

Blockhead: Football Was Very Good to Me

Bob "Poultry Legs" Gilbert

I am the only person I know who flunked college football. Not a D-minus, a big fat F, as in total failure. At the time, this felt outrageous. *Rudy*, the undersized Notre Dame scrub clobbered and glorified in the 1993 biopic, couldn't have tried much harder. The cause was a clerical error augmented by kinetic forces. Yet I'm grateful it happened. You learn more from losing.

In 1964, the University of Pennsylvania's freshman team boasted seventy-five players. In the team photo, I am the blond beanpole at top right. There were so many of us, the Quaker coaching staff fielded two squads with different schedules. I played second- or third-string guard with the B Squad. The undefeated A Squad was crushing Princeton and other Ivies at Franklin Field; we scrimmaged in unrecorded contests on the dirt and crabgrass of such places as Westchester State and Bordentown Military Institute. The latter, however, was no sacrificial lamb. It was a gateway to the pros disguised as a prep school. It boasted alums like NFL Hall of Famer Floyd Little. They played with frightening determination, as if already on the Notre Dame varsity.

How I came to face off against a fantastically stoic Bordentown monster—unfazed by a broken nose dribbling blood throughout the game—can best be explained as a fluke, especially if you'd seen my math SATs. In fact, my whole college experience hinged on random luck.

Baggy Sweatpants

It all started my junior year at NCHS with the advent of a new unofficial line coach named Bill Assiff (pronounced A- Sif). He just appeared one day at practice, a sort of personal *deus ex machina* in baggy white sweatpants. For reasons known only to him, and I write this without a shred of false modesty, he nursed a stubborn belief in my untapped abilities.

"Bobby Gilbert, Bobby Gilbert," he would wail, "you should be All-State!" He would demonstrate how by bursting out of a lineman's stance—knees bent, head up, hands vertical, legs pumping—and then whack my sternum with a massive forearm. "See?" he inquired, holding me up with his other arm. "You've got to get low and deliver the blow!" Impressive as this instruction was, the phrase always elicited a mental snicker. But I presumed he knew the technique, if not his player. He'd been voted an All-Time Penn Football player in 1955 and 1956. He had a profound influence, though I never thanked him.

I rated my gridiron skills as below average. Nor was I overly praised by my fellow starting linemen—Joe (The Toe) Perna, Jim (Jamesie) Tiani, Rick (The Other Guy Started it, Coach) Nickerson, and Peter (Staats) Staaterman. As to our regard for Assiff, he seemed to be the first in a line of admonishing advisers who accumulated as our season turned abysmal.

He kind of consulted with our official line coach, Ray (The Owl) Parry, and palled around and shot baskets with head coach Joe (The Bear) Sikorski. But at least we knew how to address him. As the Rams' worst-ever season slid inexorably downward, we acquired two more kibitzers, both without known names or authority. Quarterback Tony, then known as Jack, (Get Serious) Williams dubbed these characters White Sweater and New Guy. They mumbled among themselves and offered dumb suggestions (e.g., "You gotta hit harder!").

Assiff was different. Between bouts of extreme exasperation, he could be encouraging. He once congratulated me for making nine open field tackles in one game. I did? They must have tripped nearby. And during the screening of our humiliating 1962 70-0 loss to Darien, he'd stop the projector to note good plays, mostly made by Bobby (The Great) Dix and other members of what became the 3-D backfield, Stan (I'm as Earl, Too) Duffendack, and Barret (Jet Fuel) Duff.

Bombing at Dartmouth

In the fall of 1963, I had adequate high school grades, but I kidded myself that I was elite school material. I went for early acceptance at Williams College, but that was a joke; Brown's admissions blew me off on arrival in Providence, I bombed with a highly disdainful yo-yo at Dartmouth; Wesleyan told me I didn't have a prayer. And then with the guy from Northwestern, I inserted a foot in my mouth that descended to the duodenum. Would I go if he guaranteed my acceptance right then and there? Advice for the next life: Lie and convincingly shout out, "Oh, yes! It's my heart's desire!" Left with a single "safety school," I arrived in Philadelphia to be greeted by one last skeptical interrogator.

