timeout Coach Jordan ran onto the field. Matt thought his own heart had just stopped. He buckled his chinstrap and found an extra ball on the bench. Dimitri, one of the defensive backs caught Matt's attention and offered to catch so Matt could warm up. Matt had watched enough football on TV to know that this was what backup quarterbacks did. Still, he couldn't stop shaking. He had watched all day his teammates get clobbered. He wasn't ready for this.

So far Matt had played one play in this game. He kicked-off to start the game and watched as his teammates made the tackle. As quarterback he had yet to play a single down, in this game or for the season. In fact, in his whole life. This was Matt's first ever year to play tackle football.

Coach Jordan gathered the entire team together. "Roger's fine. Got the wind knocked of him. Four minutes left. We punt here. Lets' go out there and finish with pride. Hold them on defense, then we'll put in a strong drive. I'm proud of you guys.

You've shown a lot of bravery. It takes situations like this to practice courage. You learn courage by going through the fire. Finish strong and you can hold your head high."

Matt let out a breath. He wasn't going in.

The defense held, and the offense went back in. On the first play Jeremy, the running back, broke free and made a first down. Roger then threw a pass, and the Charges made another first down. Matt and the rest of the team on the sideline were jumping up and down screaming their encouragement. They were moving the ball – driving down the field. Roger took the ball and ran around the end nearing another first down when he was tackled by the ankle.

Roger rolled on the ground writhing in pain. Matt and Dimitri quickly tossed the ball back and forth. A couple of the players carried Roger to the bench. Matt ran onto the field, nervous, but with some confidence. The blocking was doing much better, the team was motivated. All Matt had to do was make some good handoffs and the drive would continue. The first play went well, a five-yard gain. Matt's breathing settled down. Less than two-minutes to go. Matt was going to be fine. All he had to do was get the ball out of his hands quickly.

The coach called a drop back pass play. The tight end was going to turn around after five yards and settle between the zones. "I can do this," Matt told himself.

Matt dropped back and waited for the route to develop. One of the Raiders was pushing his right tackle backwards. The guy knocked Matt's arm, and the ball bounced onto the grass. Matt knew he was supposed to fall on it, but a big defensive tackled was closing in. He would certainly crush Matt. The thought made Matt hesitate and the Raider fell on the ball.

On the sideline, all Matt could do was watch as the momentum they had, slipped away. The Raiders drove down the field and scored another touchdown on the last play of the game. Matt felt terrible. His fear caused him to hesitate and that caused his team to give up another score. He wondered if anyone saw that he had a chance to jump on the ball but didn't. Maybe in the moment no one noticed and just thought it was another good play by the Raider defense.

The next day was Sunday, and that afternoon Coach Jordan stopped by Matt's house. Matt, his parents, and Coach Jordan sat in their family room. It was the first time his coach ever come by his house. Matt instantly felt apprehensive. Matt's mom was a bit flustered by the unexpected visitor. She offered coffee and a bit of cake. Matt's dad seemed excited to have the coach pay them a visit. They had never really talked before.

"I just wanted to let you know that Roger sprained his ankle. It's not a bad sprain, but he will definitely miss next week's game."

Matt held his small plate and looked at his parents. They weren't excited about him playing football but agreed when he told them he was the kicker, and only if necessary, the back-up quarterback. *He's going to tell me I will start the next game.*

"Matt's been doing very well in practice," Coach said. "I have confidence he can do the job. I just wanted you to know that the Raiders are an unusual team. Next week's team are more on our level."

"So, Matt won't get hurt?" Matt's mom asked.

"I can't make any guarantees." Coach Jordan turned to Matt. "I want to give you a say in this. Dimitri is the third team quarterback. He's a fifth grader and will be our starter next year. If you want to start QB on Saturday, I want your full commitment. If

you don't feel you're up to it let me know. You are a valuable member of the team being the kicker. I appreciate what you do."

