

## Bread and Circus

by Steven Popkes

Steven Popkes lives in Massachusetts and is currently working with NASA on the Ares I. He gives credit for this story to his son Ben, who used to play soccer (using pine cones) with his father while they waited for the school bus. One day, Ben made a suggestion that triggered this fun tale of sports and sauropods.

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His phone rang as he was setting up for the game. He switched over, audio only. "Paderewski."

"Mike—"

"Barney, I've got to talk to the team. It'll have to wait—you know how they are."

"Mike! Don't switch off. I just talked to Jim Matteson."

Mike hesitated. "Who is?"

"Husband of Kimberly Matteson who used to be Kimberly Ross. Who is the niece of Commissioner Hack Ross."

Mike sighed. "Rumors. There are always rumors. You always get wound up on these end-of-season games."

"This isn't a rumor, Mike. Ross is going to add another team to the majors."

"That's not funny, Barney."

"It's not a joke. They're going to elevate one of the minor teams. You know who it's got to be: us or the Legs. Who else is there?"

Major league. As in wholly better than minor league. As in a real budget. As in not being owned by some other major team.

"Arizona," Mike said half-heartedly. "Miami."

"Screw them both. It's always us or the Legs in the playoffs. Are they going to elevate a team that's worse than we are?"

Mike thought for a moment. "Who else knows?"

"I haven't told anybody else. But other than that, I don't know."

Mike rubbed his face. "Don't tell anybody. Not a soul."

"You got it."

The line went dead. Mike wanted to throw the cell to the floor and stamp on it. Dance for joy at the chance. Dance in frustration that his luck couldn't be that good. What would the team think? What would Myrna think?

Instead, he turned and entered the locker room. A thick, fetid odor of carnivore washed over him. Fifteen tons of therapod looked up as he came in the door. He could tell by the splattering on the wall that somebody hadn't made it to the stalls in time. Pre-game jitters.

Their teeth gleamed as they watched him. He rubbed his hands together. Time to get to work. Play it close. Play it easy.

"Okay, team," he began. "Listen up."

\* \* \* \*

**Al:** Welcome to another episode of Monday Night Sports brought to you on the Hopkinton public access feed. I'm Albert Staab, Senior at Hopkinton High School.

**John:** And I'm John Albermarle. Also senior at Hopkinton High School.

**Al:** Tonight we get to bring you the sport we love, DinoBall. Also called Dinosaur Soccer or Sauro-Futball.

**John:** It should have a better name. DinoBall sounds like something you'd play in an arcade.

**Al:** Tonight, it's the Minor League final playoff for the East Coast Division. It looks like a good game tonight.

**John:** That's right, Al. It's the Scranton Legs versus the Providence Braves. There's no love lost between these teams.

**Al:** They've been rivals for, well, years. The Legs have been playoff champions of the division six of the last seven years.

**John:** That sure hasn't made any friends in Providence. Each of those championship matches were between the Braves and the Legs. The Braves are hungry for a win.

**Al:** I don't think it looks good for Providence. There's a rumor that the Legs are going to take Sebastian Genzyme off the disabled list.

**John:** Tom Vertech isn't going to be happy about that. He's the one who put him there.

**Al:** Cool. This could have the makings of a grudge match.

**John:** Yeah. Any idea why they hate each other so much?

**Al:** The coaches of both teams have been closed mouthed about it. It's pretty unusual among the late Cretaceous theropods. Up in the majors, don't the Miami Mosasaurs have a Spinosaurus goalie and a T. Rex center?

**John:** Stan Merck and Tam Lilly. Both left and right wings are Velociraptors.

**Al:** Not a bad combination.

**John:** Then again, San Francisco has a Gigantosaurus goalie with an entire line of Allosaurs.

**Al:** There's a lot of friction in San Francisco.

**John:** It was a bad trade. Allosaurs rarely get along with any of the larger carnivores. But I've heard that the friction between Sebastian and Tom goes back to the days when they were both in the majors playing for the Saint Louis Claws under Mike Paderewski.

**Al:** When Saint Louis demoted Paderewski to Providence they sent Tom with him and traded Sebastian to the Legs. Do you think Sebastian resents that?

**John:** Could be, Al. Or maybe neither of them liked getting dumped from the Claws. It's going to be an exciting game. We'll be right back after these public service announcements.

