

## Hell From Everywhere

Chet Muller took the flip from the rebounder, awkwardly leapt and using the backboard, cleanly dropped the ball through the basket. “Yes! Eleven in a row,” he said, grabbing and shaking a teammate’s bicep. “My record! Bet Wilt never did that many.”

“Too bad it’s during lay-up drills and not in an actual game. And Wilt? Wilt Chamberlain just scored a hundred points in a single game against the Knicks last week, so not sure he’d even care,” said his friend, Paul Minsterketter. Tittering, Chet switched over to the rebound line.

“Quit goofing around you two!” Coach Turner yelled.

Chet was a member of a really formidable St. Thomas seventh and eighth grade team which was 15 and 0 and headed for the Louisville Catholic League Final Four. The school seemed to have the whole parish, in fact, the entire city’s south end paying attention.

Though an eighth grader, Chet was the smallest guy on the team. At five-one and eighty pounds, the diminutive dreamer rode the bench incessantly. Statistically, he had accumulated a grand total of two minutes thirty-seven seconds of playing time for all fifteen games. He had scored one point, a free-throw against St. Simon and Jude with ten seconds remaining which, according to guard, Dennis Kulmer, “took the score from a spine-tingling 51 to 20, to a safe 52 to 20.” There were twelve boys on the team and none loved the game more than Chet yet he was more than willing to sit out game after game just to be a part of this odyssey with his friends.

Chet could run well enough but lacking strength and mass he was easily knocked off his feet, so much so Coach Turner did not allow him to scrimmage. “If you get hurt, it will be bad. The school is not properly insured for players and though your folks have insurance, it’s never enough. Plus, I know your parents are going through tough economic times and I don’t want to complicate that with you getting injured. I let you in three games, and even in that short stint you got blasted around pretty bad. I feel responsible. I’m glad you got to be on the team but on the court, you’re a liability to the school and our under-funded athletic department.”

Coach liked to focus on certain aspects game-to-game so Chet would sit next to the him recording such things as rebounds, shots taken vs shots made, passes before a shot, and scoring per trips down the floor versus the other team’s.

Steve Sherman was a seventh grader but saw a ton of playing time. His brother, Roger ‘Tank’ Sherman, was nearly eleven and starred on the fifth-and-sixth-grade squad. Those young newcomers to organized basketball were limited to three practices a week and only played eight games with no playoffs. Because of his brother, the younger Sherman attended the seventh-eighth graders’ practices and even scrimmaged. They called him Tank after the World War II *Sherman Tank* because he was stocky and phenomenally strong. Steve bragged that his brother could already bench press a hundred-ten pounds in their basement.

“What a phenomenal, natural athlete,” Coach would say. Whirling and flailing his arms, high stepping, dribbling through legs--both his and opponents--bashing into bodies, and making phenomenal shots, he embodied a *Boy-Globetrotter*. He averaged fourteen points a game on a good pee wee team where the second leading scorer averaged five. Everyone loved to watch him; Coach Turner claimed he could actually start on most seventh and eighth grade teams, *just not ours*. In addition, on the gridiron, he led his league in rushing and tackles.

As with most boys' sports teams, there was a fair amount of joking, hazing and general silliness. Chet, somewhat of a class clown, was fine with the high-jinx even when a teammate described his status on the team as eleven jocks and a strap.

During the week, prior to Sunday's final four games at Bellarmine College, the team practiced exceptionally hard. On Ash Wednesday, Coach Turner and his assistant both left early but had instructed the exhausted boys to run ten up-and-down wind sprints before closing shop. This occurred but no one took it seriously and soon the boys were shooting around and making jokes.

"I can't believe Rosalind's tits," chirped Dennis.

"What do you expect? She's fifteen. She didn't start first grade till she was seven," answered Paul.

"I can't believe Mimi's everything," said Tommy Heilman, who at six-foot-two, and one hundred-seventy pounds, was the team's, in fact the league's standout.

Missing the attention Tank expected, he began to stew. He started bouncing a ball as hard as he could. When someone told him to cut it out, he spat on the floor. Angry and embarrassed, the older Sherman told him to *get out*.

"Make me!"

The other boys laughed.

Tank reddened. "I can play on any team, just too young right now! *Fuck!*" he screeched the ultimate forbidden word to impress everyone.

“Come on, Catholic school, you sound like a brat. You can’t even beat anyone in sprints,” Tommy said.

“What about him?” Tank said pointing at Chet.

“Yeaahhh? What about him?” said Paul.