Matt looked across the coffee table to Coach. His mouth felt dry, and he wanted to take a sip of his milk. Coach must have seen his hesitancy to jump on the fumble. He's offering me a nice way out, Matt thought.

"Matt, take the next twenty-fours and think this through. Either come to practice on Monday with your full commitment to work hard all week or let me know that kicking is your main thing. You don't have to step into the meat grinder."

Matt's dad interjected, "Of course Matt will be your quarterback. He's been practicing all season. He can do it."

"Matt, I don't want you to get hurt," his mom added.

"Matt, you think it through. Just let me know before practice starts on Monday. Whatever you decide, I support you."

Later that day, Matt rode his bike over to Jeremy's house. Matt needed his friend's input. They went around back to throw the ball around.

"Did you hear the news about Roger's ankle?"

"Will he be ready to go Saturday?" Jeremy asked.

"No. He has to sit out at least a week."

Jeremy paused before throwing the ball back. Matt could almost see the wheels spinning inside his friend's head.

A big grin spread across Jeremy's face. "That means you'll be starting quarterback. That's great!"

"Well, I'm a little nervous."

“You’ll do great. I think you have a better arm than Roger.”

“Thanks.”

“You don’t sound too enthused.”

“I’m a little nervous about knowing all the plays.”

“No sweat. We have all week to practice. It’s not that hard.”

“You think I can do it?”

“Sure.”

That evening at dinner, Matt’s dad brought up the topic.

“We’ve been talking.” Matt’s dad waves his fork around indicating “we” was he and Matt’s mom. “We will support you whatever you decide.”

“You’ve played really well in soccer for the last five years. Maybe soccer is your gift,” his mom said.

“On one hand,” his dad started, “Next year starts middle school and this will be a big change. Competition will be rough. I know. I played middle school football.”

Matt knew this. His dad had shown him some photos. Matt’s dad had done what Matt had not. He was in the arena and played tackle football. Matt knew his dad would never understand his fear.

“It might make sense to stay with what you know you are good at. On the other hand, this may be your last opportunity to play football. You could go out there and seize the opportunity.”

“But the other boy will be quarterback,” his mom added. “You’ll just sit on the bench again.”

“Honey, this could be Matt’s chance to prove he’s the better player.”

Dad, please don't get excited about this. I'm not you.

“Dad, Roger’s really good.”

“So, this might be your one chance to play quarterback. Something to remember the rest of your life.”

Hi mom chimed in, “I can film the whole game. It’ll make a great memory.”

“But if it’s not good, will you promise to erase it?”

“Matt, you’ll do fine.” After a pause, his dad added, “That is, if that’s what you decide.”

The next day at school, Matt and Jeremy continued the discussion during lunch.

“Jerr, you know that no one knows about this. The coach will act like he decided to play Dimitri, if that’s what I choose. You have to promise you will never tell the rest of the team.”

“But why would you not?”

“I’m thinking about Dimitri. He will be the quarterback next year. He deserves some real game time.”

“Matt, you gotta do this. We’ll work hard all week. We can study the plays at night after practice.”

“I appreciate that ...”

“Matt, the Jets aren’t that good. They aren’t the freaks the Raiders are. They’re normal kids.”

Matt approached Coach Jordan before practice.

“So, what did you decide?”

“I’m going to give quarterback a try.”

“Matt, I need a strong commitment. I have two game plans here.” Coach waved his clipboard. “One for you and one for Dimitri. Are you in?”

“Yes, Sir. I’m in one hundred percent.”

Chapter 2

“Good, that’s what I want. You know the warmup stretches?”

Matt nodded his head.

“You go out there and lead the team.”

After warm-ups the coach gathered the team. “Roger’s not able to play this week. Matt will play quarterback. I have all the confidence in the world in Matt’s ability.” The coach went around the group looking each player in the eyes. “Good. Here’s the plan for this week. We’re going to run the read option. Matt will read the defensive end. He’ll either hand off to Jeremy up the middle or take it around the end himself. Jose will get to use his speed as we’ll call his number for the jet sweep. As for the passing game, we run the play action off the fake to Jeremy. Matt rolls right and hits Billy for a short gain, or Jose crossing deep downfield.”

