

went day after day, week after week, and year after year until I was eleven and weighed more than two hundred pounds. I thought that would be the end of it, once and for all. And, in a way, it was.

To make sure each kid was under the official weight limit every Saturday, the referees rigged doctor's scales around with them to every game. All of the "chunky" kids had the honor of joining the referees before each game to weigh in.

If the scales tipped past two hundred, off went the unlucky player's cleats. Then the helmet and the shoulder pads. Sometimes the jersey and the pants, and even the undershirt and the socks! Coach knew I was heading for trouble the day I had to step out of my underwear just to make weight. So he came up with a bright idea. The very next practice he presented me with a T-shirt made out of a black garbage bag.

"Put it on," he grunted, pointing out the ragged holes for my head and arms. "Start running around the practice field and don't stop until I say so."

I'd wave at him questioningly after every single lap, while my teammates sat on their helmets and talked—in between laughing and pointing at me, that is.

"Keep going, Fireplug." Coach would grunt around the mushy cigar in his mouth. "Fireplug" was the nickname he had given me. Although no one ever explained it to me, I figured it had something to do with me being shaped like a fire hydrant.

Every day at practice, I had to run laps in that stupid garbage bag. I'd hear it crinkling beneath my underarms as I stumbled through the stickers and weeds lap after lap. My short, stocky legs weren't exactly graceful, and often I'd trip or fall. The other players would laugh, but not as loudly as Coach.

I used to sit in class toward the end of each school day

and dream up excuses why I couldn't go to practice. Nothing worked, and so there I'd be, stumbling around the practice field with the sound of my plastic shirt drowning out my ragged breathing.

When the garbage bag T-shirt didn't exactly work wonders, Coach arranged for me to use the sauna at one of the local high-rise condominiums.

I rode my bike there the next Saturday. Coach handed me my garbage bag T-shirt and wedged me into a cedar-lined closet with two benches and a red metal shelf full of glowing hot rocks. He poured water on the rocks to build up the steam, and then shut the door on me with a wicked smile.

Outside the little porthole window, I could see him chomping on glazed donuts and sipping a cup of coffee. My stomach roared. Since it was a game day, I hadn't eaten since dinner the night before. Nor would I be eating again until after the weigh-in, when, as usual, I would be too weak to do anything much but sit there and pant until Coach shoved me full of candy bars from the concession stand so I could play ball again.

I sat there swimming in sweat and wondering how long this could go on. I'd been trying my best to lose weight ever since I was ten years old. I brought a bag lunch to school and skipped breakfast, but nothing seemed to work. I tried to be strong, tried to be brave, but there I still was... teetering on the brink of two hundred pounds and hoping to make it through yet another weigh-in.

Periodically, Coach would pop his bullet-shaped head into the steamy room to see if I was still alive.

I sat there dripping in sweat and realized something was very wrong with this picture. It was Saturday morning, and there I was, sitting in a sweatbox while the rest of the team chomped on Frosted Flakes and watched cartoons. They were still in their pajamas, while there I was