Why did I want to go to Penn?

Well, you see, my high school line coach went to Wharton and encouraged me to apply; indeed, he said there was no better place to get an education.

And who might that be?

Bill Assiff.

Bill Assiff! What a coincidence! "Big Bill" had been this guy's brother's roommate! It was a bit confusing in the moment, too many possessives. But I immediately got the gist: I now had impeccable credentials. Miraculously. With no inkling whatsoever of this connection going into an interview I anticipated being brief and futile.

The recruiter went wild in praise of Assiff's athletic exploits. And that was when the Quakers made others quake, even mighty Notre Dame. I didn't say much after that, but Bill Assiff's roommate's brother had heard enough. He annotated his interview sheet in bold strokes, underlined it, then summoned a senior football player to show me around the campus and sell the place hard.

And that's what put me in a shower room with naked Bordentown Military behemoths who neither smiled nor conversed. My opponent—Flat Nose, I'll call him—glowered and bled silently. The cadets' communication cues, I learned, were nonverbal. When someone flushed a toilet, diverting all the cold water, the cadets stepped forward in rank. "Fucking shit!" I bellowed, grabbing my scalded butt a half-second later. A low rumble of disapproval rose from the unburned. "We don't use words like that here," Flat Nose elucidated. Obviously, they won big that day, though six decades later I don't remember the score. What I do recall is wondering about guys who took themselves so seriously, displayed such cheesy machismo. That thought itself might explain my football failure, as well as weighing 165 pounds. Only much later did I begin to understand their desperation. This could be their living, and a very good one for a few. It was like swaggering Wharton undergrads competing for a Wall Street internship at Goldman Sachs.

Standing on the Bench

Back at Franklin Field, the B Squad's limited schedule meant I didn't play or even suit-up most Saturdays. Instead, I'd take the train home for "lost weekends" with Dave (Surfing Buddha) Jaeger, another Rams lineman. The one exception was Parents' Day. As usual, the B Squad had no game. But for the sake of proud parents—and maybe in hopes of convincing a few stinkingly rich alums to fund tenured chairs, or whole new buildings at the Wharton School—we nonstarters received strict instructions to remain standing on the benches in support of the A Team. After all, the heir to the Gulden mustard fortune was in my class, as eventually was Donald J. Trump, who transferred into Wharton during his junior year. Of course, neither played football. Nor, at the time, did I, really. So, I stepped down and wandered off to talk to my father along the sideline. My Old Man was no Saul Steinberg, who raised \$1 billion for Penn. And I was not Jonathan Steinberg, the son who graduated in 1988. But Pop looked wealthy enough in his mossy green Tyrolean hat, with its jaunty boar's-hair brush. Seeing us, the head coach sent me in for a few plays as a linebacker.

Then one day, I wrenched my knee in some pileup on our practice field beside the roaring Schuylkill (a.k.a. Sure-kill) Expressway. The pain was excruciating. Even the touch of sheets woke me in throbbing agony. I vanished for the waning days of the season but was entirely unmissed. No one came looking for number 58. Not the trainers, not the assistant coaches, certainly not the coach. This was strange. I felt certain they'd been aware of my existence. The trainers supplied me with a freshly laundered jock strap and T-shirt every day, and now there'd be a miscount. My line coach had specifically kidded me about how they were going to retire my jersey number and strode off laughing heartily. What's more, I knew for a fact I'd made a *distinct* impression on the head coach, who'd told me that, "You look like a big bird out there." Which made sense. Sikorsky had called me "Poultry Legs." Out of sight, out of mind, I guessed. Yet didn't somebody wonder if I'd been mugged in West Philly, home to Penn's sprawling urban campus and bordering the scene of summer riots? Or were they waiting for my corpse to start stinking up the men's dorm?

The answer came from the New Canaan *Advertiser*, which reported that the son of prosperous Harry and Aileen had won his freshman numerals on Penn's unbeaten freshman team—an assertion that was factually incorrect since my only brief playing time on that team had been staged for my father. Those fragile cloth relics may still be waiting for me. And, except for a disappointed Bill Assiff, that should have been that.