Anxious to go along with anything the guys wanted despite his own misgivings, Chet agreed, they’d race up and down the gym one time. The race was extremely close and declared a tie. His *god-in-the-wings* status tarnished, Tank screamed, *I won you dumbasses, I won!*

“Nope. Still got aways to go,” Tommy said smiling at Tank, “But you *are* a phenom! Look that word up.”

Chet, having collected five balls and stuffed them into a duffel bag, now walked towards the equipment closet. With a mean smile, Tank quickly crept up and foot-hooked Chet’s left ankle causing him to fall. Some of the kids laughed.

Blushing, Chet said, “Come on Tank, don’t do stuff like that. Especially to your own teammates.”

“You ain’t good enough to be on my team let alone the eighth graders’. You should know that. *Sissy*. They just let you on to be the student manager and janitor, ’ case someone throws up or shits on the floor,” laughed Tank. He kicked the duffel and five balls shot out.

“All right, all right,” said Chet. As he attempted to rise, Tank shoved him back to the ground.

“Hey,” Steve Sherman yelled, “Cut it out!”

“Hey, let them work it out,” said Rick Lauder, a mean-spirited starter. “Let’s see how this thing goes. I mean, you’re his brother, aren’t you curious?”

The words had an intriguing effect on the team. They gathered in a circle as if they were about to witness a circus act.

Tank shoved Chet again as he tried to rise.

“Hey, if we’re gonna do this, let’s start it fair,” Rick said. “You both start standing.”

“I’m not going to fight Tank,” protested Chet. “Jesus Christ, Rick!”

“Well, you may get your ass kicked then. Better stand up for yourself.”

“Shut-up, Ricky, you asshole” protested Steve, “He’s not your brother.”

“Let ‘em go, it’s just horsen’ around,” said another.

Chet rose to his feet, turned and went in the direction of most of the scattered balls. Tank raced and spun him to the ground. As Chet swiveled on his butt and tried to get up, Tank leapt as if doing a belly flop into a pool flattening his victim. There was a thud as Chet’s head struck the floor.

“Ow, *shit*, dammit!” Chet howled. “Ahhh, man!”

Tank sat on Chet’s stomach, grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the floor. Chet wriggled but could not free himself. Seconds later, Tank released one wrist, slapped Chet in the face, then caught the wrist again slamming it to the ground.

Everyone watched intently. For a fifth grader to do this to an eighth grader seemed impossible, and held their fascination.

“Come on, Chet, reverse him.” Tommy shouted. “Don’t let this happen.”

Chet struggled. Suddenly Tank lowered his face into his victim’s and yelled, “Give up? Say, *I give*, and *I am a sissy*. Say, *I wear pink underpants with little flowers on them*.”

When Chet would not, Tank placed a knee in his solar plexus and put more and more weight on it until Chet was gasping and wheezing shallowly. Tank then took his right hand and began slapping Chet back and forth, palm and backhand, as Chet was now using his free arm to attempt to push the stout body off of his chest. The struggle went on for nearly a minute.

“Come on Chet, reverse him. Fight back!” voices grew angrily. “Fight back!”

“He can’t,” said Tommy, as he grabbed Tank under the arms and lifted him off. “Your family has a monster here, Steve. He’s got a bright future, but if he keeps this up, he’s also headed for trouble.”

“Yeah, yeah, just *f-ing* around,” said Steve Sherman.

Other boys helped Chet up who was literally gulping air into his lungs.

Tank suddenly burst forward. “Okay, sissy, girl, you never said give. Soooooo *boxing!*!”

The boy began to shadow box throwing imaginary jabs, hooks and uppercuts, all the while weaving side to side and bobbing his head while moving towards Chet. The team, still more jovial than not, again broke-out in smirks and mild guffaws.

“Cut it out,” yelled Tommy.

“Yeah, no boxing,” said Steve Sherman.

“Okay, *bullfighting!*” announced Tank as he bent to the floor and began pawing it, as if he were about to charge. He lurched forward and began bouncing on all fours, then stood and bent down and shot forward, extending his arms in a circular fashion around his head, obviously pretending they were horns. He came hard for a ramming. Surrounded, with nowhere to go and more frightened than before, Chet shot his right fist forward and caught Tank with a smacking blow to the face.

Chet bounced back, almost falling and holding his smarting wrist. Tank stopped. He put his hands over his eyes and let go with a wail. Everyone knew it was a ploy, especially Chet, who uttered, “Oh shit, I’m dead now.”

But it wasn’t, and Tank continued his mournful rail, and in moments, was sobbing quite loudly.

“Goddammit,” yelled Steve Sherman, “You little bastard. Let me see! Let me see!” Tommy peeled back Tank’s hands.