Practice followed the game plan. Matt knew none of his teammates were allowed to tackle the quarterback in practice. Matt wore the yellow mesh jersey over the top of his regular practice jersey, which made his stick out from the others. This was like a magic shield protecting Matt from harm. It made it easy to get the plays down.

At one point, Coach declared it was time to work on the passing game. “Matt, if no one is open on the roll out you have two options. Throw it out of bounds or tuck the ball and turn it up field. No need to try to run over anyone. Just get as many yards as you can and step out of bounds.” Over the next few plays Matt began to feel comfortable

with throwing on the move. Coach ended the practice with encouraging words for the team.

While waiting for their rides, Matt and Jeremy talked.

“Coach is a real genius. He made a great game plan. Simple to learn. You’re going to do great!”

Matt smiled. It was a good day. “Thanks.” Deep down Matt could only think that on Saturday he wouldn’t have the yellow jersey. *The Jets will be after me on every play.*

That night after dinner, Matt’s dad showed Matt his middle school yearbook with all the photos of his dad playing football. Matt’s dad was an offensive lineman. On of the guys who pound it out in the trenches. He obviously had no fear of getting hit.

The two of them sat side by side on the couch.

“These were some great days,” his dad said. “Our games were after school on Tuesdays. On game days we wore our jerseys to school. We’d be excuse early from our last class. It was quite a feeling to walk down the halls to the locker room while everyone else was still in class.” His dad pointed to another page of pictures. “Most of the student body stayed and watched. We had cheerleaders and pep rallies.”

“Did you play in high school?”

“Naw. I was a scrappy player but not near big enough to compete at the high school level.”

“Did you ever get hurt?”

“Never.”

The next day in practice, the coach had the Charger middle linebacker wearing a green 51 jersey. The coach explained. “Matt, I want you to get used to looking for Smithy as you step up to the line. Every play we run will be to be where he is not.”

That day and the rest of the week went very similar. The goal was repetition. Matt was feeling it. He now had confidence managing the offense. The guys on the offensive line encouraged him on every play. It was a world of difference from last week where he had to play when he had never done so. His own players seemed so hostile to him being on the field.

Friday evening the team all gathered over at Coach Jordan’s house. He hosted the team for pizza and film session the night before every game. This week Matt really felt like he was part of the team. Usually, as just the kicker, Matt hung in the back of the room and watched the players interact. This day felt like one of his birthday parties when he was young. Practice had gone well all week. The O-line promised Matt that they would protect him. At the film session, Matt received a good deal of friendly ribbing.

Watching the other team on film, Matt noticed that each of their defensive ends played very aggressively. They came down the line hard and fast to catch the dive back before he hit the hole. Coach pointed out that they were ripe for Matt to pull the ball and run right passed them. About three quarters of the time, Matt should hand off. When he did keep it, it would surprise them. Coach proclaimed that Matt should get seven or eight yards every time he kept it.

The other thing Matt noticed about the Jets was their middle linebacker was a beast. He would have fit right in with the Raiders. It was easy to see, this guy was the

backbone to their team. He stuffed the runner every time in the middle. He ran fast to the sidelines to close-down the runner. On pass plays he blitzed often.

The coach didn't talk too much about him that evening. Matt wondered if the others on his team saw what an opposing player he was. Waiting outside for their rides, Jeremy mentioned it to Matt.

"I think our coach is a genius. The whole game plan is designed to keep that guy out of the play. The read option, the roll-out passes. He won't have an impact at all."

"Do you think Coach meant to teach us an audible?"

"You mean in case Smith-Cline lines up in the hole where I'm supposed to run?"

"Yeah. I thought he was going to put that in."

