

THE FIRST HUT

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Dear Professor Gregory:

Why do quarterbacks call the snap with the exclamation "hut"?

(signed) A Curious Fan

Dear A. Curious: I'm glad you asked me about "hut," because it's a fascinating story. It was related to me by my old college history professor, Dr. Ajax R. Kayuk, a gentleman of impeccable honor and whose word I would certainly take as gospel. Let me explain how he happened to tell me.

Many years ago, when I began as an associate lecturer at Mountebank U., I found myself in need of some extra income. I won't go into the difficulties entailed in surviving on an associate's pay, except to say that I was unable to practice forward passing a football by throwing it into a targeted earthenware jar because I didn't have a pot to pass in. However, I was lucky enough to find a simple janitorial chore that helped with expenses. Before going to my first class at Mountebank, I'd spend a half hour each morning sweeping the floor at a nearby tavern, the Goshamahl Inn. The Inn was open late and the owner was always anxious to go home as soon as he closed yet hated to arrive the next afternoon and be greeted by a floor strewn with evidence of the previous eve's revelry. He was happy to pay me \$20 a week to sweep away the worst traces.

One April morning, as I pushed my broom under a table, it met with resistance, and I heard a groan. I pushed again. More resistance – and the cry: "Awright, awright, officer!" The next moment, out from under the table crawled Dr. Kayuk.

Naturally, I was surprised to see him. I'd heard he was on sabbatical in Bangkok. After reminding him that I had been his student several years before at the state university, I expressed my astonishment at finding him thus. Struggling into a chair, he explained that he'd been working extra hard of late in researching his latest book, a study of leisure activities among the third-generation Irish of this particular neighborhood, and had stopped by the Goshamahl for a few first-hand observations.

"But, Doctor," I exclaimed, "this is a Polish neighborhood."

"Counter-balance," he said. "At any rate, m' boy, I remember ordering a light sherry. And then, apparently, fatigue overwhelmed me. Say, is there anything around here for breakfast?"

I told the dear gentleman that I was happy that his writing career was going well, but that I was sorry to hear that he had shifted from his previous subject matter – penetrating studies of sports history. My soon-to-be-published A History of Balls of the Base Variety had been inspired by his research efforts, particularly his monumental Where It Runs Deepest: The Influence of the Confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers in Western Pennsylvania Sports Affluence. "You, sir," I said, "are the wind beneath my wings."

"That's nice," he mumbled. "Gawd, you'd think there'd be something nourishing around this hole." He found a nearly whole cigarette in an ashtray, lit it, and coughed twice. "I'm far too weak to move."

"I'm afraid the Goshamahl doesn't serve food, Doctor," I said regretfully.

He waved his hand. "One needs only a modicum of astuteness, m' boy. I seem to recall that certain grains are used in preparation of the commodities served here. Grain is full of vitamins and such. Perhaps...?"

"I really think you shouldn't be here, Doctor," I said. "The owner wouldn't –"

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“Certainly he couldn’t be such an ogre as to begrudge a poor scholar a morsel of sustenance,” Dr. Kayuk insisted. “And it will give a weary academician the chance to tell his favorite student about a fascinating item of football history I came upon recently – the origin of the exclamation ‘hut’ in calling signals.”

“Well,” I said, “perhaps one beer.” I hadn’t realized that I’d been the doctor’s favorite student, but I suddenly saw the significance of his always calling me by the wrong name in class. He’d wanted to save me the jealousy of my classmates. The man was a saint!

As it turned out, the doctor’s story was longer than I anticipated. Twice I was forced to call on him to pause in his account – once while I phoned in sick to cancel my class and again when I had to change the keg. I’m no match for Dr. Kayuk as a story-teller, of course, and I may leave out some of the details that made his account so vivid, but here are the bare bones:

In 1906, the forward pass was legalized. Most important football teams, college and pro, decided to ignore it on the ground that it was an unnatural act. However, Willis Kryhoski, the coach at Wilmerding Normal (now Wilmerding State Teachers), about 20 miles from Pittsburgh, saw in the pass a way to give his heretofore woebegone team a chance to win. As a footnote, the Wilmerding Bulls hadn’t registered a single victory during the 1905 season.

As soon as his team assembled that fall, Coach Kryhoski had them begin practicing forward passes. They soon discovered that one hand worked best and spirals were preferable to end-over-end. Coach Kryhoski determined that Jason Gribble, his quarterback, was fairly adept in throwing, but that only one of his ends, Harold Skub, was able to catch the ball. The other end, Stanley Mueller, not only was hopeless on thrown balls, he tended to drop the football when it was handed to him.

So, from the start, Kryhoski’s air attack was limited to Gribble-to-Skub. Unfortunately, while both were competent athletes, neither was much in the mental department. Or, as Kryhoski put it, “Gribble’s thicker in the head than an elephant is in the ass, and he’s the smart one!”

Nevertheless, the passing attack worked well in practice, as Gribble and Skub connected consistently. Now you must understand that this was a totally new way to move the football, and there was no existing terminology. Such niceties as “Z-out,” “Stop and go,” or “Button-hook” were far in the future. At first, Gribble and Skub made up their own signals for pass patterns. These signals were called at the line of scrimmage, by the way, as the huddle was not widely used until much later. The rudimentary pass patterns simply involved Skub running straight downfield from his right end position, racing toward the middle, or cutting diagonally across. Gribble would call “Straight!” “Middle!” or “Cross!”

