

INDOORS ON A NOVEMBER SUNDAY

By Jim Kiel

People were still in a state of shock. Unbelievably, President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated on a Friday of that week, and the game was scheduled for the following Sunday night. Our team arrived from Philadelphia by bus on Sunday afternoon. We all expected an announcement at any time that the game had been cancelled. We never thought we would play.

The inside of Atlantic City Convention Hall was a spectacle to behold. Indoor football, which has become commonplace today, with the advent of stadium domes. In 1963, the idea of playing football indoors had as much mystique as the concept of man walking on the moon, which did not happen until 1969. Both ideas were on the drawing board, the Astrodome planned, and the American space program well underway. Few people realize, however, that indoor football was alive and flourishing long before the Astrodome, or other indoor facilities, on the boardwalk, in Atlantic City, NJ.

This game, while by no means the first in the convention center, was billed as the biggest semi-pro spectacle of the century. Tincum Athletic Club, a perennial champion in the Southwest Philadelphia area, and area with a higher per capita rate of shot-and-beer, die-hard football followers than perhaps any in the country, against the Hammonton Bakers, representing the best in the Northern New Jersey, New York City area, with perhaps the second highest per capita shot-and-beer rate in the country.

Both teams arrived for the game well fortified with "ringers," the majority recent college graduates, or seniors past their final season, and who were no longer concerned with maintaining their amateur status.

When our bus arrived, even though most of the players were well used to big cities, with tall buildings and large stadiums, they stood in open-mouthed awe at the sight of a building large enough to house an entire football field. Yet, there it stood, in all its magnificent and sprawling splendor: a football field, not carpeted with some form of plastic material, but with real grass, brought in by truck in the form of sod, painstakingly placed and matched to make a seamless surface as smooth as the best fairway.

The field was lined out in lime, yard markers in place, with goalposts sprouting majestically from both ends of the field, not made any less impressive by the fact that one was jammed tightly against the edge of the stage where Miss America was crowned.

If the sight of the field indoors did not hold one in awe, the fact that there was room, within this hallowed arena, for another sports spectacular, did. In the lobby area were two training camps set up side by side. One was for Joey Giardello, the local boy challenger from South Philadelphia, and the other for Dick Tiger, the reigning champion of the world, from Nigeria. Each fighter put on a show of his own that weekend, jumping rope, sparring, signing autographs, and getting ready for the upcoming title fight at the convention center. All of this, incredibly, was occurring under one roof.

Most of us were just beginning to believe that the world was not coming to an end after the trauma of the JFK assassination. Both football teams mingled amid the spectators watching the fighters train in the huge hall, many taking pictures, teammates clowning and mugging for the cameras, as buddies took the pictures that would be cherished for life, a few lucky enough to be posed with Joey Giardello, or Dick Tiger.

It was a semi-pro heaven for most of the players, many of whom were used to playing in grass-less dust bowls, where yard markers might consist of two brooms and a length of clothes line, where grandstands, if there were any, were often at risk of collapse, and always in need of fresh paint. So spectators stood, instead, where one player, much larger than the others might show up in gold pants, while his teammates all wore white, or one blue helmet might stand out in a sea of gold, and many a game ends in an unsupervised brawl, sometimes involving players and fan alike, and even an occasional referee.

Events of the week had most people glued to TV sets or radios, waiting for current news reports. Few could pass a TV, and TV's were everywhere. Someone had a set in the lobby of the convention center, and there was a small group gathered around it, watching the news with one eye, and the fighters with the other. Suddenly, there was an outcry of voices in unison, as those watching gasped, collectively. The hall buzzed.

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On the TV, Jack Ruby had emerged from the depths of a parking lot and murdered Lee Harvey Oswald, right there, in front of the world, and in front of the cameras. The buzz rose to fever pitch as word of the killing spread.

