



*From The Cheap Seats, by Ted Gross*

## The Old Squash Coach

The old coach is sitting on his front porch in Mill Valley telling stories.

Dog walkers and neighbors pass by, and Dick greets each one with a piece of humor, and the walkers smile and move on, and the old squash coach continues.

'One year I had Chuck Muncie in a racquetball class,' he says. 'I told you that one, right?'

I heard it before but it doesn't matter. Muncie was the Pac-8 player of the year in 1975. He was the runner-up

for the Heisman Trophy and the third player picked in the NFL draft.

Muncie was 6'3 240 with track speed. An anomaly in the backfield then and now.

'You remember in those days,' Dick says, 'the racquetball courts were underground, under the football practice field. But forget that. He showed up for the first class . . . and the last class.'

Waiting for me to chime in: 'So nothing in between then.'

'Nope. So I give him an F. Next thing the Cal coaching staff descends on me like it's World War 3.'

'But you held firm.'

'Of course. Then they sent Roger Theder to try and soften me up. Good guy. Fraternity brother of mine back at Western.'

'Hmm. For the good of the university.'

'Whatever. No way.'

'So they had to drag him to summer school now, make a plea to the deans to keep him eligible?'

'No idea.'

There was a part two, which I'd heard before as well, but I couldn't stop here.

'But you ran into the head coach later?'

'Yeah. I didn't tell you about that? It's a Saturday afternoon--and this is 30 years after--and I stop into Perry's in the city. Sitting there having a beer are Bill Walsh, Joe Montana and Mike White.'

'And you knew Bill Walsh, right?'

'We played tennis a few times. I gave him some tips. Anyway he invites me to join them. A half hour goes by and Mike White doesn't say a word. Finally he goes to the bathroom and I ask Walsh what's wrong with THAT guy?'

'And Bill Walsh says?'

'You flunked Chuck Muncie.'

Even hearing it again I'm thinking what an amazing story all around.

Dick says do I want some Cheetos or something. I tell him I'm good.

The old squash coach is in the home stretch now. White blood count and other assorted issues. I ask him about growing up in Michigan, playing sports.

'Well you know who Earl Morrall is don't you?'

I was a kid then, but sure. Earl Morrall was a backup to Johnny Unitas but frequently came off the bench. He managed the Colts to a Superbowl win in 1971.

'He was at Muskegon,' Dick says, 'I was at Kalamazoo Central. He and I went head to head both sports.'

'Gee. Any memorable games?'

'Well, I shut him down good a couple times in basketball. He was bigger and the better ballplayer.'

'How about football?'

Dick takes his time. His voice is quieter.

'We had a big game in '51. We were quarterbacking against each other. Bad weather. Tough to move the ball. We had the lead in the 4th quarter though.'

'Oh.'

'Guy gets deep on us at the end. Morrall hits him for the winning score . . . They went on to win the state championship.'

'Wow . . . Must have been some throw then. Those conditions.'

'I played safety on defense,' Dick says, *real* quiet now. 'I slipped on the goddamn ice.'

Dick stares into the distance, toward Mount Tamalpais. I do a little rough arithmetic. That play happened 70 years ago.

After a few minutes a dog walker passes by and waves, and the old coach is

back to making jokes, this time about  
Washington politics, and the guy smiles.  
Even if the guy disagrees, how could you  
not.

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