\* \* \* \*

Mike didn't see Sebastian when he followed his team past the bleachers. Maybe what he'd heard was wrong. Maybe the rumors were just rumors. He pointedly ignored the Legs warming up on the other side of the field.

He ran the starting two wings in a quickness drill and watched them dribble the twenty-five-pound ball effortlessly. That was the fun part of the job: watching the Velociraptors run.

A shadow loomed over him and he heard harsh breathing. Oh, yeah, he said to himself. That's the other part of the job.

"Is it true, Mike?" Tom bumped him with his head and almost knocked him over. "Is Sebastian going to play today?"

Tom's head was only level with Mike's eyes, not towering over him like a full-sized T. Rex. Tom was about one-eighth size: one-inch teeth, six-foot legs, eight-foot tail. It didn't matter. An ancient mammalian shiver rubbed its way up Mike's spine every time Tom walked near him.

"So what? So you can go for him again and lose the game?"

Tom ignored him. He scanned the other side of the field. "He's not there."

"Tom, we can win the playoffs this time," pleaded Mike. "We can get it all back. We can take them. If you just ignore him—"

Tom looked down at him briefly then stared back at the Legs. "He's not here," he said with satisfaction. "I must have hurt him pretty bad when I checked him."

Mike buried his head in his hands. "Which got you thrown out of the game and we lost, six to two. We had it in the bag, Tom!"

Tom walked away without reply and started stretching with the Velociraptors.

Mike sighed and looked over to the Legs for himself. No Sebastian. His breathing eased. Maybe it was just a rumor. Good.

He hooked up the transceiver and started making suggestions first to

Victor, the left wing. Then, he took his two defensive Megalosaurus to task for not covering the holes fast enough. He heard the rippling tone on the transceiver and switched over to his cell.

“Mike here.”

“Honey, I’ve been thinking.” Myrna always started a conversation that way. It gave Mike a sinking feeling.

“Yes?” He switched channels and yelled at Victor. “Stretch your tail and your talons together. You can’t stretch them one at a time.”

“—so the toilet is loose on the floor. The plumber came in and said the floor would have to be ripped up. I called the tile man and he’s come and says we have to select a whole new color.”

“That sounds okay.” Switched channels again. “Tom, you’ve got to warm up just like everybody else.” Tom snarled at him across the field but started stretching his tail.

“—they look as good as they’re going to be. I want you to look, too.”

“I trust your judgment, honey,” he said, then quickly changed channels to the staff line. “Barney, we’re going to be ready to start soon and the water jugs aren’t out. See to it.” Then, back to Myrna.

“—so he’s going to call you in about half an hour.”

“All—what? I can’t talk to him in the middle of a game. It’s the playoff.”

“Mike, you have to take an interest some time. It’s your home, too. It’s not my fault we’re in Providence.”

“But—”

“There are no ‘buts’ here. I’ve done all the leg work. I just want you to make sure I haven’t missed anything.”

“It’s the middle of the game!”

“You can’t take a short phone call?” in that brittle voice Mike knew so well.

“Okay,” he said defeated. “I can give him a minute.”

Mike hung up and watched his team. This is going to go well, he thought with a certain amount of satisfaction. They win. They go on after the championship—the East Coast Division is easily the strongest. If they don't mess up, they had the cup. Who was Ross going to pick then? The losing team?

At that moment, every one of the saurians stopped what they were doing and stared over at the Legs' side of the field.

Mike closed his eyes. He knew exactly what had happened.

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**John:** Wow. Look at those muscles. Are you sure he's within the weight limit?

**Al:** Sebastian weighed in yesterday at three thousand, nine hundred and eighty-seven pounds, well inside of the one-to-two-ton range.

**John:** He must have starved himself for a week before the weigh-in. He's got to be two and a half tons, at least.

**Al:** According to a press release I've just been handed, Sebastian has been undergoing some radical gene therapy to increase his muscle mass. That'll make him even tougher to beat.

**John:** Or for Tom to hurt him again. Coach Paderewski has his work cut out for him.

**Al:** The Legs have always like big players, preferring a straight forward line of Charcaradontasauruses backed up by Gigantasauruses on defense. Even so, historically the Braves have been thought the better team.