In the spring I didn't go out for sports. That is, until I got a postcard notice from the Athletic Department that I was on track to get an F in physical education. In those days, two athletic courses were required to graduate, and I'd been automatically enrolled. I'd been unaware of that. A clerk told me that all the courses were filled, with one exception: spring football. Back I trudged to River Field.

Mimicking a Bulldog

This time, we scrub lineman learned opponents' plays. I became a Princeton Tiger, a Yale Bulldog, and whatever a Bucknell mascot is called. (I should ask Hugh (Hughie) Harwell, the Rams' team manager matriculated there.) *

Squaring off against varsity linemen, it was Bordentown all over again. My knee still was very tender, but I fled blockers and bashed heads halfheartedly enough to avoid serious injury until one fateful day.

My assignment was to run a rival college's trap play. To explain: I'd vacate my left guard hole and run to the right. I'd smash into the defensive tackle as he rushed unheeding into a hole left by the absent right guard, who was leading an end run. This was a variant of the famous five-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust power sweep that was the Green Bay Packers' bread and butter. Bam! My victim never saw me coming.

A long whistle blast ensued, and everyone stood still. "Unremembered surname!" roared out a varsity line coach named Seifried (Siggy) Molnar—no kidding. "Did yew zee vat dat skeeny kid just deed to you?"

Unremembered surname gave me an intensely baleful look. "Yes, coach," he muttered.

"Run zat play vonst murr!" commanded Siggy, a former Penn All-Ivy tackle.

Bodies in Motion

Which brings us to kinetics, another key element in this story. It is defined as that "branch of classical mechanics that concerns the effect of forces and torques on the motion of bodies having mass."

According to the book *Concussion*, Dr. Bennet Omalu was the first to closely examine the brains of professional football players in post-mortem autopsies. He began in 2002 with the Pittsburgh Steelers' All-Pro offensive center "Iron" Mike Webster, who was relatively undersize in body mass, only six feet and under 250 pounds. Unlike boxers' tattered brains, Webster's looked pristine, despite a cognitive descent by age fifty that left him occasionally catatonic, using his stove as urinal, and living on potato chips and almond rolls. Omalu persisted. He thinly sliced Webster's tissue samples and tried various staining agents and finally isolated the telltale minute sludge and tangles of a new disease now called chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

The Hits Keep on Coming

CTE's worst damage comes from accumulated hits. Webster had taken an estimated twenty-five thousand high-impact blows to the head over a fifteen-year career. It is the repetition of violent collisions that does it, the doctor revealed. For instance, the g-force that causes blackouts among jet pilots is a hefty five to six g's. Yet, studies show that football *linemen* sustain twenty to thirty g's on *every* play for decades.

Of course, spectacular human crashes in tackles made against running backs and receivers can even kill but are rarer. Such impacts generate a whopping ninety to one-hundred g's. Yet unnecessary roughness calls and other penalties have been around for years to stem gratuitous brutality. Indeed, the NFL's wide audience appeal depends a whole lot on not too many balls being dropped from hands afflicted by sudden death. *

But now let us return to 1964: After the snap, unremembered surname, whose body mass was massive, turned toward me with alacrity, got low, and delivered a monumental blow as I ran into him at full tilt. WHAM! From my vantage point, it appeared to be a perfect Assiff-style forearm shiver. How about that?

Know why you see stars when hit in the head? It's because, in response to those forces and torques, the brain slops back and forth in the jelly inside your skull. In other words, it twists and tugs against the ligaments that hold it in place. These, the brain records as flashes of light. I arose from the encounter in semi-consciousness and the afternoon moved on in fuzzed-over half focus. It was one of five or six concussions that left me woozy or inert on the ground (two from car crashes).

The most dramatic came during a scrimmage with Stamford's Rippowam High School. A hulking fullback * and I collided with such fearful head-on terminal velocity that it broke my helmet. On impact, off popped the top half of a steel snap that held up the entire suspension system. My head smashed into the remaining half, now negligibly cushioned, resulting in a perfectly round bloody indentation on the crown of my cranium.

