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Tom Sheehan

The Walls Came Tumbling Down

My grandson Travis, 9 years old and 3 years at quarterback for his Red Storm and Pop Warner teams, who wears the same number 12 that I once wore, listened to many football stories when he visited his grandma and me, often riveted in place by past revelations. I saw the itch start. I could see it in his eyes, the way it had been in my sons' eyes, in my father's eyes.

His hunger to participate in the game was off and running. On many rides as part of his visits, I drove him past our Stackpole Field and the spot where Manning Bowl used to stand in Lynn, Massachusetts, next door to us, all the while stories of past games at those fields spilling from an old man to an eager listener. The stories were about the old players, many of them long gone, and he understood early that they remained with me because of my love for the game. I've told Travis, and all my children and grandchildren, that we come with two things in our favor—love and energy, and we better make sure we use them all up in everything we do.

Travis is giving it his all, for sure, and that taken him past an injury in his last game, rushing for a touchdown, to where he now eagerly looks forward to baseball soon here and the next football season.

The stories that fed his hunger were varied, of all timbres and tones, and one of them was about a great player named Alex Destino, who played for Gloucester High School when I was a pup. It was in the days we lived at Manning Bowl for weekends at a time, and he pulled off the greatest defensive move I can ever remember on that field.

Every time I think of The Bowl razed to the ground, the dust of generations spreading, I think of Alex and, as usual, my old teammates and the relentless foes we ran against. Time has its way of taking its measure, of course, for I lost another one a short while ago when my old co-captain and center of the '46 Saugus Sachems, Andy Forti, passed on.

But we were there, my teammates or classmates and I, on fall days . . . Friday nights, Saturday matinees, on Saturday nights and again on Sundays when games were eventually scheduled to fully use that grand old concrete concourse. We played or we watched others play. There was no place else to be in the 1930's and the '40s. It seemed we were there forever. It still seems that way, though old Manning Bowl is gone now and Manning Field sits in its place, though the goalposts have been moved 90 degrees.

It was a Gloucester-Lynn Classical or Lynn English game where Destino shone; the runner broke loose, and with an escort blocker running interference rushed down the press box sidelines heading for glory at the Maple Street end. The only one in the way was Alex Destino, one of Gloucester's finest (and they've had many of them), coming over from his defensive spot, eyeing the progress of the runner and the huge blocker out front.

Instead of being coy about his maneuver, Alex raced at the tandem, threw himself at the feet of the blocker, bowled him over, came upright on his knees and embraced the surprised runner in a convincing tackle, arms wrapped about both legs, no place to go and no way to get there. It's as sharp in my mind today as it was then. Of course, when it comes to Manning Bowl, I am totally immersed in great scenes, great adventures, and great games. In rugged participation there

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were some we won, some we lost, but that venue was, for all the latter Thirties, all the Forties and Fifties, the haven and home and bright spot for a few generations of football fans. I was one of them. And untold thousands from Saugus and elsewhere on the North Shore.

My father was a great fan too, but during the war years his job as a security guard at General Electric was a full-time job. Many days or nights, when we played at The Bowl, my father had to work and had to listen to the game on radio or to my replay late that night when he came home from work. But there was the night in 1945 when we had a game at The Bowl against Harry Agganis and Don Miosky and Stanley Brittan and George Pike and the rest of the Classical squad on the run for a great year.

During half time, Coach Dave Lucey gave one of his famous talks, screaming at us, spittle coming at the corners of his lips. It was notorious. It was infamous. We burst from the locker room, on fire. For those in our way of escape, it was tidal. We brought that fire onto the field. We were losing 12-7, late in the third period, guard Georgie Miles, forced a Classical fumble on our 2-yard line. But we started a long and torturous drive of 19 plays, about 98 yards against that Classical juggernaut. In the press box, Tom Lester of WESX was broadcasting the game. When we had fought our way past midfield on that fateful drive, Lester caught the excitement. "Saugus is going wild!" he said, and, in appreciation of a few sly moves, he added, "and Sheehan's going crazy!"

We ran the Charlie Sampson Special a couple of times, the 42 Reverse a few times with Cushie Harris carrying the ball, the 46 Trap, and the Halfback Spin around End, and the Off-Tackle with the ball in my hands, the Fullback Buck with Cushie again. We didn't pass, we ran. We ran and ran and ran. Small, begrudged chunks, but gains.

My father, at his post at the main gate of the GE plant, was listening to the game. The GE Guard Chief told me the story some days later. "Tom, I heard all this screaming and noise coming from the radio on the desk at the Western Avenue gate. The next thing I know, the damned GE ambulance is going out the gate with the siren screaming and it speeds down Western Avenue in the direction of Manning Bowl, the old redhead at the wheel."

To this day I can hear the wail of the siren, see the ambulance pull into one end of The Bowl, my father leap out of the ambulance. We had the ball on the 9-yard line. Iran it. Harris ran it. I ran it. Harris ran it. Then I called Harris again and he scored the winning touchdown, 14-12.

I did not see the ambulance leave, but I know my father went back to work. Duty had called at both ends of the scale. When he got home from work, I was sound asleep.

In 1946 all Saugus home games were played at Manning Bowl—English, Classical, Beverly, Swampscott, Peabody—but it was old hat to us then. I knew the tilt of the field, where the ball bounced best, where the ghosts were lurking to break loose in our favor. Stackpole Field that year was unplayable, so we went to our second home, a home away from home. Manning Bowl had all the creature comforts for us who longed for that sweet competition, who found respect in and among a host of great friends over the years, for we spent our summers together at Fisherman's Beach in Swampscott, the adolescents and teenagers on parade, graduation coming, Korea just around the corner for the unsuspecting. But The Bowl was not past for me. In 1947, while at Marianapolis Prep in

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Thompson, Connecticut, in an undefeated season, we played Admiral Bullis Academy of Silver Springs, Maryland, in the first Shoe Bowl Game ever at The Bowl. Late in the game I tossed a pass to Walter Belardinelli, my tailback from Bethel, Connecticut. Walter, the best I ever played with, picked off the ball at our 40-yard line some 2 yards beyond the safety. He crossed the goal line, salvaging a tie game, 10 yards ahead of the safety.