**John:** It's Coach Paderewski's creative use of the mix, Al. The Velociraptors are very fast—much faster than the Legs' wings or defense. When they need muscle in a center, they have Tom, the fastest T. Rex in the league. Then, when they turn to defense, Tom is just as big a presence and he's backed up with the two Megalosauruses.

**Al:** But the Velociraptors are always getting hurt.

**John:** Absolutely. I think Paderewski considers them disposable.

With the unlimited replacement rule, they pretty much are.

**AI:** The players are lining up at the center of the field. Let's go live to Price Chopper Field.

\* \* \* \*

Tom managed to restrain himself for the first quarter. It was just straight passing plays—the only way the Braves' forward line could survive against the Gigantosaurs. When the Legs tried to come in, Tom fell back, not even trying to get to Sebastian. He just worked with defense to return the ball to the Legs' zone. Mike began to breathe easier.

In the middle of the second quarter, a Legs wing lost the ball and Victor Russogen picked it up. He ran up the center of the Legs' zone and slipped between the two Gigantosaurs. He leaned to one side and grabbed the ball with the claws of his left foot. Mike had just enough time to think remember the three-second rule! when Victor let fly a beautiful shot to the inside right corner.

Sebastian stepped forward and snagged it and threw it back across most of the quarter-mile field. The Legs' forwards had dropped back but now surged to meet the falling ball. The right wing bounced it off a bony skull plate to the left wing who caught it on his tail and slammed it over Carly's head into the net.

Tom roared and ran back to Carly. He slammed Carly's chest with his tail, roared again.

At that point, the tile man called.

"This isn't a good time," Mike yelled above the rumble on the field.

"Andrew. Call me Andrew. Your wife said I could call."

Carly staggered back into the net. Carly had always been the most affable member of the team but this was too much. He slammed back.

"Your wife said you had to choose between Daffodil Yellow or Cream Yellow."

"What's the difference?" Mike started running onto the field. He didn't like where this was going.

“Tell you the truth, I’m color blind. I only went into this business because my father wanted me to. I wanted to be a musician.”

The resounding whacks between Carly and Tom sounded like gunshots. Victor ran between them to stop it.

“No!” Mike yelled across the field.

“I suppose you’re right. My being a musician has nothing to do with tile. I think your wife’s partial to Daffodil.”

Tom brought those jaws down on Victor and flung him off the field. Victor screamed.

“Daffodil!” shouted Mike and switched over to the staff channel to get Doc Wilson.

Tom shook himself and looked around. He saw Victor writhing by the net. Tom shook his head and backed away.

Victor lay still, panting. Wilson came up at a dead run and slapped patchadern kits on all of the open wounds. The patchadern foamed like bad beer and then set hard, showing the extent of each wound by a distinctive color. Wilson ignored them, concentrating on correctly fastening the leads on Victor’s neck. He sank them deep into the flesh and looked at the readout. Wilson visibly relaxed. He gestured at the readout. “No broken bones or neurodamage. Just nasty trauma. These guys are built tough.”

Mike nodded and put a call down to the substitute pen. Victor was out of the game. “Warm up Vern. He’s got five minutes.”

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**Al:** Whoa! Tom must be on a hair trigger tonight. That’s a costly mistake.

**John:** That’s right. Not only is Victor now on the disabled list, the referees are flagging a five-minute penalty on the Braves for unnecessary roughness against a fellow team member. So the Braves will have to play short-handed.

**Al:** That’s longer than roughing against an opposing team member. Why?



**John:** It's to reinforce sportsmanship, Al. Players have to be reminded that they're on the same team. It also gives the Coach time to warm up a substitute player. It looks like Vernon HeBei is going to be Victor's substitute. That could be exciting. This is his first time in the playoffs.

**Al:** On another note, did you see the shot Victor made on Sebastian before Tom roughed him up?

**John:** I did. The referees timed it at 1.6 seconds.

**Al:** The three-second rule doesn't mean anything to a Velociraptor, does it?

**John:** No, it doesn't. They're just so fast that three seconds is a lifetime to them. That's plenty long enough to set up and deliver any shot they want. That's one reason Coach Paderewski uses them.

