Go Deep to the Sewer

By Bill Cosby

The essence of childhood, of course, is play, which my friends and I did endlessly on streets that we reluctantly shared with traffic. As a daring receiver in touch football, I spent many happy years running up and down those asphalt fields, hoping that a football would hit me before a Chevrolet did.

My mother was often a nervous fan who watched me from her window.

“Bill, don’t get run over!” she would cry in a moving concern for me.

“Do you see me getting run over?” I would cleverly reply.

And if I ever *had* been run over, my mother had a seat for it that a scalper would have prized.

Because the narrow fields of those football games allowed almost no lateral movement, an end run was possible only if a car pulled out and blocked for you. And so I worked on my pass-catching, for I knew I had little chance of ever living my dream: taking a handoff and sweeping to glory along the curb, dancing over the dog dung like Red Grange.

The quarterback held this position not because he was the best passer but because he knew how to drop to one knee in the huddle and diagram plays with trash.

“Okay, Shorty,” Junior Barnes would say, “this is you: the orange peel.”

“I don’ wanna be the orange peel,” Shorty replied. “The orange peel is Albert. I’m the gum.”

“But let’s make ‘em *think* he’s the orange peel,” I said, “an’ let ‘em think Albert’s the manhole.”

“Okay, Shorty,” said Junior, “you go out ten steps an’ then cut left behind the black Oldsmobile.”

“I’ll sorta go *in* it first to shake my man,” said Shorty, “an’ then, when he don’ know where I am, you can hit me at the fender.”

“Cool. An’ Arnie, you go down to the corner of Locust an’ fake takin’ the bus. An’ Cos, you do a zig out to the bakery. See if you can shake your man before you hit the rolls.”

“Suppose I start a fly pattern to the bakery an’ then do a zig out to the trash can,” I said.

“No, they’ll be expecting that.”

I spent most of my boyhood trying to catch passes with the easy grace of my heroes at Temple; but easy grace was too hard for me. Because I was short and thin, my hands were too small to catch a football with arms extended on the run. Instead, I had to stagger backwards and smother the ball in my chest. How I yearned to grab the ball in my hands while striding smoothly ahead, rather than receiving it like someone who was catching a load of wet wash. Often, after a pass had bounced off my hands, I returned to the quarterback and glumly said, “Jeeze, Junior, I don’ know what happened.” He, of course, knew what had happened: he had thrown the ball to someone who should have been catching it with a butterfly net.

Each of these street games began with a quick review of the rules: two-hand touch, either three or four downs, always goal-to-go, forward passing from anywhere, and no touchdowns called back because of traffic in motion. If a receiver caught a ball near an oncoming car while the defender was running for his life, the receiver had guts, and possibly a long excuse from school.

I will never forget one particular play from those days when I was trying so hard to prove my manhood between the manholes. In the huddle, as Junior, our permanent quarterback, dropped to one knee to arrange the garbage offensively, I said, “Hey, Junior, make me a decoy on this one.”

Pretending to catch the ball was what I did best.

“What’s a decoy?” he said.

“Well, it’s—“

“I ain’t got time to learn. Okay, Eddie, you’re the Dr Pepper cap an’ you go deep toward New Jersey.”

“An’ I’ll fool around short,” I said.

“No, Cos, you fake goin’ deep an’ then buttonhook at the DeSoto. An’ Harold, you do a zig out between ‘em. *Somebody* get free.”

Moments later, the ball was snapped to him and I started sprinting down the field with my defender, Jody, who was matching me stride for stride. Wondering if I would be able to get free for a pass sometime within the next hour, I stopped at the corner and began sprinting back to Junior, whose arm had been cocked for about fifteen seconds, as if he’d been posing for a trophy. Since Eddie and Harold also were covered, and since running from scrimmage was impossible on that narrow field, I felt that this might be touch football’s first eternal play: Junior still standing there long after Eddie, Harold, and I had dropped to the ground, his arm still cocked as he tried to find some way to pass to himself.

But unlimited time was what we had and it was almost enough for us. Often we played in the street until the light began to fade and the ball became a blur in the dusk. If there is one memory of my childhood that will never disappear, it is a bunch of boys straining to find a flying football in the growing darkness of a summer night.

There were, of course, a couple of streetlamps on our field, but they were useful only if your pattern took you right up to one of them to make your catch. The rest of the field was lost in the night; and what an adventure it was to refuse to surrender to that night, to hear the quarterback cry “Ball!” and then stagger around in a kind of gridiron blindman’s buff.

“Hey, you guys, dontcha think we should call the game?” said Harold one summer evening.

“Why do a stupid thing like that?” Junior replied.

“’Cause I can’t see the ball.”

“Harold, that don’t make you special. Nobody can see the ball. But y’ *know* it’s up there.”

And we continued to stagger around as night fell on Philadelphia and we kept looking for a football that could have been seen only on radar screens.

One day last year in a gym, I heard a boy say to his father, “Dad, what’s a Spal*deen*?”

This shocking question left me depressed, for it is one thing not to know the location of the White House or the country that gave its name to Swiss cheese, but when a boy doesn’t know what a Spal*deen* is, our educational system has failed. For those of you ignorant of basic American history, a Spal*deen* was a pink rubber ball with more bounce than can be imagined today. Baseball fans talk about the lively ball, but a lively baseball is a sinking stone compared to a Spal*deen*, which could be dropped from your eye level and bounce back there again, if you wanted to do something boring with it. And when you connected with a Spal*deen* in stickball, you put a pink rocket in orbit, perhaps even over the house at the corner and into another neighborhood, where it might gently bop somebody’s mother sitting on a stoop.

I love to remember all the street games that we could play with a Spal*deen*. First, of course, was stickball, an organized version of which is also popular and known as baseball. The playing field was the same rectangle that we used for football: it was the first rectangular diamond. And for this game, we had outfield walls in which people happened to live and we had bases that lacked a certain uniformity: home and second were manhole covers, and first and third were the fenders of parked cars.

One summer morning, this offbeat infield caused a memorable interpretation of the official stickball rules. Junior hit a two-sewer shot and was running toward what should have been third when third suddenly drove away in first. While the bewildered Junior tried to arrive safely in what had become a twilight zone, Eddie took a throw from center field and tagged him out.

“I’m not out!” cried Junior in outrage. “I’m right here on third!”

And he did have a point, but so did Eddie, who replied, not without a certain logic of his own, “But third ain’t there anymore.”

In those games, our first base was as mobile as our third; and it was a floating first that set off another lively division of opinion on the day that Fat Albert hit a drive over the spot from which first base had just driven away, leaving us without a good part of the right field foul line. The hit would have been at least a double for anyone with movable legs, but Albert’s destination was first, where the play might have been close had the right fielder hit the cutoff man instead of a postman.

“Foul ball!” cried Junior, taking a guess that happened to be in his favor.

“You’re out of your mind, Junior!” cried Albert, an observation that often was true, no matter what Junior was doing. “It went right over the fender!”

“What fender?”

“If that car comes back, you’ll see it’s got a fender,” said Albert, our automotive authority.

However, no matter how many pieces of our field drove away, nothing could ever take away the sweetness of having your stick connect with a Spal*deen* in a magnificent *whoppp* and drive it so high and far that it bounced off a window with a view of New Jersey and then caromed back to the street, where Eddie would have fielded it like Carl Furillo had he not backed into a coal chute.