"I thought that, too. But it'll be all right. I'm not scared of him. My game plan is to hit him so many times, he'll get tired of tackling me."

"He's good," Matt said.

"Yeah, he'll get some tackles. No doubt, but he won't be able to stop us over the course of the game. There's just one of him. The rest of the team, we'll demolish."

Matt admired Jeremy's confidence and enthusiasm for the game. It was as if he enjoyed all the heavy contact. *All the linebacker has to do is hit me one time. I'll be killed.*

The next morning, game day, Matt looked at the pancakes his mom made him. He tried to eat. He knew he needed to eat. He just couldn't. He drank his juice and ate the bacon. The pancakes just wouldn't go down.

"Everything all right?" His mom asked. "Are you coming down with something?"

"I'm fine. Didn't sleep too well last night."

“Nerves?”

“Probably. Where’s Dad?”

“He went out to buy doughnuts. He felt he needed to pass these around for the parents at the game.”

Just because I’m leading the team, he thinks he’s leading the parents? Matt put his fork down and let out a breath. “I don’t need all this extra pressure.”

His mom sat down next to him and put her arm around him. “You’ll do fine. You know the plays now. You did great all week in practice.”

Matt appreciated the hug. He needed it. He just couldn’t tell her what his real fear was.

The air was cool and crisp, perfect fall weather. The summer was over, and the cold hadn’t begun. Matt loved the fall, though to him it always went by too quickly. Matt walked the field, his shoes getting wet from the dew. The grass near the endzones had been worn down and was mostly hard-packed clay. The sun just coming over the tall trees. His game was the first on that field that morning.

The field was marked-off, so it was eighty yards and not one hundred. It was also not as wide as a real field. In each endzone were the old-style H goalposts. On one side of the field there were bleachers and a concession stand. The two teams shared a respective half of the other sideline. This kept the parents away from the players in the course of the game. Some parents couldn’t help themselves from getting right there on the sideline with advice or bottles of water. Matt was glad for this. He would have been mortified if his dad mingled on the sideline. He seemed pretty worked up about this game.

Matt's teammates mingled around, some by the bench, some scattered about. It's time he thought.

In as loud and deep voice as he could muster Matt called, "Warm-ups. Stretching. Line-up." It worked, the team responded and lined-up in rows just as they did for Roger. Leading the stretching kept his mind busy and off his inner thoughts.

After all the pre-game drills, the captains walked out to the center. This was the first time Matt had participated in the ritual. Jeremy and Felix stood out there with Matt. The Jets had three players also. Smith-Cline, their middle linebacker stood a head taller than the others. Matt thought he saw a bit of dark hair on his upper lip when they shook hands. The Jets won the toss and the Charges would kick-off.

A few minutes later, Matt lined up the ball on the tee for the kick-off, remembering the words of his coach from last night's film session, "Keep it away from number eighteen. He's small, but super fast, and has already run three kick-offs back for touchdowns."

Matt saw that 18 was to the left so he kicked it to the right. Matt's role was to hang back and be the safety. So far in the season, his team had always made the tackle long before any threat came his way. Number 85 began moving up the right side. Matt slid over some in that direction. Then just as Matt thought the guy was going down, he lateraled to 18 who sped across the field heading to the left. The trick play worked. Number 18 ran past all the Chargers and was approaching midfield. Matt did what he knew he was supposed to do - move in front and be ready for the tackle. Matt had never tackled anyone in his life.

Matt had to make the tackle. It was going to be right at mid-field, right in front of the bleachers. He couldn't miss. Surely, he could stop this little guy. Matt moved directly in front of his path. The guy was running straight at Matt as if he was going to run through him. *The guy's half my size.* Matt stood in the path and – closed his eyes - and braced for impact.

The little runner hit Matt square in the chest. Pain shot through Matt's body, and he fell over backwards. Matt hit the ground and heard the whistle blow. He looked around, 18 was on the ground. Matt had done it. He made the tackle.