The game was December 7, 1947. The field was frozen from the 30-yard line into each end zone. Straw was piled on the sidelines. The crowd, as usual, was immense. It was my last call at The Bowl.

These days Manning Bowl memories keep leaping, and the names and faces and accomplishments keep coming back in a litany of images. Some of them went off to Korea with me, teammates to the last: Rocco Cerrone and Tony Andreottola from Revere; Joe Penney and Marty Smith and Jack Hennessey and Charlie Long (who later worked in my crew at Raytheon) from Lynn English; George Comiskey and Billy Ransom and Bob Debner from Beverly; Pat Arena and Joe Palazzola and Mooter Albert and Ted Williams and another Destino from Gloucester; the intrepid phalanx from Peabody of Herky Harris, Buddy Roche, Dick Keone, Pete Kravchuk, Luke McHugh, those we scrimmaged against so many times I can't remember; and Harry Agganis and Don Miosky and Ray McClorey and George Pike and Dave Warden and Stanley Brittan and Mecca Simirowski and Boley Dancewicz from Lynn Classical.

And there was Jimmy Vizarkas, of Lynn Classical, who a few years later I spotted walking down the Main Supply Route (MSR) in Korea as his outfit was relieving mine on Heartbreak Ridge and I did not see him again until Founders Day in Saugus in 2002. That day on the MSR we talked about Manning Bowl and our last encounter there in 1945.

There was a smiling quarterback named Rodriguez from Classical and an Air Force team at Fort Devens in 1950 when Jimmy and I and Art Spinney, then with the Baltimore Colts and later to protect Johnny Unitas in that great 1958 win over the New York Giants, rehashed our days at The Bowl after our military game, just before we headed off to other destinies.

Memories still fall out from the site of the old Bowl as I drive by, caught up in reverie and nostalgia.

My wife Beth came home from work one evening with a new story to shake me up. She was the manager of an Alzheimer's ward in a nursing home. "We have a new short-term patient in our ward. His name is George Faulkner. I told him my name and your name. When he heard your name, he said, excitedly, 'I remember Tom Sheehan. I played against him and Saugus and against Lynn Classical with Harry Agganis. I remember both of them.'"

George Faulkner was a rambunctious, hard-nosed tailback for Arlington High School, an *old school* player, the kind who sticks in your mind. We played against Arlington in 1945 at Camp Edwards on Cape Cod, a rollicking, no-holds-barred game for entertainment of the troops, many of them being separated from the late madness of war. Later he played for an Army team here in the states and overseas when Art Spinney and I were playing for Fort Devens in the fall of 1950, before our own deployment overseas.

I thought it would be a sweet respite if both of us could remember some of our playing time there at The Bowl, a time for the ages, a time for the aged. I paid

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him a visit in that drear ward. A sad note followed a few weeks later when I attended his memorial services. But I came away from that short visit knowing we had closed a stretch of 60 years between meetings, now and then with an uncontested view of our involvement.

So, amid the dust and the noise, amid the tumult and the crush of cascading cement, some old fans out here have gracious recall, the lingering memories of an ecstatic center of joy. We'll carry it off that way with us, saying: *You can tear the place down, but you can't take it away.*

How and why I swing things this way, just like the pigskin bounces, with my love of the game and my love of the language, arose in great part from the following lead paragraph by Fred Foye in *The Boston Sunday Globe* in October of 1941; and I serve it up from memory, as I have done hundreds and hundreds of times: *Harrington-Shipulski, Shipulski-Harrington. Shipularington Harringpulski- ton the names Mike Harrington and Eddie Shipulski became a dizzying maelstrom of air bombs, bucks and touchdowns, and when the nose drops were administered here this drear day, undefeated Melrose awoke to find itself defeated and Saugus High School, otherwise known as The Shipulski-Harrington Athletic Club, leaving town with a 13-0 victory.*

My boyhood heroes were magnificent and so was Fred Foye; I was in love with the game and with the language, for I had seen every play of that game from the grandstand and added the clipping to my scrapbook.

The footnote to this latter entry occurred only 3 years later, in 1944, on an October Monday afternoon at Stackpole Field in Saugus, after Saturday's game between undefeated Melrose and undefeated Saugus was postponed because of rain. I was not in the grandstand for this game: I was in uniform for Saugus. We won again, 13-0. I played behind Frank Pyszko at tailback and defensive back, a whirlwind that day, who picked off 5 interceptions in one game: that's a career record for many defensive backs. And our captain was Art Spinney, on an Army team with me later, and a bulwark as an offensive guard in front of Johnny Unitas in 1958, and of whom, in this drama, I wrote these words: *Short Trips Back to the Pocket with Colt Guard Art Spinney: You were more defense than the Maginot Line in that '58 overtime game against the Giants, and Johnny Unitas had more graces than Paris. When we put you down for the last time, they huddled again around your fistled hands, Saugus Sachems, Heights' Eagles, Champion Colts, Hall of Famers, Governors, the carpenter who still works the house next door.*

And with a note to close on, those images still intact, I add the following: Travis, my quarterback, asked me one day how old I was when I scored my first touchdown. When I told him about 16 or 17 in high school, he said, "Grampa, I beat you by 10 years."