Rick Lauder peered closely. “He looks okay, I mean his eyeball seems all right. Probably gonna have a shiner, look at that knot.”

“Oh, damnit to hell! *Damnit to hell!* Our old man is gonna kill me.” said Steve.

Practice now was truly ended. There were no showers in the facility, so most of the boys just dressed and headed for the gym doors and home. Chet and Tommy Heilman gathered basketballs. Still upset, Chet said, “Man, I didn’t mean to hurt him. I almost passed out while he was on my chest. If you wanna call it a fight, I *sure* lost, he just got hit once.”

“It’s okay, buddy, you did what you had to do,” said Tommy. “We, all of us, let you down. That little bastard deserves to really get his ass beat. What a punk! What a turd! And us? A bunch of sick cowboys letting that go on. I’m sorry, Chet.”

“Ah, that’s okay. Man, I shouldn’t be on any teams—I’m a disgrace.”

“No, don’t say that. You’re only an inch taller and he outweighs you. I bet there’s other guys on the team he could do that too. A young bully, nothing worse because he has nothing to lose and the older guys he attacks, unless they can just wrestle him and pin him without hurting him, have nothing really to gain,” said Tommy.

“I don’t think I’ve heard the last of it. I mean, he may get me again when no one’s around. Or, Mr. and Mrs. Sherman may find out,” Chet lamented.

“Wait Chet, Lois, our *Lois Sherman!* Eight years, *our Lois!* I know her well enough, so do you, I’ll call her tonight and fill her in.”

Chet now had the two duffels filled with balls and was dragging them to the storage closet. “No, no, don’t tell her. I don’t want her thinking I bullied and punched her fifth-grade brother,” he said.

“All right. You’re right, maybe they’ll concoct a story that he got hit by a pass or something. Darn! Why didn’t we think to tell them that before they left,” Tommy said, lifting the sacks onto the shelves for Chet. “I should try to call Steve, before their old man gets home.”

“Won’t work. He works now at night at the International Harvester Plant. I think he just got promoted from foreman to a plant manager. I heard Lois telling Sister Joseph Agnes and Brenda Lingall last week that he’ll have to be third shift for a while, that’s like overnight work.



So heck, he's probably at home right now. And, Steve is always saying what a badass he is when he's mad too. I doubt if he'll lie. Man, I just don't know," said Chet pushing open the door to the gym.

"Sorry Chet, didn't figure on this," Tommy said. "But, here's an idea. You want me to go vouch for you to your parents?"

"No, I don't want dad to know I got my ass kicked by a fifth grader."

Laughing, Tommy said, "But technically you won."

They both laughed. "Tommy, I did not win. He just decided to stop killing me and start crying."

"You won. They call it a TKO, technical knockout. He could not continue. Or maybe they'd say, he did not wish to continue."

"Like Wayne Bethea versus Sonny Liston?" asked Chet.

"In poor Wayne's case, he *could* not continue."

The next day Lois Sherman, a girl who had never shown him any emotion but kindness and an occasional smile--as the boys and girls from age six to fourteen had not had much actual conversational time amongst one another, especially with even the playground divided--confronted Chet just before the school day began. As he struggled to pull a couple books from the storage area under his desk, she said, "Thanks for beating up my little brother. I never thought of you as a bully. I thought of you as a really nice guy, a classmate all the way through who made us laugh a lot each year. But I guess never getting to play, you felt you had to take it

out on someone. Tank's eye is nearly swollen shut, but dad made him come today to show Father Hardeman."

"Lois—" Chet began.

"I don't want to hear it. You're an eighth grader and Tank is in the fifth. He's got a black eye and you slugged him. Why my brother Steve didn't, didn't do something, I don't know. You're lucky he didn't beat the crap out of you." She started to walk away.

"Because Steve was there and you weren't. Tank killed me yesterday, ask anyone who saw it," Chet said, blushing and looking around.

Lois turned back, her head shaking slowly. "All this time, you've not been such a good person and I am just now realizing it. My opinion of you has completely changed. Dad really slapped Steve around yesterday afternoon for not sticking up for Tank. So, you got both of them. I hope you're happy. Maybe you should be expelled, just two and a half months from graduation. And why would DeSales want you? A thug in a parochial high school?"

"Come on, Lois, you weren't there, you can't mean all that."

Her face reddened, "You think I don't mean it?" She reached over and shoved his binder and the two textbooks off of his desk. "Go ahead brave boy, hit me!" she said.

As Chet sat through classes, he couldn't concentrate. Several times, tears welled in his eyes. He always liked Lois a great deal, how many others would interpret his one punch this way?

