

END ZONE

GARFIELD

1939 high school team is a story of leather helmets, iron wills and kids from Jersey who won it all

BY HANK GOLA
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

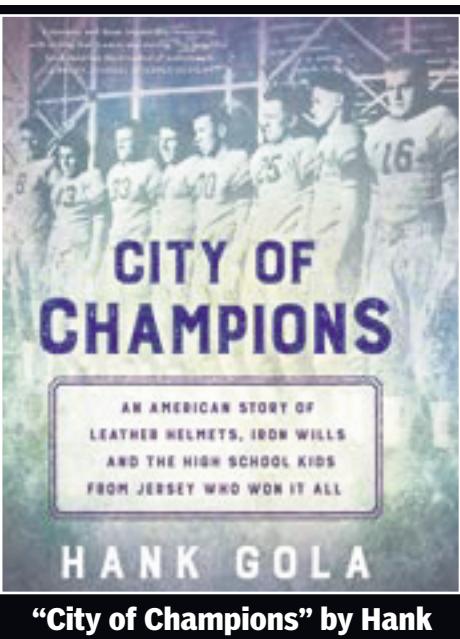
For 75 years, Walter Young had something on his mind that he just couldn't let go.

He was, by that time, a very accomplished man in every respect. Yet Young always had a burning desire to do his best and a constant fear that he hadn't. So it was that one unresolved detail weighed inconveniently on his conscience; a specter of guilt that revisited every time he looked back on a long-ago Christmas night in 1939. The outcome was perfect that night, at least for Young and his Garfield High School teammates. The New Jersey team had already beaten the odds by just getting to the "Health Bowl," but to have defeated powerful Miami High for the "mythical" national championship was beyond their dreams.

Now, after all those years, Young finally had the chance to salve that pesky and recurring pang of guilt. His nerves tingled so that he might as well have been sprawled on the playing surface of Miami's Orange Bowl, when he was a raw-boned 17-year-old football player with wide eyes. "Mythical" was a good word, because, all these years later, it still seemed surreal to the man peering into the glare of the laptop — and into unveiled truth itself.

Social media, of all things, offered Young his redemptive moment. And he could hardly believe it.

Before him on his kitchen table sat a computer streaming a YouTube video. Smoky images



"City of Champions" by Hank Gola is the story of the 1939 Garfield High School national championship team. It can be pre-ordered now and will hit bookstores on Nov. 26.

all lit up by the stadium's soft arc lights and the blinding pops of news photographers' flashbulbs. Eldredge was the star of Miami's Stingarees. Young had cut him down with the key block on a Garfield Boilermaker touchdown, leaving the two boys together on the gridiron surface, each upset for different reasons — one terribly angry, the other thoroughly frantic.

The deceptive play, with the simple, stark name of "Naked

of that game appeared in black and white, although he could easily imagine them in color — the green grass, the yellow uniforms, the blond hair of "Lil' Davey" Eldredge barely peeking out from under his tight-fitting dark blue, leather helmet, Reverse," had worked to perfection — thanks to Young's final role in it. As Garfield's left end lifted his head over Eldredge, Young could see his teammate, John Grembowitz, alone in the end zone — although he wouldn't allow himself to admire the scene. He hurriedly scanned the field for something else: a penalty flag. There was none.

The thousands in Miami's home crowd, unaccustomed to anything but celebrating plays, had gone silent, their usually clanging cowbells hanging by their knees. It only made the little voice inside Young's head all the louder. Where he should have felt relief, there was dread.

"One little block," Young explained, recalling the play in detail. "My job was to pick up Gremby as he came around left end. And he was wide open. Davey Eldredge was the kid way back, the final safety. He had the speed to catch John, and I was supposed to block him. I did. But I misjudged. He was so much faster than

I was, so that instead of blocking him in a safe way, I clipped on the side. I said to myself, 'Oh my God, I fouled him.' I looked around and... no flag... and Gremby was over."

