



Not Just For Kicks

By Dan Schlafer

I became a football junkie at age two. My big brother gave me a helmet, shoulder pads, and a bright red jersey for Christmas that year, and I was hopelessly hooked.

My brother was my first coach. It didn't take me long to conclude that teaching others the game I loved the way he taught me was my dream job—my *destiny*.

With my playing days over after college graduation, my high school coaching career began. For five years, I was an assistant, knowing deep in my heart that I could steer the ship, if given the chance.

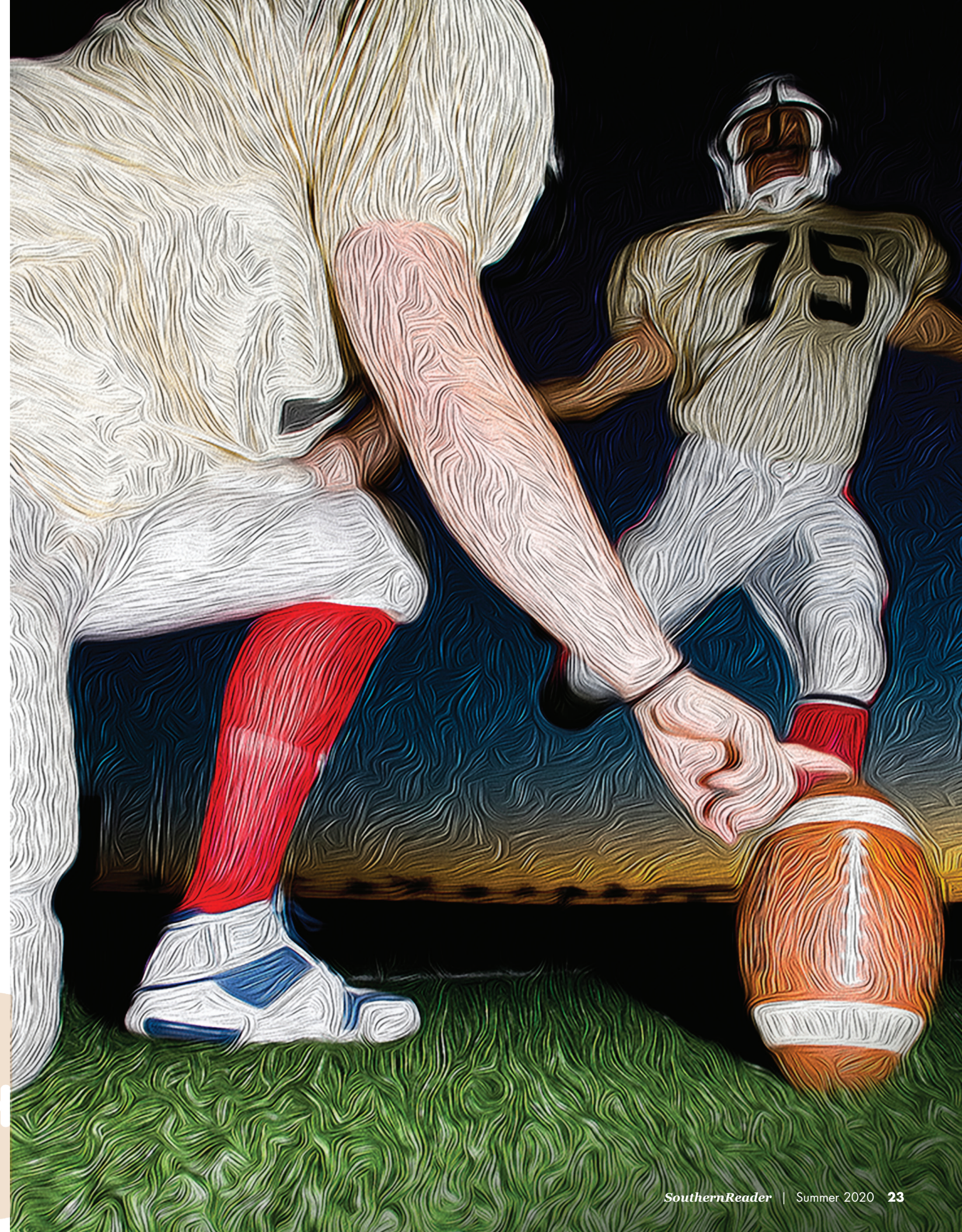
That chance dropped into my lap when the head man unexpectedly retired. The moment I had planned for more than 20 years was at hand. What a rush! *I would make Vince Lombardi look like a neophyte*. After all, I had forgotten more football than most folks will ever know. *I would make an immediate difference*.

I put try-out signs all over campus. *Are you big enough? Are you tough enough? Are you strong enough? Are you quick enough?* If you've got what it takes to play a *man's game*, meet me in the locker room after school on Friday!

He was a thalidomide baby—this freshman I'd seen on campus. Those who aren't old and gray like me won't remember thalidomide. Those of you who are, do. It was a morning sickness drug that played cruel tricks on unborn babies back in the 1960s. Grotesquely deformed children became its calling card.

There was no question that he was a thalidomide baby, a point never argued by those who talked about and pointed at him. He

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was deaf, had no external ears, and one leg was significantly longer than the other. He walked with a pronounced limp. Watching him try to run was too painful for words.

He also had no forearms. Attached at his elbow were four tiny fingers, no thumbs.

It was time for the after-school meeting. The thalidomide baby showed up first. What's more, he walked up to me and in his unique voice said, "Coach, I want to play football!"

I stood in stunned silence. Clearly, this wasn't in his best interest or mine. I considered the liability issues.

I'd be held responsible for that single, well-placed blow that certainly would render him more handicapped than he already was.

Quick thinker that I was, I bounced it right back at him: "You know what? I need a good manager! How about it?"

"NO COACH! I WANT TO PLAY!" was his retort.

I'd had a psychology course in college. "*What a waste of my time. I'll never use this in real life,*" was my rationale as I went through the motions to earn the credit. Suddenly, I realized *I could use that stuff*. I could make him see this was a bad idea and even couch it in such a way that he'd think the decision to abandon the bad idea was his. *After all, I was a college graduate.* He was a mere ninth grader.

"What position do you want to play?" I asked. "Quarterback?" (He had no forearms or hands.) "Linebacker?" (He was small and weak.) "Running back?" (He couldn't run.)

I wasn't prepared for the response. "No, Coach! Not quarterback! Not linebacker. Not running back...**I can kick!!!**"

Guess what? He could. Remember that "one leg longer than the other" thing? That's

what made him so good. He planted the short leg and used physics on the long one. When his foot hit the ball, it sounded like a shotgun blast.

You could hear it a mile away. *He* couldn't.

He still holds the school records for most consecutive extra points and longest field goal.

When he graduated, he had two words after his name that I could only fantasize about as a player—*All-American*.

Who was taught the lesson? Who was it that made a difference?

The story doesn't end there. After all, others needed to be taught a lesson, too.

He got a job. Not just any job, mind you, but as a draftsman.

Go ahead, read it twice. *He drew for a living*. Putting his pencil between the two withered fingers on his right hand, he was an architectural wizard.

Next time you feel sorry for yourself or think

you've got it rough, consider that thalidomide baby. You'll feel better instantly.



Dan Schlafer has been a professional educator, coach and administrator. During his coaching career, Dan earned Coach of the Year honors thirteen times and while at Tennessee School for the Deaf, he coached two deaf national champion runner-up teams. As a high school principal, Dan was named Principal of the Year in (2002-2003) by The Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association. He was enshrined in the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) Hall of Fame in April 2013.

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