At lunch and the subsequent recess outdoors, the seventh graders were about to go in as the eighth graders got their twelve minutes of exercise. Chet sought Steve out. "Steve, Steve," he yelled, "wait!"

Steve stopped suddenly, and said, "Get away from me, you asshole."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I never thought about it, I just sort of reacted to him charging me."

"Someday, I'm gonna charge you, and we'll see," Steve said.

"What would you have done? What would you have done in my place?"

"Not that."

"Why didn't you stop it? He was clearly, actually, hurting me. I still gotta bad headache from when he landed on me. Why didn't you do something? This is as much your fault as anyone's," said Chet.

Steve stopped. His eyes glowered but the comment startled him. "I don't know. My brother's a little punk and gets away with murder. I admit that. But that's it. I don't know. I don't care. Just leave me alone. *I mean it too.*"

The two hours before practice crept by painstakingly. Sister Joseph Agnes, who had always showed some favor towards Chet totally ignored him. Somehow, this horseplay and its consequences had turned into something brutally unforeseen.

At 2:45 the boys were dressed for practice, and they were unusually still. Coach Turner instructed them to do calisthenics and then lay-up drills. There was not the usual intensity-spiked afternoon with shouts and laughter. At 3:05, a scrimmage began between the starters and

the next five. Since Chet was never in those, he began putting the balls in their tubular-chrome rack along the side of the court..

The coach approached Chet. “In here,” he said pointing towards the dressing room then yelling. “What in the hell, Muller? What happened yesterday? You of all people, slugging a kid that many years younger?”

This was too much. It was all Chet could do not to burst into sobs. “You’ll have to ask the guys because no one believes me. But every one of them saw the whole thing.”

“Well speaking of seeing, Father Hardemann wants to *see you*, so just stay away from the practice floor today.” The coach suddenly threw his clipboard to the floor. “Damn, I mean that kid is going to be a star athlete. What if you’d damaged one of his eyes? He’s a child. And our Padre is as steamed as I’ve ever seen him. So, just hang around in here, Muller, don’t come out. Study or something until he gets here. Jesus, of all the things I have to worry about. Now this!”

Chet sat down on a bench looking at his grammar book’s cover and the letters he had scrawled only days before, ‘ILRK’ for I love Rosemary Klein. It seemed so utterly stupid at this point and he started scratching over it with his pen. Then, seething with anticipation he began pacing back and forth in the tiny room, rehearsing what he might say to Father Hardemann. “God, help me, I don’t know what to do.”

Some fifteen minutes later the door banged open—it was Hardemann. Quirky and emotional, he was a fixture at every football and basketball game both for the fifth-sixth and the seventh-eighth graders. Plus, many games DeSales High School played. A man obsessed with masculinity and athletics, he stood every bit of six-three and a solid two hundred pounds.

Fortyish, red-haired and balding, he folded his arms and scowled at Chet.

“You know, if you wanted to beat the crap out of some kid, you might have done better than to pick my favorite boy in the whole school. He’s an American dream. A miniature Bob Cousy or Oscar Robertson. On a football field he’s clearly the best in the city at his age. But that’s just it, Muller, he’s ten! *He’s just ten!* He’s a star in the tyke league. You’re fourteen.” Hardemann said.

“No Father, I just turned thirteen in December.”

Hardemann’s nostrils flared. “Are you making a joke by contradicting me? Okay, you’re in the eighth grade, he’s in the fifth. I mean really, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I don’t know, Father. He wanted to race me, I didn’t want to, but the guys wanted to see it. So we did and we kinda tied. He got angry about it. He attacked me. At first, I thought it was just goofing around, but even then I was getting hurt.”

“Aw, little baby,” the priest said.

Pursing his lips, Chet shook his head, then continued. “But after a minute or so, the guys thought it was some sort of spectacle. They were laughing. They were urging us, especially me to fight. To fight back. He destroyed me. It must have gone on for a good three minutes, probably more. I couldn’t breathe when he was on top of me. I kept hearing, *reverse him, hit him back*. Then they pulled him off me to start again. I was dizzy and I have to say, Father, I was scared. He was playing like he was a bull pawing the floor. And he charged. I knew I was going back down hard again and probably hit my head, and he would be on top of me. I never had that feeling where I couldn’t get any air. I didn’t think, I just swung.”

“You had to hit him with your fist? You hit a fifth grader with your fist in the face, because he was what? A formidable child-wrestler pretending to be a bull?” Hardemann said. “*In the eye?* And, did you not remember what Jesus said about hurting a child? I believe, summarizing, that it was better to tie a loadstone around your neck and jump into the sea. Sounds like maybe the one unforgivable sin!”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t really thinking.”