**Al:** Maybe three seconds is too long. Should they shorten it?

**John:** It's been controversial for some time. Like the quarter-mile field. In Europe they use a much longer field. Hand shots are more common but they don't have the same impact on the game.

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The score stayed one/nothing for the rest of the second quarter. Tom seemed to lose interest in the game. Instead, he coasted along with the pack, passing the ball when he got it. At the half, Mike took him aside while the others were resting.

"Tom, you've got to wake up."

Tom didn't answer. He just stared at Mike.

"Look, you just lost your head out there. Victor'll be fine."

"You think I'm bent about Victor?" Tom chuckled. "Hell, I just mussed him up a bit to see how he tastes. Next time he won't be so quick to interrupt a discussion."

"Then, what the hell's the matter with you?"

Tom looked at him first with one eye, then with the other. Mike could

have sworn if Tom could have grinned, he would have.

“Figuring the odds, Mike. Just keeping my thoughts to myself.” Tom brought his head low enough that Mike could feel the wetness of his fetid breath. “You know about that, right, Mike?”

Tom laughed and rumbled back onto the field.

What the hell did that mean?

Myrna called.

“Yes,” he said mechanically.

“I saw it all. You ought to have a strong talk with him. Biting his own team member.”

“Daffodil,” Mike said, watching Tom take his place in the center of the field.

“That was my thinking, too. Here I thought we hadn’t been seeing enough of each other and you pick the same one I like.”

“Got to go, Myrna.”

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**AI:** Vern passed it to back to Miguel. Miguel passes it across the field to Vlad. Vlad sends it up field in the air. Sebastian runs out of the goal and snaps a tail on it.

**John:** He must have a lot of confidence. It’s almost like he’s daring Tom to come after him.

**AI:** I think that’s what he’s doing. Vlad blocks the ball, but the Legs’ Guillermo stops it with his chest, goes around Vlad and takes the shot. Carly catches it and kicks it back on the field.

**John:** Seems like Tom is playing again. Didn’t it seem like he was just sleepwalking out there?

**AI:** It did, John. He’s really got to play well now. The Braves are down a goal in the middle of the last quarter and the Legs aren’t giving them many opportunities to change the score.

**John:** Jack Merck, the Legs' right wing, intercepts it and brings it back into the center zone. Tom snags it back, he's not sleeping now. Tom passes to Vern. Vern to Miguel and a tall one back to Tom. He head-butts it but Sebastian blocks the shot. It rolls over to Vlad. Vlad snaps it in, under Sebastian's tail. Nice shot!

**AI:** That was a nice one. Uh, oh. Sebastian didn't take that very well. Vlad is trying to get away but Sebastian is chasing him.

**John:** And here comes Tom. Looks like trouble.

**AI:** The referees don't want to get in the middle of this one. They're backing off. I can see Coach Paderewski yelling onto the field. Tom is turning away. Sebastian said something. Tom is turning around. I think there's going to be a fight—wow.

**John:** You said that right. As big as he is, I never would have thought Sebastian could knock Tom off his feet.

**AI:** Look out. Tom's back up. He's going for him.

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, you're not even listening to me. That's the trouble. With you, the job is everything. Where is the time for us? That was the only good thing I thought might come of this move. We'd have to have time for each other. Maybe we should spend some time apart."

Carly shot the ball back in the field. Jesus, he's good. I need to give him a raise.

"What?" He looked at the mouthpiece of the headset as if she were there. "I don't understand."

"It's likely for the best. You can concentrate on your ... game. And we can decide if we should, well, you know, stay together."

"Honey—" The ball was in the air, it shot to the left like a live thing, then like a bird, it slipped past Sebastian. "Yes! Oh, yes." And suddenly he was yelling. They were back in the game.

"Mike, you don't have to take my ear off."

“Sorry.” He felt his grin from ear to ear fade. Then, he saw Sebastian start to chase Vlad. “Uh oh.”

“Sometimes I don’t think we were ever suited.” There was a click.

“Bye,” Mike said absently as he started running.

Tom went down hard and for a moment, the air seemed stilled. Then, Tom roared back to his feet.

“Stop,” yelled Mike.

Tom was unintelligible.

Mike grabbed his tail. “Not this game. Not this time.”

Tom swatted at him but Mike wouldn’t let go.

Tom noticed him for the first time. He reached around and bit off Mike’s arm.