Matt picked himself up and jogged to the sideline. The Chargers defense ran on the field. No one gave him a high-five. It was as if they all expected him to make the tackle. Matt sat on the bench and steadied his breathing. He did it. He conquered one of his fears. Now, all he had to do was play the game and not get creamed for the next, Matt looked up at the scoreboard, forty-seven minutes and twenty-five seconds.

The Chargers defense held the Jets who punted. Matt buckled his chinstrap and was stopped by Coach Jordan just before running on the field. Coach put his hands on Matt's shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

“Take two deep, slow breaths.”

Matt did.

“Better? Good. Run the read option to the right three times and no huddle. After that I'll send a play in. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Matt met his team in the initial huddle.

“We’re running read option to the right three times in a row. This play and two more. No huddle.” Matt looked at the faces in the huddle. “OK, ready, break.” They all clapped hands in unison and lined up.

Matt handed the ball to Jeremy who ran for five yards. The on second down he ran for two more. On third down Jeremy was stuffed at the line of scrimmage. The coach called in the punting team.

Coach pulled Matt aside. “Remember in practice? You were doing great in practice. Read the end. The last two plays he was crashing down and stopping Jeremy. If he does that, just keep the ball and run right past him.”

“Yes, Sir.” Then Matt found his water jug and sat on the bench. In real time, he thought the d-end was coming down the line. He was thinking he needed to keep it. But there was a long way to run before he could make it to the sideline. He wasn’t sure about the linebacker or safety. Either one of the players could cream him. Worse than that Smith-Cline is fast enough to track him down.

The Charger defense made a stop after two first downs and Jose picked up twenty on the punt return. On first down Matt gave the ball to Jeremy going left and he made six yards. Second down was another seven. On the next play Coach called a jet sweep, and Jose took off for twenty-five yards. Somehow Smith-Cline chased Jose down and made the tackle. He wasn’t just huge; he was also fast.

That didn’t matter though. Coach was calling great plays, all designed to run away from Smith-Cline. Matt knew they would score this drive. But after three plays it became fourth and one. In this age group, kicking a field goal wasn’t even an option.

Matt was about fifty-fifty on extra points, but this was too far. Coach called for a quarterback sneak.

Matt approached the line of carefully, surveying the field, just as he had seen quarterbacks do on TV. He wasn't sure what they were thinking, but he was praying he would live. Smith-Cline lined up in the gap just left of Felix, the center. A defensive tackle was to the right. Matt didn't see any opening. He wished they had practiced the audible. But today all he had to do was take the ball and run low. Maybe, if he stayed right behind Felix, he might make it.

Matt took the ball and before he could think he was pushed over backwards with Felix falling on top of him.

I can't breathe! I can't breathe!

The players got up and he was fine. He was breathing, and nothing seemed broken. He stood up and saw the Charger defense running onto the field.

Coach stopped him on the sideline. "Nothing you could do about that. They read that play. We'll work on audibles in practice this week."

Matt grabbed his water jug and sat on the bench. He looked at his feet. If he looked up, he would have seen his parents sitting in the bleachers across the field. *Was it possible that if he were as tough as Jeremy, he could have made the first down? Or was the play doomed no matter who ran it?*

The next two drives for the Jets ended in punts. The Charger defense was playing great. The problem was the Charger offense. Matt's team hadn't even made a single first down since the ill-fated quarterback sneak. After their second straight punt Matt ran to the sideline. The coach did not say a word to him. Jeremy approached him.

Jeremy was drenched in sweat. He was mad and breathing hard. His uniform covered in dust and a scraped knee showing some blood.

“Dude, you need to run it. Fake it to me and run around the end. They’re on to you. They know you won’t run it. Just run it. One time, one big run and they have to respect it. We can win. You just have to run it.”

Matt replied in a low voice, “I’m afraid I might fumble.”

“Forget that! Keep the ball high and tight, both hands. Just run it.”