Looking Like a Martian

I awoke to see the strange but kindly face of a middle-aged Black man peering down at me. “I know just how you feel,” said Rippowam’s coach. After that, I wore a special helmet * with a spongy pad glued on top that made me look vaguely Martian.

Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. But those last few college poundings gave me the necessary sports credit to graduate, right?

Another postcard came from the Athletic Department. I’d flunked phys ed, it read. Inquiry at the Palestra revealed the reason: This time I *had* been missed. And even though I’d showed up every day since being notified, I still hadn’t attended enough “classes.” Catch-22.

At year end, I received a form invite to attend summer football practice in Hershey, Pennsylvania. I didn’t go. To tell the truth, I held a grudge. But one final message came winging to me from the Palestra my senior year. This was 1968, the Age of Aquarius. The College had inaugurated pass/fail to prevent the military’s induction of students below a certain grade level. Penn’s younger students were wearing granny glasses and agitating like Leon Trotsky. Everybody smoked dope. And I had to take a mandatory gym class? An unsupervised weightlifting course was the easiest solution.

One afternoon, while languidly pumping curls, I recognized an old teammate who wandered in to do a few sets. Another B Squad guard, he’d made it to the varsity, but at a huge price. He was hobbled by gruesome scars slicing across both knees. He laughed about no longer being a running guard like Green Bay’s Fuzzy Thurston, his idol. It was okay, though. It got him out of Vietnam.

A Rash of Good Luck

At that moment I felt very fortunate to have failed football and avoided being crippled. And soon thereafter I flunked two armed forces physicals for having a chronic skin rash. Happy failures, all.

From such random twists of fate, I take the lesson to be glad in all things. Even though in 2015, I was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, a progressive neurological disorder some scientists link to brain injuries. And despite spending thousands of dollars on Mohs surgery and radiation treatments for skin cancers brought on by baking my atopic dermatitis in “healthy” sunlight.

William S. Assiff (also an All-Time Penn baseball player) went on to IBM management positions and continued to coach boys’ football. We never talked again; he died in August 2022 at age 87. But he had believed in me strangely and strongly enough that I sneaked into Penn—a dual imposter in athletics and academics—and did get a great education. That certainly wasn’t his entire intent, and

I may have blocked a more worthy minority student. Which got me thinking about recent court decisions and political investigations involving college admission policies.

Nevertheless, wherever you are Coach Assiff, I thank you.

* Note 1: The Bisons. In fact, Hugh became Bucknell's head football manager too. Our paths crossed distantly in 1965 when the Bisons faced the Quakers in Philadelphia. *"Did we say 'Hi' before the game?"* Hugh asked in an email. Sadly, no. He didn't hear my yells from the stands. He credits Joe Sikorsky for spotting *"my innate OCD organizing skills. I sorted, straightened, folded, stacked, and shelved everything the players had dumped. Joe was very impressed."* So am I. As a naval officer, Hugh served in the mothership guiding Trieste II's record 4.5-mile-deep dive to salvage space junk. And he later earned a masters in Regional Planning with strong emphasis on ecology and natural sciences at, where else? Penn.

* Note 2 In the famous 1960 photo of an unconscious New York Giant's star Frank Gifford lying on the infield dirt at Yankee stadium, the Philadelphia Eagle raising his arms in triumph is Chuck Bednarik, a Penn All-American. Teammates thought Gifford was dead and he only returned to play two years later. In the aftermath, the NFL banned clothesline tackles. An autopsy years later revealed Gifford had CTE.

* Note 3: Jim Tiani, who remained conscious, says Rippowam's back wasn't all that large, but he did become a humongous deal in sports. Bobby Valentine went on to play for and manage the New York Mets in a long Big-League career. When I bumped into him, he was on his way to being Connecticut's only simultaneous All-State star in football, basketball, and baseball. In an email, Jim recalls: *Bobby is 5' 10" and about 190. He was built like a "brick shit house" back then. In the scrimmage I tried to tackle him, and he ran right over me. I am on my back, and he plants his foot on my chest and keeps running until you linebackers got him. I remember when you got your helmet smashed.*

* Note 4: A titanium football helmet six inches thick, generously padded on the outside with superball rubber, would only prevent a broken skull. The gray matter would still slosh around inside.
