

# My football story: muddy fields and broken teeth



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consciousness, it has become the city's lifeblood. This is a community that relishes the muddy fields, always lowers its shoulders, and will never, ever turn in its uniform.

Come to think of it, even Bobby Douglass ended up spending part of his career wearing the green and gold.

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that persona.

It was not long before I noticed that most of my playmates had grown much bigger than me. I was still relatively short and thin. I vividly recall one ball carrier charging toward me at full speed during a game. Rather than lower my shoulders and attack, I meekly fell backward and watched him run over me like a locomotive.

At that moment, I should have known that my football career was over. Heck, in another game, my best friend Mike lost a tooth. A tooth!

But when I arrived at high school and saw the heroic status bestowed on football players, I could not resist making one more reach for stardom. I tried out for the team. To nobody's surprise, it did not go well. After a few days of being tossed around like a rag doll, I turned in my uniform and announced my retirement.

I then joined the school newspaper, became sports editor and took my place along the sidelines.

More than 30 years later, I see myself as a kid again in the faces of so many Green Bay Packers boosters, both young and old. I am transported back to that neighborhood department store every time I watch wide-eyed fans meeting their green-and-gold heroes — each chiseled out of stone.

Football has not only crept into Green Bay's



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Green Bay Packers players connect with young fans in many ways, including the bike-riding tradition at training camp.

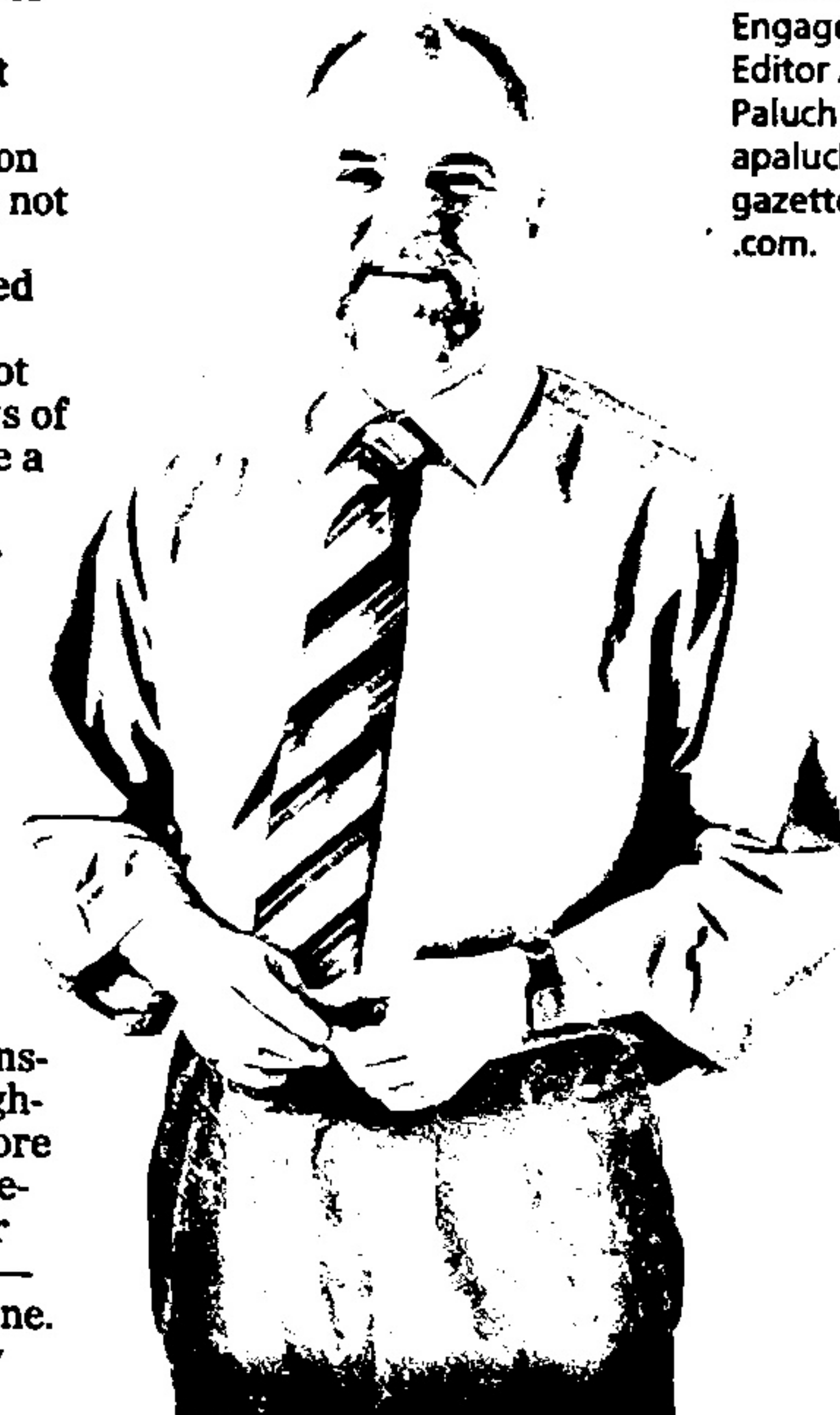
My interest in football now piqued, I woke up one Christmas morning to find a football helmet under the tree. It was a gift from my grandmother. Bless her heart, she had brought home not a Bears helmet, but a Cleveland Browns helmet. I suspect she thought the bright orange color would appeal to me.

To be honest, I was more excited when I acquired a youth-size football, small enough to hold in my hands. Full-size footballs made the game virtually inaccessible for me. But with the proper ball, me and my buddies were soon passing, catching and punting like pros.

That Cleveland Browns

helmet eventually came out of the closet, too, as I lined up in muddy fields against kids dressed in their own makeshift uniforms. Each game was a neighborhood event on par with the Daytona 500. We almost expected to see a Goodyear blimp flying overhead.

One guy named Leo showed up wearing a Green Bay Packers helmet. He announced that he was a diehard Packers fan, even though he lived in Chicago. His favorite player was a running back named John Brockington. Brockington was a bruising runner who intimidated tacklers. Leo did a commendable job of embracing



Football crept into my consciousness slowly during the 1960s in Chicago.

I enjoyed sports, of course. But the Chicago Bears in those days were not offering much to capture a boy's imagination. My first football memory involved kids at school making fun of a new player's peculiar name: Dick Butkus.

It was a neighborhood friend who later opened my eyes to a vast universe of football that extended far beyond Chicago. There were guys like Johnny Unitas, Roman Gabriel, Joe Namath and Bart Starr.

Those were some superstar names, weren't they? They all sounded like Greek gods to me. I imagined each one looking like he was chiseled out of stone. Superman without the cape.

Soon I had a chance to meet one. The newest quarterback for the Bears was making a guest appearance at a department store in my neighborhood. I went with some friends and waited in line. That was the day I shook hands with Bobby Douglass.

OK, go ahead and laugh. Football fans will remember that Douglass never amounted to much of a superstar. From the perspective of a 10-year-old boy, however, the towering quarterback with blond hair looked every bit like an action hero come to life. I was certain he could hurl thunderbolts into the sky.