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Chapter 1 An Ace in the hole.

The first thing that Bob May noticed in the office of Marice Morton was the five inch high brass nameplate on the front of the desk. It read “Ace Morton.” Bob wondered to himself how narcissistic did a person have to be to name himself “Ace”?

“Coach May, welcome to Ace Plumbing and the Indianapolis Roughnecks. Just call me Ace!” That comment erased all doubt about the issue. It brought up the question of how long before the team's name would be changed to the “Ace's Wild.”

“Thank you for giving me your time...” Bob had to swallow hard before he could manage to get the next word out without an accompanying chuckle. “...Ace.”

“What kind of offense have you run before?”

“I've run several kinds of offense. I believe that we should build the offense around the strengths of...” Logic was cut off by arrogance.

“We run a power I. Have you run that before?”

“Yes, but how good is your offensive...”

“Good! It's settled then. See you on the field this afternoon.” Ace waved his hand like he was brushing a fly away from his fruit salad. As Bob rose and began to leave, Ace stopped him. “Son, what kind of vehicle do you drive?”

“A mini-van. Why?”

“Well, sometimes we need to car pool to a game out of state. You will be able to give several players a ride. Good!”

“Great.” Bob barely whispered his response. It was so soft that it failed to reach Ace's oversized and undoubtedly overly sensitive ears.

After a quick late lunch which would have to serve as diner as well, Bob pulled into the parking lot of James Franklin High School Athletic Facility. He looked around at the cars in the lot. There were a wide variety of trucks but not many cars. A few were newer but the majority was much older and many were in bad shape.

“My kind of team—hungry!” He walked into the locker room of the visitors of Franklin and a familiar smell twinged his nostrils. The smell would have knocked those that have never ventured into a football locker room right off their feet. It was a combination of ninety year old dried sweat, slightly mildewed pads, and fifty gallons of Icy-Hot.

The room was littered with men in all levels of dress and undress. There seemed to be three basic body types—spindly, severely over weight, and obese. Ace was holding court in a corner of the room.

“Gentlemen, I want to introduce our new Offensive Coordinator—Bob May. Bob comes to us from the Columbus Crush. He has just opened a consulting company here. I want you to give him a big Roughneck welcome.”

In unison, the choir from hell began a chant “**Roughnecks, Roughnecks is our name. Roughnecks, Roughnecks is our game. GO ROUGHNECKS!**” Bob hoped they could play better than they could chant.

“**Mr. May will also be Assistant Head Coach replacing both jobs that the traitor Barnsnider had.**” The coach's voice instantly changed from that of an infuriated drill Sargent to a more conversational tone. “That traitor left to become head coach of the Indianapolis Arrows.”

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“Now, let's hit the field and show our new coach what we're made of!”

The two coaches sat together watching the “practice” which was supposed to be run by the quarterback coach Tom Knight and the defensive coordinator Mark Miller. Instead, the inmates were running the asylum. The practice quickly degenerated into a ragtag scrimmage with the quarterback, Jamil “wheels” Martin, calling the plays. Naturally, all the plays were long passes to his cousin known as the Tyrone “the jet” Simpson. While his speed was legendary, so were his stone hands. A variety of passes bounced off his helmet, shoulder pads, and hands.

“Bob, these are our returning players. I wanted you to get a look at the team before our tryout. We have forty-six on the roster now from last year. We have a tryout scheduled for Saturday to find a few more. The league lets us carry a maximum of fifty-five active and six cab squad players. So, all we need to find Saturday is about fifteen new bodies.”

May sat there in disbelief watching the pathetic display going on below him. Finally, he could take no more.

“HOLD IT!” May flew down the bleachers next to the practice field past a startled offensive line and grabbed the ball out of the center's hands. “Offense, huddle up. Gentlemen, we have about a half hour of sunlight left. Let's try to use that time to accomplish something.

“I want to see a 1-6-1.” There were eleven pairs of eyes looking at him like he had just landed from Mars. **“1-6-1!”** Still no reaction from the assembled players. **“X and Z run 1's and Y runs a 6!”**

“Coach, what is a 1?”

“1 is a slant and 6 is a dig pattern. Got it?”

“Yea.” The response was about as convincing as that of five year old standing behind a broken vase that says he has no idea what happened.

“1-6-1 break!” Jet who was playing the X receiver strolled aimlessly through the defensive backfield. Y and Z ran into each other running slants over the middle. The pass fluttered to a spot of grass devoid of players on offense or defense like a bird that has consumed too many fermented yaupon berries. May buried his face in his hands. His receivers were the three stooges.

“HOLD IT! What was that?” He struggled to get control of his temper and tried his best to not to laugh at the ineptitude. “85 you were the X, right?”

“Coach, you can call me Jet. Yea, but because of my speed, I always deep.”

“Jet, I could care less about your speed. You could run a two second forty yard dash and it does us no good if you don't catch the ball.”