With that, Young turned his attention to the video of the old game. His coach, Art Argauer,

was an early proponent of game film. Shot from the sideline, it was cut up to show each snap. In the game's aftermath, it was a hit in Garfield's Ritz Theatre and at various banquets. Even-



Walter Young (l.) and Len Macaluso show off the game ball from the Health Bowl at Garfield High's Homecoming Game in 2014. Below, in a promotional photo, Art Argauer and the boys take in an account of their trip south. Showing interest, from left to right, are Ed Hintenberger, Benny Babula, Angelo Miranda, John Orlovsky and John Grembowitz.

try, someone who still drove the often traffic-tangled route from his home in New Jersey to his office in Connecticut twice a week.

Above all, Young was a man of faith. He had officially retired from the pulpit of the New Apostolic Church, but he remained deeply involved in its ministries and bound by its teachings. He was Priest Young to the congregation.

Young admitted he hadn't thought much about the game for long stretches. His life was too busy to dwell on it. A self-made man who'd built his own scale company, he was, at 92, the oldest active CEO in his indus-



college, and he followed his patriotism into the Army Air Corps, where he served as a meteorologist in World War II, in both Africa and Europe. He married and had a family. After his first wife, Edith, died too young, he married Alida, a fellow church member who had lost her husband. There were grandkids and great grandkids. And with his day-to-

day life filled with such matters, the game never seemed all that important.

Oh, he remained tremen-

dously proud of his team and friends with one teammate in particular. Now and then, there would be an anniversary celebra-

tion or reunion and there was the night he was inducted into Garfield's Hall of Fame. Now and then, Young would admire the game program with his teammates' autographs or the certificate he'd been pre-

sented at the 1940 New York World's Fair, which proclaimed him a national champion for Garfield's 16-13 win. But given his strict Germanic upbringing, there was little room for senti-

mentality or nostalgia.

His hometown, however, felt otherwise. To working-class Garfield, the 1939 team was the embodiment of its grit, its pride and its underdog mentality — why the city called itself "City of Champions." In Garfield, the story of the 1939 game was legend, passed down from father to son. If there were a test for Garfield citizenship, one of its questions would surely be:

"Who kicked the winning field goal in 1939?" If you couldn't answer, "Benny Babula," you might as well move across the river to Clifton.

Babula was gone for almost twelve years now. Young was among just a few survivors from either squad. The game's 75th Anniversary had arrived, and Young was invited to Garfield's Homecoming Game to be honored at the coin toss along with former teammate Leonard Macaluso. He walked proudly to the middle of the field, still erect and athletic-looking. And as he glanced at the sign above the scoreboard reading "Art Argauer Field," he began to fully absorb the mark his team left on the community. In an interview that night, Young admitted he had never appreciated it all until recently, and he confessed to his long-held torment about the block.

But even the proof of a legitimate victory left Young in amazement. "I still don't know how we did it. Some day, I'm sure it's all going to be exposed as some sort of elaborate hoax, that it never really happened," he said with a chuckle.

Garfield's path to a national championship was more than circuitous. It was filled with roadblocks and detours. Serendipity and happenstance powered the street lamps. Fate was the road map, the destination finally reached under the spell of a full moon.

The Boilermakers would exploit every opportunity and manage every fine line. It shouldn't have happened. But, just as Walter Young's block, it did.

"Can you play it again?"

END ZONE

WAS KING

table as familiar images — unfolding frame by frame — filled the screen. The power of Babula's runs. The precision of the blocking of Garfield's single wing. The speed of Miami's short punt formation.

Young took it all in.

As the video reached the third quarter, he knew what was coming. He rose out of his seat a bit and put his well-worn, big hands on the table as his face flushed with the amazement and excitement of a teenager.

"This is it? Yeah, by God it is! I don't think I've ever seen it the way I'm looking at it right now... Can you stop it?... Now Gremby's got the ball."

Frozen on the left side of the screen, a shadowy figure, Garfield's left end, can be seen. Y-

oung. Looking more closely, a solitary Miami player looms in the secondary.

Eldredge. As the film progresses, they meet. Head on. Eldredge goes down.

Legally. "I'll be damned," he said.

The man who made the block asked to rewind the play over and over. The block was legal every time. He was damned no longer. His conscience had been cleared. Those old butterflies, cocooned so long, were emancipated. It was as if the game had finally ended.

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