“You didn’t think about hitting Tank in the eye. Well, how does that happen? With no premeditation? Just happened.” said Hardeman with his eyebrows raised and an open-mouthed grin.

“I guess, Father, it was like what we learned in seventh-grade science, an instinct. I was scared and I admit a little mad that someone would treat me that way and no one would help. I just shot my fist out.”

Hardemann glared for several seconds. “I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all. I don’t feel any sympathy for you. You know, you had no business on this team, Gene just did you a favor. You have a uniform. You have actually been in games and you didn’t deserve any of it. I see this as taking out your inadequacies on a smaller boy. And I hate it, and I don’t care for you. I will speak to your parents about this. Gene says you can stay on the team and dress, and sit on the bench for our final games. I let Gene run the team. But if it were up to me, I’d throw your ass out right now. Plus, you’re graduating in ten weeks or so. You represent the school, your family, your church, your community—right? Did you think of that? Next semester you’ll represent St. Francis DeSales High, an esteemed, classy school. Do you understand where I am coming from, Mr. Bully?” Hardemann now had his hands on his belt buckle.

“Yes, Father,” Chet mumbled.

“I hope your father takes you right over to the Sherman’s and beats the hell out of you there. Whether that happens or not you had better believe this, if you ever hit a child again, or a girl, or bully anyone,” he slowly unbuckled his belt and pulled it through its loops. “You will answer to me, right here, and I will not be lenient! Got it?”

Chet’s mouth fell open, “Yes, Father.”

Hardemann wrenched the door open and left, “Damn it to hell! This damn day and age!” he yelled.

Chet stood in utter shock not able to move. Soon, he heard voices and he pushed the door open slightly. Tommy Heilman spoke, “Father, you got to know, you weren’t here. I never saw anyone tossed around, smothered and even punched like Chet was. He did what he had to do. We sorta just let it go, like it was some dumb clowning around and we were making Tank into an even bigger monster by laughing. As captain of this team, I place the blame on myself. But I swear before God—”

“Be careful,” said Hardemann.

“No, I mean it, Father. Chet is not guilty of a thing. Somehow, we’ve kinda taken Tank and created a mini-bully, a sadistic little brat, he’s the one you should straighten out.”

There were more voices. Suddenly everyone was agreeing with Tommy.

“He’s my brother. I should have stopped it,” said Steve Sherman. “I am proud of him and the fact he can do so many like older-athlete things at ten, and I suppose that’s why I didn’t

do anything. He was throwing around an eighth grader,” said Steve Sherman. “I see now, it was pure wrong.”

“I shoulda never left them alone,” said Coach Turner. “I had more faith in their maturity. I didn’t understand this thing till now, but I take responsibility.”

Chet sensed Hardemann’s wrath along with his despair. It was as if the team, now including the coach were trying to nudge him off his self-righteous rage. “Shut-up!” Hardemann bellowed. “All of you! This is bad, terrible and I don’t need to hear any more! *I get it!*” He took a deep breath.

“Still my fault, Father,” Coach Turner reiterated.

“Okay, okay, let’s concentrate,” said Hardemann, almost gasping. “Coach Turner, Gene, it’s not your fault, I’d have trusted them too.” Now absolute stillness reigned as this damning fact struck each boy.

Hardemann paced for several seconds then turned back finally saying, “All right fellows, let’s move forward. We got the playoffs. The whole city can be ours. I don’t want to hear anything more about this, this ugliness. You see where horseplay can lead. Still, no eighth grader is...” He paused, seemingly confused. “All right then, damnit, let’s just start getting ready for St. Helen’s.”

Chet let go of the door then slid down onto the bench in the dank room. Exonerated some no doubt, but feeling anguish in a different form. *What am I? he thought grimacing. A softie? Some weak-half-boy that needs protection? Maybe always a bully to a lot of people who weren’t there?* His anxieties of ten minutes ago had transformed into an empty, pitiful self-image.



Tommy Heilman found him after practice and they walked the streets near their homes.

“This will go away,” Tommy said. “A couple months from now, it won’t mean jack shit.”

“I don’t know. I wish I could move to a new town and start over.”

Tommy put his arm around Chet. “Don’t think that. Hey, I let you down. Same with all of us. But I bet we all learned more from this than even you did, believe me. Coach is gonna talk to Sherman’s old man. I’m callin’ Lois. The whole truth will come out. For what it’s worth buddy, I’m really sorry and I’m always here for you. I hope that means something coming from a not very reliable friend like me.”

Without looking up, Chet said. “It means a lot, Tommy.”