

George an' Me

By Bob Carroll

Edmund Morris' biography of Ronald Reagan in which he made himself a character and invented scenes and conversations 'twixt him and Reagan has inspired me to write *Me an' George*, a biography of George Halas.

The abridged version follows:

Chapter 1: I first met George at a Tupperware party held at my Aunt Suzie's home in Skokie in August 1919. He was on crutches.

"Hi," he said, thrusting out his hand, "I'm the New York Yankees' next rightfielder."

"Glad to hear it," I said, eyeing his crutches. "What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Well," he said earnestly, "When my hip heals, I can play some football for the Hammond Pros, but I don't think there's any future in pro football so I'll probably sell used cars."

"You should play football," I told him. "Everybody's buying brand new Model-T's. Forget used."

"I never thought of that," he said. He stared at the container in his hand. "What am I forgetting?" he asked.

"You have to burp it," I said.

Chapter 2: I was speaking easily in a speakeasy to a flapper one could easily speak to in April of 1920 when I saw George sitting grumpily in a corner.

"I thought you'd be at spring training with the Yankees," I said.

He looked up angrily. "Didn't you hear? The Yankees bought Babe Ruth to play right field. There's no chance for me there. Lousy home runs!"

"Well," I said hopefully, "maybe the Yankees will trade you someplace where they don't hit home runs – like to the St. Louis Browns."

"Oh, Lord!" he said. I thought he was going to cry. "Maybe I'll get a job in radio. It's a coming thing. Like, I could do a sports show."

"Radio's just a fad, George. People want to see what they're hearing. How long can you stare at a dial? Say, I just remembered, some starch company down in Decatur is looking for a baseball coach."

"Yeah?"

"The bad part is he'll have to coach the company football team too."

"That wouldn't be hard," he said. "A football coach doesn't have to be nearly as smart as a baseball manager. That's what John McGraw or Walter Camp or one of those Easterners says."

"Do you know anything about starch?"

"Sure," he said. "It makes things stiff."

"So does this," I said, lifting my glass.

Chapter 3: A year later I was in Decatur for a crocheting convention. George was knitting a sweater that had turned into a scarf. "I'm glad to hear things have worked out well here in Decatur, George."

He heaved a big sigh. "Yes, but I really miss Chicago. It's such a toddlin' town. Always something happening."

"I think you purred when you should have knit. Nothing's happening at Cubs Park this fall. They can't find any football team willing to play there. Say . . .?"

He shook his head. "Oh, no. Taking my Staleys there would be too risky. I just couldn't bear failure."

"You know, George, 'Bear' would be a great name for a football team."

"Better than Wind or Fire? How about Rockets?"

"Nah, Bear!" I said. "Bears are big and tough."

"And smell bad. Anyway, I haven't said I'll move my Decatur team to Chicago."

"Just think about it, George."

Chapter 4: I didn't see George for a number of years while I was getting rich in New York on the stock market. Then in January 1930, I was in Chicago selling apples on Racine Avenue when George and his partner Dutch came arguing down the street.

"You do it," George said.

"No, *you* do it," Dutch countered.

I asked them what the problem was.

"We just heard that Capone didn't like how his favorite team was coached last season," George said.

"Another losing season could mean cement galoshes for the coach," Dutch explained.

"So," George said, "Dutch should coach the team. He swims better than I do."

"Not with bullet holes in me," Dutch said. "I'd fill up and sink."

"I've got an idea," I suggested. "Hire a third party to coach the Bears, someone who wouldn't be missed because no one ever heard of him. Somebody like Ralph What's-His-Name from Lake Forest."

Dutch's eyes lit up. "Great idea! I'll go phone him right now."

When Dutch was out of earshot, I turned to George. "You two are so different. I thought one of you would have bought out the other by now."

"Not me," George said. "I don't want all that responsibility. This whole pro football thing could crash any day. Then where would I be?"

I told him, "People with more money than sense are always starting up football teams. Maybe some rich Texan."

George laughed. "Sure," he said, "a team in Dallas. That'll be the day!"

"Well, someplace. You could sell all the equipment, make a killing, and keep all the money yourself if you didn't have a partner."

I could tell he was thinking about that by the way he was squinting. At last he said, "Remember about five years ago when I wrote to you in New York and asked what to do?"