The Charger offense had been starting each drive deeper and deeper on their side of the field. On the Jets last drive they went for it on fourth and two at the Charger eleven and the defense held. Only four minutes left to go in the game. Matt had to lead the team on a long drive.

After three plays, it was fourth and three. The Chargers at their own sixteen-yard line. Matt assumed they would punt, but the coach yelled to stay in on offense. Jose came onto the field with the play. No read option. Matt was to fake and run. No decision here. Matt was being told.

Matt faked the dive to Jeremy and saw the defensive end crashing down fast. Matt ran right past him. In front of him was a big open field. Matt ran at an angle to the sideline. He saw the first down marker. He saw the safety approaching fast. It was a foot race. Matt had a chance, but the safety was fast. Matt was on a course to get creamed. He ran straight for the sideline and made it out of bounds just before the collusion.

Matt heard the collective groan from his team. His coach threw his clipboard on the ground. Matt was a yard short of the first down. The Jets would take over.

Matt failed the courage test. He had seen his favorite pro quarterback on TV many times put his head down and bull forward for a first down. When that guy needed a yard; he got the yard. What had Matt done? Run like chicken little to the sideline. That safety was half his size. Matt should have been able to run through that tackle.

It was obvious, too. Everyone saw it. *How could he face his team? How could he explain this to his parents? That he was scared? What would happen at school? His dad, how would he react? It's ok, son. You could the play the trombone and be in the band.*

The Jets ran two plays with little success. Matt couldn't imagine a sixth grader making a field goal. The Chargers needed two more stops. On third and eight, the Jets ran the half-back pass. It worked. Their receiver was wide open, caught the ball and jogged in the last five yards for the touchdown. It was 6-0 and the Jets lined up to kick an extra point. Matt was the Charger's kicker, and he never kicked extra points. If the Jets kicker made it, then Matt would need a touchdown and a two-point conversion.

This is such a stupid game. From this point on for the rest of my life, I'll be a nerd. I'll lose all my friends. I'll just be a shadow walking down the hallways in high school.

On the sideline everyone was on his feet and screaming, trying to ice the kicker. Matt couldn't even get up from the bench. The future of his whole life was turning right here. He would forever be labeled the coward. The wimp who was afraid of being hit in football. Laughed at on his way to tennis practice.

The kick went up and looked horrible. It barely cleared the line of scrimmage, but somehow made it over the cross bar.

Matt stood up and turned away from the field. He thought he might throw up. A hawk took flight from a tree. Two summers ago, he had stood on the high dive, terrified, holding onto the railing. Kids below were chanting, "Chicken!" Across the pool, a hawk took to flight. Matt let go of the rail, his field of vision narrowed, all he saw was the end of the board. He took off and ran to the end and jumped.

This is not an option. I have to do this.

Matt buckled his chin strap and waited for the kick-off. Nothing mattered now. He was going to give it his all, even if it meant he would be smeared into the grass. The Chargers were too good of a team to lose to the Jets. Two minutes, sixteen seconds left and three timeouts.

Dimitri ran the kick-off back to the twenty.

Coach pulled Matt aside. "Do you want me to play Dimitri?"

"No. This is my time."

Chapter 3

At the line of scrimmage, Matt saw big Smith-Cline cheating in to stop Jeremy. Matt faked it and ran around the end. He had an aggressive angle toward the sideline and by the time he was pushed out of bounds he had eleven yards. He did it. He made the first down. He was still alive. Not even hurt.

On the very next play, Jose ran the jet sweep to the other side and gained almost twenty. Goin no huddle Jeremy ran up the middle running right past the blitzing linebacker for twelve more yards. Coach called a timeout. In this league the field was only eighty yards. The Chargers had the ball at the Jets twenty-seven.