We were sure now that the game would be cancelled. I, for one, was convinced that World War III had begun. One woman fainted. She was over-dressed, as many fight fans sometimes are, garbed in satin, and floor-length mink with enough makeup to open her own drug store. She uttered a low, moaning sound, then hit the deck with a loud smack. One of Giardello's handlers jumped down from the ring and brought her to with a dose of smelling salts, and a couple of men in sharkskin suits helped her up and took her toward the front entrance.

As Ruby was collared and led away, people began to calm down again, gradually, and pretty soon some sort of spokesman for the promoters of the game arrived and announced over a loud speaker that the game would still be played. The players and what spectators who were in the hall cheered mightily.

Players on both teams were given a small allowance to buy supper. We split up in small groups and most settled on a hamburger or something light. The conversation among the players was animated, and local newspapers with stories on the game were everywhere.

This was an unusual combination of players for a semi-pro game. At the same table, sharing a pre-game meal, were neighborhood players with nicknames such as "Onions, Rocky, Fats, or Fat Daddy," players who were probably good enough to have played at some college or other, but who never had the grades, or the inclination to go, and who stayed at the sandlot level for the sake of their love of the game, or the contact, or the exercise, or whatever, but certainly not the glory; and the "ringers," from colleges like West Chester, Maryland, North Carolina State, or Temple, and the others: men on their way back down, the ones who had experienced flashes of glory at the top, in the NFL, or the fledgling AFL, who now labored willingly in the arena of the semi-pro, enjoying the last vestiges of their careers. For this one magical evening at least, all were teammates, and they were about to join in battle.

The players on the field that night had reached the pinnacle of semi-professional sports. The years of carrying their own shoulder pads and shoes to playing fields in God-forsaken and out-of-the-way places, and of dressing for games in a car, of lights supplied by portable generating equipment that failed at least once per quarter, of hats being passed to pay the players something, of the hat coming up empty, and players having to settle for a free beer and kielbase sandwich, culminated, for many of us playing that night, as one opportunity for little of the glory of the "big time."

The stands were not embarrassingly empty for this game, as they were for so many semi-professional contests. Not this time. They were, in fact full. Our PR man announced a paid attendance in excess of 10,000 in the locker room before the kickoff. Not only were people out to watch a good game, but they were looking for a distraction from the horrible news from Dallas and Washington. The fans were in an extraordinary mood. The shock of having lived through the assassination of an American president, of having lived through the live coverage of a murder, the uncertainty of it all, the underlying fear that our country was under attack, and that we would soon be at war, had the adrenalin flowing more than at any other game I have ever seen.

The National Anthem was played to an absolutely motionless crowd of spectators. There was not a whisper when a moment of silence was called for our slain president. The self-control and restraint exercised by each individual in the crowd exploded in one tumultuous roar as the announce introduced the starting lineups.

That same release of pent-up energy by the crowd also propelled both teams to perform far beyond usual levels for this type of game. The fact that so many of the players had never played together before would, more often than not, make the game a comedy of errors, with glaring mistakes in timing, and missed assignments. But this game was smooth and flawless. The fact that the game was being played indoors only added to the electricity.

The grass was spongy underfoot, but the playing surface was very smooth. Both teams had straight oxygen available on the sidelines for the players, and it was necessary, and welcome. The air in the hall quickly became heavy, and breathing became difficult. There was a slight odor of garlic or onions in the air, which no one ever explained.

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The hitting in the game was as hard as in any game I ever played, and all of the players I talked with agreed, even the ones who had played in the NFL. For all the hitting, the game was almost devoid of penalties, despite the fact that, time and again, players got into fights. But as quickly as they began, they ended, not because of anything the officials did, but because the players themselves brought things under control. One was a bench-clearing encounter, which otherwise would have ended in a free-for-all, but this one subsided as quickly as it began.

For those of us who were there, and part of this experience, this was one of the strangest games of football ever played. Not only was it among the first ever played indoors, but it was played on real grass, under some of the most unusual emotional circumstances, and it was played by a very unusual combination of sand-lot and big time players and promoters. It was, without question, a semi-pro football player's dream come true.