I nodded. "Sure, you couldn't decide whether that post-season tour would draw bigger crowds with Red Grange or Crazylegs Schultz."

"Yeah. I took your advice and it worked out great."

"I always liked Red," I admitted.

"We even met Calvin Coolidge."

"What did he have to say?"

"Not much."

"I always liked Red," I said.

"Buy the team?" he mused. "Let me think about that. How much is that Golden Delicious?"

Chapter 5: I spent most of the 1930's in Mudwallow, New Mexico, working for the WPA. My best work was a mural in the post office that showed the history of the cactus. Maybe it's still there. The decade was nearly over when I returned to Chicago. By then George owned the team and had come back as head coach. Capone was in prison. I found George sitting in his office at Wrigley Field. He was poring over pages of X's and O's and cussing a blue streak.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "This new T-formation stuff Clark Shaughnessey wants me to use is so damn complicated I'll never figure it out. And look at how Hunk Anderson wants the line to block! Why, they're hardly blocks at all!"

I admitted I didn't know Shaughnessey very well, but Hunk was a terrific line coach. If he said the new formation would work, it probably would. I took a couple of minutes to look at the diagramed plays and then tried to explain them to George. After an hour, he threw up his hands in despair.

"Look, George," I explained, "it really doesn't matter if you understand how the plays work. You're the coach. Just tell the team to run them. If they don't work, blame Shaughnessey."

"All well and good," he said. "I don't have to understand the plays, but the quarterback sure does! Where can I get a quarterback smart enough to run this thing? He has to be some kind of genius! Wait a minute! Jay Berwanger! We hold his rights. Maybe I could talk him into playing."

"He hasn't played for several years," I cautioned. "He'd be rusty. I was thinking maybe Luckman."

"Who?"

"Sid Luckman from Columbia. Smart as a whip."

"Yeah? Can he pass?" George asked.

"I think so."

"Well, maybe if Berwanger says no, I might call this Luck guy."

"Of course, you'd get a lot more publicity with Berwanger 'cause you'd have to give him such a big contract."

"Money's no object," George said. We sat in silence for a full minute. "But then Berwanger's no Baugh when it comes to throwing the ball."

I picked up his telephone. "Should I ask the operator to connect you to New York?"

"Reverse the charges."

Chapter 6: In December of 1940, I was in Washington to testify before a House Committee investigating communist activity in the crocheting industry. George Loomis, a representative from a midwest state,

questioned me at length about “red yarns” and then invited me back the following week. That left me with a weekend to kill. On Sunday, I was on my way to a football game – one for the championship as a matter of fact. Suddenly, I spotted George sitting on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial.

“George,” I asked. “Why aren’t you at the game getting your team ready?”

“I just can’t face it,” he said. “We’re going to lose and then I’ll have to listen to George Marshall gloating.”

“Why would General Marshall gloat?” I asked.

“Not General Marshall, George *Preston* Marshall, the Redskins’ owner.”

“Well, tell him if he gets too obnoxious, you’ll hire some African American players. That’ll shut him up.”

George’s jaw dropped lower. “Nothing will shut him up,” he said, “except maybe beating his team, but I don’t think we have a chance. That Sammy Baugh is just terrific.”

“George,” I said, “you won’t have a chance with that attitude. Your team will see that you don’t have any confidence in them and they’ll be beaten right from the start. You’ve got to get off to a good start. That’ll build confidence and then your Bears will get stronger.”

“Easy enough for you to say,” George grumped.

“I probably shouldn’t do this,” I said. “Here’s a play you can use. It’s sure to work.” I quickly diagramed it in some dirt that had accumulated in the gutter. “And then Osmanski goes around here for a touchdown,” I assured him.

He stared at me in admiration. “That’s absolutely brilliant!” he said. “I’ll have the boys run it as soon as we get the ball.”

“No,” I cautioned. “Run it the second play. You don’t want to embarrass the Redskins. That might make them mad.”

“Good thinking,” he said. “It wouldn’t be sporting to run up the score.”

“Not even against George Marshall?” I asked with feigned innocence.

George laughed and loped off to the stadium. I never did get to the game. I met this lovely lady selling Redskins pillows outside the park. But I heard later the play worked very well.

George and I had many more conversations in succeeding years, but I’ll save them for my sequel, *George, Me, an’ Vince*.