“Listen. You all are doing great. On the next play, Matt fake to Jeremy and run to your right. Stay behind the line of scrimmage and just lay a soft little pass to Billy. He’ll be running to the sideline at your speed. That cornerback will come up to try to drop you for a loss. Just an easy little toss over his head. Billy, just catch the ball and when you know you have it then turn up field.”

Taking the ball from Felix, Matt rolled to his right. It was exactly as the coach said it would be. Someone was running straight toward him. Just down field, only five yards deep, Billy ran toward the sideline in perfect rhythm with Matt. He was wide open. Matt tossed it up and then went down. The cornerback tackled Matt just after he released the ball. On the ground he heard his teammates whooping it up. Billy made about ten yards before the safety tackled him.

Matt screamed out, “No huddle.” The team ran to the line. Matt patted his right leg to signal Jeremy. Matt would hand it off for a run up the middle. He saw Smith-Cline cheating the gap. Matt led Jeremy and pulled it at the last possible second. Matt didn’t need to see what would happen to Jeremy. He was going to get slaughtered. Matt took the ball and ran around the end and turned sharply upfield. The safety plowed his shoulder into Matt’s midsection. Never in his life had he hurt worse. He thought he might throw up. Everyone on the sideline was jumping and screaming. He had made the first down.

The coach called the second time out and gathered the team along the sideline. “Thirty-eight seconds. First and goal at the eight. Matt, you all right? You look green.”

“I’m fine coach.”

“We’re going no huddle on first two plays. Bubba, you’re in as blocking back. We’re running the I. We didn’t practice this this week, but we’ve done it before. Matt, watch where Smith-Cline lines up. If he’s left of center, then yell ‘Robert.’ Fake to Big Bubba and give to Jeremy. Jeremy, stay right behind Bubba. Matt, if Smithy is on the right of Felix, then yell “Larry,” See how it works. Open to the side where Smithy is not.”

“What if he plays it straight up the middle?”

“Trust me. He won’t. Got it? Two plays. No huddle. If we still haven’t scored, I’ll call the last time out. Everyone, hustle to the line. Get set and be ready. Get up and do it again. And stay still. No one moves. Wait for Matt’s call. It’ll be first sound.”

Matt was confident. The coach was a genius. The Chargers were going to score. At the line he saw Smith-Cline cheating to the left. Matt walked to the line just as he had seen quarterbacks do on TV. He yelled across to the right and left, “Robert!”

Matt took a breath and approached his center. The clock was stopped. He had plenty of time. “Down!” And the world exploded in a synchronized rush. Bubba went first and Jeremy right behind. Matt carried out the fake by running to his right. He watched as Jeremy made maybe three yards.

Then everyone popped up and scrambled back to their positions. Matt turned his head and yelled “Robert” just so Bubba and Jeremy could hear. “Down!” And another clash. Dust everywhere. Matt couldn’t tell what happened, but he heard a whistle.

Coach had called the final timeout. It was third and five with twelve seconds left.

“One play. We will score on this play. Four wide receivers, two each side. Line up way outside. Inside guys in the slot. Each side run the flag and cross. You know the

play. The slot goes to the flag and the wideout runs toward the pylon. Now Jeremy, you stay in to block in case Smithy blitzes. If he doesn't blitz that means he has to cover you. Run to the goal line and turn to your left. Matt, you getting this? It's a quarterback draw. If Smithy blitzes run as fast as you can right passed him. If he follows the back, wait a beat, act like you're going to throw and then run up the middle. You haven't done this in practice, but the rest of the team knows the drill.

"Everyone hands in. One-two-three."

The team yelled in unison, "Chargers!"

The team ran out on the field and lined up quickly. The Jets coach called timeout.

Coach Jordan gathered the offense. He took a knee in the middle and just smiled.

"We spooked 'em. They'll change the defense to guard against the pass. This is exactly what I knew he would do. Matt, this is going to open the field. Perfect for you to waltz into the endzone."