“I've been working on that Coach.”

“For how long?”

“All six years I have been on the team.”

“Work harder. Now 85 and 89 run a 1 and 80 runs a 6. DO IT!”

After more than twenty repetitions, the team was finally able to complete a five yard pass.

When darkness fell, May went back to Ace's office to talk to the head coach.

“Bob, here is our offensive play book.” The pair of five inch binders were overstuffed with pages.

“You actually use all these plays?”

“Of course we do. We very seldom call the same play twice in a game.”

“Do you practice all of them?”

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“Well,” The pause told May all he had to know. “We try to make practice fun. If we drill them too much, they just don't show up to practice.”

“Do you let those that miss practice play that week?”

“We have to if we want to win. Wheels is the only quarterback we have.”

That night Bob went over the play encyclopedia. He picked out forty plays that seemed to be possible for the developmentally challenged team to master. He then viewed the video tapes that passed for the team films of last years games. He fast forwarded past the defense because he could not stand to watch. Unfortunately, he had to watch the offense. It was a horror film. The offensive line missed blocks then fought with each other in the huddle. It was a good thing that Wheels was fast because he was running for his life all night. The running game was a joke. The backs couldn't hit the hole if it had been the size of the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. That didn't really matter because there was no hole most of the time. He turned off the television after having watched only two of the wins and two of the losses. He just couldn't take any more. He was reminded of a comment by the Tampa Bay coach McKay when he was asked about the execution of his offense. His response was “that's not a a half bad idea!”

Bob couldn't sleep thinking about the challenge that he faced. If he couldn't turn the offense around, the Roughnecks would be playing an awful lot of defense awfully. That was the stuff of nightmares.

Friday, he couldn't concentrate on his business because he was drowning in the quicksand of offensive offense. He stopped at Krispy Kreme to get a couple of dozen donuts. It was going to take a more than one dozen to get him through more of the football follies that he felt he had to watch that night. He drove by an ABC Liquors. He had not ever been much of a drinker but wondered if a quart of Cutty Sark might make the team look a little better. It couldn't hurt but he decided against it.

The tapes did not get any better. As the year wore on the weak defense wore down and the line got fatter and sloppier. The early games he had watched last night had been bad. There were no politically correct words he could think of to describe the last few games. The play was worse than dreadful.

Saturday morning Bob went to the office about an hour before the tryout to make copies of the minimalist version of the play book. Bill Willis, the reserve QB came in the meeting room.

“Coach, can I talk to you?”

“Sure. What can I do for you—It's Bill isn't it?”

“Yes Sir. I know Coach Morton likes Wheels but I started for three years at Indiana Central College. Wheels has a great arm but you never know where the ball is going. Last year we were 4 and 6. We lost four games because Wheels threw interceptions that were run back for touchdowns. I know I can play at this level but Morton won't give me a chance.”

In the following hour, Bill brought coach May up to speed on the mismatched collection of personalities that made up the Roughnecks. The team had three players that had been the last cut in the NFL. Jet was one of those players. The other two were on defense. Four others had been invited to an NFL camp after their college experience. Seven others had some college experience but the rest were basically ex-high school level players.

The rumor was that Jet had been cut not for his stone hands. May found that very hard to believe. Jet had been cut for his habitually bad attitude. May found that very easy to believe. And belief in what he heard from every source on the team. It was no different that a new consulting client.

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The consultant must learn the truth as quickly as possible if the project is going to help the client.

At noon the tryout began. More than two hundred showed up at the tryout and a few of them passed the eyeball test. As the position coaches ran the tryout, Bob and Mark Miller sat watching the meat market. A young man in a hoodie was running around the field like he owned the patent on grass.

“Who is that?”

“Oh, you haven't met Jack yet? That is Ace's older son. He used to coach the defensive backs but I thought since you were new you could use him on offense. He is your wide receivers coach. Good luck with that!” A couple of things bothered Bob. First, the chuckle at the end of Mark's indicated what Bob's Dad had always told him—never do business with a widow or an idiot son. He also wondered if the younger son was named Ten.

A defensive end prospect caught Mark's eye. He stood six-four and weighed two-sixty and had the body of Adonis. When he ran the 40 in under 4.6 seconds, Mark's face glowed.

“One-twenty-one looks like a keeper. We need a monster at end.”

“He certainly looks the part, but let's see how he plays in pads.”

In shorts, helmets and shoulder pads 121 could not be blocked. He got around the offensive tackle on every pass play. He was the one that made the two hand tab that simulated a tackle on any run to his side of the field.

“I've found my starting right end!”

“We'll see.” There were twenty-four players that were invited to the first practice of full team. Sixteen were offensive and Bob finally saw some potential on his side of the ball. He liked a short slow skinny kid that was trying out for wide receiver. The kid didn't have much athletic ability but he ran great patterns. No matter who tried to cover him, he was always open. The best part was he caught everything thrown anywhere in his zip code. As the players that were kept were leaving the field, Bob pulled the kid aside.

