

.....

PROLOGUE

Chicago. A dreary December afternoon so cold that anyone who dares to venture out runs the risk of frostbite, or worse. A punishing wind off frozen Lake Michigan only adds to the misery. The city is shut down, closed up, as Chicagoans seek warmth behind closed doors and boarded-up windows.

On the North Side, though, home to Wrigley Field, some 15,000 football fans have braved the dangerous conditions to watch a game, a National Football League championship game between the fearsome Chicago Bears and the upstart Washington Redskins. Swaddled in layered coats and mufflers, wearing gloves, hats pulled down over their ears, these fans are fanatics in every sense of the word. Some caught the elevated train and rode it through a desolate downtown, the train winding its way through the canyon of tall buildings blocking out a pallid sun. Others rode streetcars past mounds of snow shoved out of roadways. Still others maneuvered Model Ts, slowly and carefully, through the icy streets.

The locals have come to see their Bears, the “Monsters of the Midway,” a team of hard-nosed, big-shouldered brawlers who not only defeat their opponents almost every Sunday but also punish them in the process. Chicagoans like to think that the Bears of George Halas and Bronko Nagurski

and George Musso truly embody their big, tough, hog-butcher-to-the-world metropolis.

Several thousand fans are there from out of town. They boarded a special train in Washington's Union Station and headed west. Disembarking at Chicago's LaSalle Street Station, fortified against the cold by flasks of alcohol stashed away in their overcoats, they hailed cabs to take them to the tidy brick ballpark that baseball's Chicago Cubs have made famous. Their Redskins are completing their first season in Washington, but already the capital city has taken them to its heart.

Years later, the NFL championship game will be called the Super Bowl. Years later, millions of football fans around the world will gather in front of their televisions to witness the spectacle. Advertisers will pay millions for a few minutes of viewing-audience time. On this cold day in Chicago, fewer than 20,000 football fans, their very sanity in question, are on hand to witness one of the pivotal games in NFL history.

Shortly after noon, the two teams take the field for the kickoff, the Bears in their dark blue jerseys trimmed in orange, the Redskins wearing their trademark burgundy and gold. Both teams wear tennis shoes, hoping to get whatever purchase they can on the ice-encrusted field. Mist from their breathing is visible in the frigid air.

The tall, spindly-legged Texan who ambles onto the frozen turf of Wrigley Field on that dreary Sunday afternoon has played in miserable weather before. The pride of Sweetwater, Texas, he has known northers that barrel across the plains with little warning, straight from the Canadian Arctic. As a high school senior four years earlier, he played in a blizzard, with driving snow and sleet pelting players and fans alike. But he has never played in temperatures so frigid that it hurts to breathe, so cold that hands and fingers ache and barely move, so cold that it is actually dangerous to be outdoors. He has never played on turf so hard and brittle that it rips bare skin like a cheese grater whenever someone hits the ground.

Backed up against his own goal line the first time the Redskins get the ball, young Sam Baugh looks around the huddle, ten men snorting steam in the punishing cold. He glances over the helmeted heads of his teammates, sees the mob of blue-shirted Bears waiting impatiently at the line of scrimmage to tear him apart. Literally. That is their game plan—hurt him any way they can, send him to the sidelines, knock him out of the game.

The Bears know he is special; so do his Redskin teammates. From the moment he rifled a bullet pass to a teammate in the team's first scrimmage—"Which eye, Coach?"—the Redskins knew they had something. And now, four months later, their confidence has been confirmed.

Although he is barely out of college, he has gained his teammates' respect during the long season, a season that has culminated in this moment, this championship game. They wait for his instructions. He glances over at Riley Smith, the Redskins' signal caller. (Sam is actually the tailback in the Redskins' single-wing formation.) Smith hears him out.

"Let's trick 'em," he suggests in his Texas drawl. "I'll drop into punt formation. But I won't punt." He glances at stellar running back Cliff Battles. "See that chunk of ice right over there?" he says, nodding toward a white spot on the yellowed grass. "Run straight to it, cut to the sideline and look for the ball."

The Redskins break their huddle and line up in punt formation. The Bears aren't surprised, since punting on first down is standard strategy when a team finds itself bottled up in its own end of the field. The Bears know that Sam is also one of the best punters in the game, possibly the best.

Smith calls the signals and Sam waits for the snap, his face beneath the leather helmet red and raw. His cold hands received the ball, but instead of stepping into it with his strong right leg, he wraps his long fingers around it, feeling for the laces as he rolls to the right behind the goal line and looks downfield for Battles. The Redskin running back, running as fast as he can on the frozen field, carefully sets his pivot foot and cuts in front of a Bear safety, Gene Ronzani. As Ronzani slips on the ice, the Redskin halfback gathers in the Baugh toss over his right shoulder and motors up the sideline for a forty-two-yard gain.

Although the Bears hold shortly afterward, the pass from the end zone delivers a message: the Redskins' brilliant young passer isn't going to allow the elements to dictate strategy. Neither the weather nor the fearsome Bears can scare him.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

SLINGIN'
SAM

*Sammy happens to be just
about the most valuable
football player of all
time, according to most
pro coaches I've talked to.*

—SPORTSWRITER
GRANTLAND RICE, 1942

*I still think he was the
greatest quarterback who
ever lived, college or pro.*

—SPORTSWRITER
DAN JENKINS, 2006

*In two hours, Sammy Baugh
gave me the finishing touches
for Augustus McCrae
[in Lonesome Dove], and
he didn't even know it.*

—ACTOR ROBERT
DUVALL, 2006