I'm going to drop back and pass, and Smith-Cline will blitz and kill me. If he doesn't then it's me running up the middle straight into my space. He'll be waiting to kill me. The coach thinks that I'm just going to sneak past him.

Matt stepped up to the line and big Smith-Cline was cheating in, ready to blitz. The rest of the defense was spread out waiting for a quick slant or an out route. Just to reinforce the rouge, Matt turned to his left and yelled, "Jose, it's all you!"

This would be a perfect play if it wasn't for their best player standing right in the middle of the plan.

Matt took the snap and took the three steps back exactly as he practiced all week, his eyes on the big guy the whole time. He wasn't blitzing. Jeremy saw it too, and he ran forward to the goal line and turned left.

Matt tucked the ball and took off. His vision narrowed. All he could see was a small spot in the endzone. It was as if he was going to run right off the high dive at the pool. There was no turning back. He would make it or get clumpered.

Then nothing. Matt scored untouched. His heart leapt. Felix swarmed him with a big hug. They did it; they just scored. On the sideline, Coach waved frantically.

The two-point conversion. It's not over.

Big Bubba ran onto the field faster than Matt had ever seen him run. The game clock was stopped, but they still had to watch the play clock. Matt met Bubba just outside of the huddle.

After a moment, trying to catch his breath, Bubba was able to say, "Jackson."

Matt yelled for the wide receiver to head for the sideline. The strategy was obvious. *Coach is going up the middle.*

After precious seconds, Bubba said, "I formation, ... hand to me ... on right side, ... Jeremy pushes, ... you, ... sprint right for the fake."

Matt explained the play in the huddle. "It's the tush-push guys. We win it right here. On two, hold your water."

Matt ran to the line. On his second "hut" Matt gave the ball to Bib Bubba and turned and ran as fast as he could for the right pylon. It helped. Matt saw two players closing in on him. One wrapped his arms around Matt's legs and Matt went down.

Looking up from the ground, Matt saw the referee extends his arms straight up.

We won!

The Chargers went crazy, jumping up and down. Matt saw Coach and the players on the sideline. They weren't celebrating. Matt looked at the scoreboard. Chargers 8, Jets 7. Three seconds left.

The team organized on the sideline. Coach said, "Time doesn't matter. They have all the time in the world to run this back. This game is ours to win. All we have to do is make the tackle. Matt, squib kick it. Everyone, stay in your lanes. Fall on it if it's in your lane, but primary mission is to make the tackle. No matter what they have up their sleeves, it won't work. Stay in your lanes. Lets' go. Hands in. Chargers on three 1-2-3, ..."

"Chargers!"

Matt bent over the tee with the ball. He had never in his life attempted a squib kick. He had seen it a million times on TV. *How am I supposed to put this ball?* Matt placed the ball as normal. *I'll kick it normal, just lean forward a bit, just like a low, free kick in soccer. I can do this.*

The ref blew the whistle, Matt kicked and lost his balance. He jumped up and couldn't tell what was happening. It seemed everyone was running to the right. Then a Jet player took off in the other direction running to the left. Matt saw the field clearly now. Smith-Cline had the ball and moved so far to the left that he was running up the sideline. No Charger was in position. No one had stayed in his lane. Matt instinctively ran to his left. All the monster had to do was run straight at Matt and the game would be over.

What an idiot.

Smith-Cline was running up field right along the sideline. Matt moved to cut him off. Suddenly Matt felt all the confidence in the world. He was going to win this. Smith-Cline had no instinct for the play. He was running like a sprinter, which he wasn't. Matt timed the angle perfectly and just when it appeared Smith-Cline would run past, Matt pushed him out of bounds.

Game over.

Matt sat up from the sideline away from the teams and the one next to the bleachers. Up there his mom was clapping like crazy. His father just stood in silent awe. He had the proudest smile on his face. Across the field his teammates were celebrating. Jeremy ran toward him, screaming in delight. Matt looked at the scoreboard. 8-6. No time left.

I stopped Smith-Cline.

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