“You looked really good out there. Where did you learn to catch like that?”

“My Dad was my high school coach and college. My older brother was his quarterback. I was the designated catcher for eight years starting when I was eight.”

“You have a great chance to make this team. What's your name?”

“I would love to play for you. I'm Mike Sherman.”

“You are Bobby Sherman's little brother.”

“Yea.” The tone of his answer indicated he was not too excited about playing with his older brother.

“What is your brother doing now?”

“He got a job after he got cut from the Patriots last year.”

“Here is my card. Have him call me.”

Bob didn't get the call from QB Sherman in the week before practices were scheduled. The first five practices of the team by rule were in no pads. Bob used the week to put in his abridged play book. Wheels didn't appreciate the change in procedure.

“This isn't the way we practice. I run the offense.”

“This is the way we are going to practice from now on.”

“Well, I might decide not to play at all under those circumstances.”

“Wheels, that's fine. I have major problems with your mechanics anyway.”

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“What's wrong with my mechanics?”

“Your footwork is abysmal, your delivery point is all over the place, you have no touch on your throws, you don't read the progression. When your primary target is covered, you run. And despite your athleticism, you have trouble shuffling within the pocket to avoid the rush. You trust your strong arm way too much and tend to throw into double coverage. Other than that, you might be the next Joe Montana.”

“You don't want me to play quarterback because I'm black. You're a racist!”

“I don't care if my quarterback is sky blue pink with yellow spots. If he can make plays and take coaching, he will do. The point is you can become an excellent quarterback **only** if you are willing to do the hard work to develop.” Wheels threw the ball to the ground and walked off.

“Willis, you're up.”

The three black offensive linemen ran up to Bob.

“If Wheels isn't the quarterback, we aren't going to play. What do you think about that?” The smirk on the face of speaker was unmistakable. Bob turned to the reserves standing on the sidelines.

“56, 67,74 you're up.” Bob turned back to his former charges. “If you gentlemen can tackle, I suggest you go see Mark. If not, then based on the tapes I saw of the Roughnecks against the Arrows, our cross town rival can use all the help it can get.” With that he turned and began to call plays in the offensive huddle. The three objectors just stood there looking at the coach.

“If you gentlemen don't move, you are liable to get run over. Oh, I forgot. Having seen your performance on last year's tape, you gave a lot of experience at getting run over. **MOVE!**” Like a small gaggle of geese, they waddled across the field toward the defense teams workout.

Suddenly the offense began to move. Willis didn't have half the arm that Wheels did but he was accurate and threw on time to the right receiver. Sherman was playing the slot receiver and was working the middle of the field. He was catching the ball and moving the chains. Then Jack pulled Sherman and replaced him with Jet's cousin Rahim.

“Jack, I want to see more of Sherman.”

“He is not the starter. Rahim is the starter opposite Jet.”

“As long as I am the OC, I will decide who is the starter.”

“Who do you think Dad will back, you or me?”

“Well, let me make this as clear as I can. Until he fires me, I will decide who starts. If you can't accept that, tell your Dad to fire me or try to coach defense.”

When the offense and defense got together, the change was obvious. Practices that Bob had seen on tape were controlled by the defense. The offense had sputtered and lost every practice on tape. Now the combination of Sherman and Willis along with a six-six tight end Ron Martin were moving the ball easily. Because the short and medium passing game was working, play action opened up the running game. Davis, the tailback, was ripping off runs of ten to fifteen yards regularly. Wheels was playing cornerback and got beat regularly by the new offense. His frustration was obvious.

Ace came down half way through the scrimmage.

“**Bob, this isn't our offense!**” Before Bob could answer, Mark joined the conversation.

“No, it isn't our offense. This one actually moves the ball!”

“But we're known for our power I.”

“No, from what I have seen on the tape you were known for a June Taylor Dancers offense—

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one, two, three kick. You can't run the ball if there are twenty defenders in the box. This offense is much simpler and moves the ball effectively.”

“Well, I don't know.”

“Based on the abilities of the team, this is the only offense that is going to work.”

“I don't know. We will have to see.”

“Mark, I appreciate your support.”

“I did it out of self-interest. If we play Ace's offense, I'm going to be playing a lot more defense.”

Bob looked at the tape of the first practice of the new offense. There were a few adjustments he wanted to make but the two hour tape was only a half dozen donut experience. Sherman continued to catch everything and 121—Marcus Jones continued to disrupt the offense to some degree but was not nearly as effective as he had been at the tryout. Two linemen from the tryout were looking good. Sherm Walker, a guard with college experience from Northern Indiana was working well at left guard and TJ Schaeffer was looking like a real candidate at left tackle.

With the left side of the line and the passing game solidified, running the ball would be a real possibility.