

The recent NFL playoff games have reminded me how much fun I had playing football as a kid. Whether it was flag football through the city's recreation programs, Pop Warner, Cope Junior High or my sophomore year at Redlands High I had great time. Like most men, I have to periodically convince myself that I can still play at the same level my 15-year-old body did. It could happen! Really! Unfortunately, while I believe that it COULD happen, it's never actually happened, and my body bears the proof.

There is a distinct connection to my chosen career and my childhood aspirations to become Redlands' next NFL draftee. When I was playing flag football one of our coaches and referees was Dennis West, among the best police dispatchers the Redlands Police Department has ever had. I played against the then, better-athlete-than-me, and now, Capt. Tom Fitzmaurice. (Note: the captain's various crummy assignments I give him have absolutely no connection to the many hits he gave me on the field!)

When I was playing Pop Warner my coach was RPD Lt. Jack Bray. He would swing by the field on his lunch break when his work schedule conflicted with his attending our practice. I still fondly recall his chiding me for my inattention while he was lecturing us on pass rushing techniques. I couldn't help the fact that I was gazing at his police car or the equipment he wore on his duty belt and daydreaming about someday being a crime fighter like he was. And, how can I forget my 9th and 10th grade coach Gary Branstetter threatening to call the police on me ... oops! Well, that's another story!

When I hit the ripe old age of 25, my former gridiron foe and current RPD colleague, Tom Fitzmaurice, got the bright idea that we could replicate those wonderful days of yesteryear by participating in a charity *tackle* football game with other cops suffering from the same delusional affliction. What a hoot it turned out to be! How sore I became! What little sympathy my wife displayed!

Our practices were great fun and I couldn't believe I was playing football again. At least until I almost had my head ripped off, and my shoulder nearly dislocated, by San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department Capt. Mike Macetti, who had obviously gotten better with age and played linebacker with a vengeance.

During this phase of my apparently never-ending adolescence I was also convinced that, as an unstoppable crime fighter, I could chase down any crook (just like chasing the quarterback!) and jump over any tall building in a single bound – while never hurting myself. No matter how many times events tried to convince me that I was probably delusional, nor how many times my wife laughed herself half to death or how many times my mom cautioned me to be careful lest I get hurt (come on Mom, I'm a grown up cop now!) I was convinced that I could still do it all.

Late one very cold night, my partner Detective Mark Bush and I were looking for a fugitive we knew was in town. This guy ALWAYS ran from the police. I ALWAYS caught the guys running from us (OK, maybe not always, but since I have selective memory – just ask my wife – I choose to remember catching them all). I was riding “shotgun” (police-ize for the front passenger seat) while Mark drove.

As we drove slowly down the street we approached a group of guys walking toward us. When we got close enough to see their faces, I recognized our fugitive in the group. I yelled at

Bush to “stop the car!” as I was getting out. He slammed on the brakes – which is not exactly what I meant. This caused me to fall out of the car, doing a perfect “face plant” at the feet of the now-alerted fugitive. As the fugitive took off running, I quickly got up (OK, maybe not so quickly) and heard BOTH the guy’s friends AND my ever-supportive partner laughing hysterically! This was not going well!

My embarrassment caused me to increase my pace as I yelled at the guy, “Hey. You. Stop. I’m a police officer! Stop. Please.” Surprisingly, he only ran faster.

Momentarily, I became aware of a car driving next to me. In between gasps I turned and saw that my ever-faithful compadre Det. Bush was not chasing the fugitive but was actually pacing ME while I chased the bad guy! In between his own gasps – caused by his hysterical laughter – he was encouraging me to “get em!”

“Come on, you can do it!” yelled Bush. “You’re gaining on him. I think he’s getting tired! Just run a little faster!”

“*He’s* getting tired?” I yelled back. “What do you think I’m doing? Do you think you could maybe help me?”

“I am helping. I’m coaching you.” Mark yelled. “You’re looking great. I think you could get a medal in the Police Olympics!”

He hesitated for a moment and then exclaimed, “Hey, your face is bleeding. You want me to call the paramedics?”

Just about then the guy cut into a nearby backyard and I continued the chase. I heard Mark’s laughter fading as I turned the corner into the backyard. I got a great “pursuit angle” on the guy, and, making a tackle worthy of the NFL – and one my coaches would have been proud to witness – knocked him to the ground. Well, actually, we both went into a pool of nasty, stinking sewer water and unidentified toxic waste the size of a pond at Ford Park. We were both covered in slime.

Being years younger than I, the fugitive recovered more quickly and the fight was on! He was determined not to check into the “gray bar hotel.” And I was just as determined to see justice prevail.

Eventually, Bush parked his warm, dry police car and came to my rescue. It took both of us to get the cuffs on the guy (try handcuffing a slippery greased pig sometime and you’ll get the idea) but eventually the good guys won out!

Bush’s first comment to me after we got control of the guy was “Nice tackle!”

For a moment my football/cop self-esteem shot up and I thought, “I’ve still got it!” Until, that is, Bush exclaimed, “Boy, you guys stink! Come on Bueermann, couldn’t you have tackled him BEFORE he fell in the sewage? Can you just walk him back to the police station?”

Mark was one of the best cops I ever worked with – and absolutely one of the funniest! Of course, with me as his partner, he had a lot of material to work with.

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