Coach Kryhoski felt this was a little obvious and that opponents would quickly diagnose Wilmerding’s intentions. He watched Gribble for several days before he made a suggestion. Lined across the north end of Wilmerding’s field, behind the end zone, were three small sheds. The ones at either corner of the end zone were used as dressing rooms for the Bulls and the visitors, and the one in the middle for storage. The coach told Gribble to think of them as “Bulls’ shed,” “storage shed,” and “visitors’ shed,” and to direct Skub toward one or another in his signals, thereby masking the pass pattern from the enemy. After several days of practice, Skub managed to remember which shed was which.

A few days before Wilmerding’s opening game, an incident took place on campus that was to have far reaching reverberations. Jason Gribble was active in campus politics and indeed had been only narrowly defeated in his run for sophomore class treasurer the year before. The burning issue on the Wilmerding campus that fall of 1906 was freedom of speech. This because the school library had removed a work by Oscar Wilde from its shelves over the summer. Many students were upset – perhaps a majority – and a rally was held on the campus green.

Gribble, of course, realized that he could advance his political hopes by being in the forefront of a “hot” issue. He managed to wangle a spot as one of the speakers at the rally.

Although many students spoke with more logic, verbosity, and erudition, it was Gribble who drew the loudest cheers when he faced the crowd and bellowed, “If I want to say (bleep), I’ll darn well

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say (bleep), by heck!"

The next day, nearly every area newspaper carried an account of the rally with Gribble's pronouncement prominently featured. The Pittsburgh Press even had a picture – a cartoon actually – of Gribble standing on a soapbox, with fist upraised, shouting words that were plastered over with "censored." Although eyewitnesses insisted that Gribble had not actually raised his fist and that he'd stood on the pedestal of the statue of General Horatio Wilmerding, the school's founder, they all agreed that it was a fine likeness of the young firebrand.

For its opening game, Wilmerding hosted Allegheny Mines and Farm Machinery. As soon as WN had possession of the football, Gribble walked up to his quarterback position and called, "Bulls' shed!"

He was shocked when the referee, a Mr. Lionel Tauber, stepped in and penalized Wilmerding for bad language. It turned out that Tauber was slightly hard of hearing and, recognizing Gribble from the newspaper cartoon, had misinterpreted what the fiery quarterback had said. No amount of persuasion on the part of Gribble could convince Tauber that the word uttered had actually been "shed."

For the time being, Wilmerding was stifled. Gribble was afraid to call another pass play for fear of being penalized, and WN was soon forced to punt. AM & PM ran the ball back all the way for a touchdown.

Things might have gone better had Gribble and Skub been able to talk with Coach Kryhoski at that point, but the rules of the time forbade coaching from the sideline. Before they lined up to receive the ensuing kickoff, the two young athletes discussed their predicament. They reasoned that they needed to employ a word other than "shed" to denote the small buildings that were the key to their passing game. Skub suggested "outbuilding;" Gribble came up with "enclosure." They settled on "hut" and numbered the buildings from right to left.

On Wilmerding's first play after receiving, Gribble called out, "Hut one!" AM & FN was caught flatfooted as Skub raced straight down the field to take a beautiful forward pass from Gribble. It would surely have gone for a touchdown had not Skub stumbled over a recalcitrant blade of grass at the ten-yard-line. The Bulls tried two running plays without gain and the first quarter ended.

The teams reversed ends of the field. Perhaps Gribble might have said something to Skub as Wilmerding walked back up the field, but, as he admitted later, he was somewhat put out that his end had fallen down on the way to a sure touchdown. He determined that the third-down play would be another pass, and as soon as his team lined up, he hollered, "Hut three!"

Gribble naturally assumed that his end would be able to mentally transpose the sheds from one end of the field to the other, but such cleverness was far beyond poor Skub. When the ball was centered, he turned and ran UP the field away from the goal line and toward the real shed at the far end of the gridiron. This maneuver totally confused poor Gribble who compounded the error by actually throwing the football toward the retreating Skub. Ironically, the addled quarterback never threw a more perfect spiral.

The result was a completed lateral pass and ultimately a safety. The demoralized Wilmerding squad eventually lost by 40 points. Even though the "wrong-way" play accounted for only two points, it was headlined in most western Pennsylvania newspaper accounts of the game. The Pittsburgh Press re-ran the same cartoon of Gribble on a soap box, but this time he was shouting "Hut one!" Several eastern newspapers also picked up the story. "Hut one, hut two" became the in-joke of the season, and several teams began incorporating it into their signals, often catching their opponents back on their heels rocking with laughter. It is said that when DeWolfe Hopper's famed recitation of Casey at the Bat failed to amuse his audience, he could always save the situation by intoning "Hut one, hut two."

Harold Skub dropped out of school and is believed to have joined the French Foreign Legion.

Jason Gribble, who was arguably more at fault, continued his education, finally graduating in

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1910. But "hut one, etc." continued to haunt him. No matter what he tried, he was not taken seriously. In the fall of 1911, after failing twice in business, he ran for the Pennsylvania state legislature. His opponent countered with the slogan: "I never hutted once!" Reportedly, the only votes Gribble received were his own and that of the ever-supportive Coach Kryhoski.

In desperation, Gribble left the country, taking a job as an able seaman aboard the passenger ships of the White Star Line. This may explain the famous quotation alleged to have been uttered on the bridge of the Titanic in 1913: "Iceberg? Don't be silly. That's old 'Hut-One' Gribble on lookout."

As nearly as I can recall, that's the entire story. I wish I had taken notes. As the hour had grown late, I thought it prudent that Dr. Kayuk and I leave the Goshama! before the owner arrived. Standing on the sidewalk outside, I suggested that he come home with me where he could rest, but, ever the scholar, he insisted that he still needed more research for his book and had just seen a neon sign go on at the Kit-Kat Club down the block. He left me there, filled with awe at the man's untiring pursuit of knowledge.