The world seemed to flash suddenly white. Everything slowed down. Tom straightened up and stared at Mike. Then spit out the arm, glanced over at Sebastian and turned away, lumbering back into the Braves’ zone.

Mike grabbed the end of his spurting arm, clamped down on it—he couldn’t hear anything but rumbles and cries. A tourniquet. I need a tourniquet. He looked around. The blood seemed to spurt out in a slow rhythm. He clamped his good hand over the end and squeezed as hard as he could. White fire burned out his vision again and he thought he was going to faint.

Then, Doc Wilson was there.

\* \* \* \*

**AI:** Have you ever seen anything like it?

**John:** Never. I don’t even know if there’s anything in the rules to cover this. Coach Paderewski is being carried off the field. Tom is pacing next to the Braves’ goal. Is he saying anything?

**AI:** I can’t make it out. Looks like Assistant Coach Barney Perini is being asked to forfeit.

**John:** Will they forfeit?

**Al:** I think they'll have to. Look what's happened.

**John:** So, it's another trip for the Legs to the series.

\* \* \* \*

Things swam into focus in the ambulance. He looked at his arm. It was a stump below the elbow. There was a cap of patchaderm at the end.

"Did you get it?" He looked over at Doc Wilson.

"Huh?"

Mike reached over with his good hand and released the straps. He sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the stretcher. "Did you get my arm?"

"Sure. It's on ice."

"Good. Keep it there." The EMT's tried to push him back into the ambulance. "Get out of my way." He pushed past them and staggered back into the stadium. Under the bleachers, through that tunnel that always reminded him of a cave, then out onto the field.

"Barney!" he yelled. Where was that son-of-a-bitch? "Barney!"

"Here." Barney was running, followed by three referees.

Mike caught his breath. "Tell me you didn't forfeit."

"I was about to."

"We don't forfeit. Tell them that."

He pushed them away and walked out onto the field, holding his arm. Tom was pacing back and forth in front of the Braves' goal. Across the field, Sebastian was doing the same in front of the Legs' goal. They were roaring at one another.

"Tom! Tom!" He stood in Tom's way. "Shut up!"

Tom stopped.

Mike stared at him. "Are you ready to play now?"

"What?"

Mike held up the stub of his arm. "You've messed around a lot. You beat up on poor Victor. You got a damn good taste of me. Now, are you ready to play?"

"Play, hell. I want to kill the bastard."

"We're tied. We can still win."

"Why? So you can win and get back in the majors or something? So you can keep your pretty wife happy? Why should I care?"

Sebastian roared at them. Tom roared back.

"You've screwed up every game against Sebastian for six years. You beat him up and the Legs win. Every time. Every time after the playoff, Sebastian gets a bonus and laughs at you. You go over there again tonight and he'll mop the floor with you. He's been planning for this night for six years."

Tom stared at him. He looked over at Sebastian and back to Mike. Back to Sebastian. After a moment, he seemed to grin at Mike. "Okay. I'll play." He went over and started talking with Vern and the defenders. Mike was tempted to follow but he worried that Tom would change his mind.

The referees were waiting for him when he came back to the water table. Mike knew the rules. The worst they could do was give them a five-minute penalty. Vlad took it for Tom.

The heavy ball came out of the zone like a rocket. Miguel bounced it back into the center zone where it was snagged by Vern. Vern dribbled it over to one side, drawing fire. Then, he popped it in the air and head-butted it to Tom.

Tom stopped it with his chest and when the ball hit the ground, he covered it with his foot. Mike automatically started counting: one.

Tom continued forward onto his other foot, then rolled in midair, cocking the foot with the ball as limber and graceful as if he'd been a

Velociraptor himself.

He's been practicing this, he thought with awe. Still counting: two.

Tom let go, all thirty-two hundred pounds of muscle behind the ball. It shot across the field inhumanly fast. Sebastian never had time to move. It struck him right in the chest and broke right through his ribs and stomach, almost breaking out his back.

Sebastian looked at the hole, then at Tom, then fell slowly forward.

The bending of his body popped the ball out his back and it rolled gently into the goal.

The whistle blew.

\* \* \* \*

**AI:** If that's not the best finish to a game I've ever seen—

**John:** The referees have just ruled that Tom did not violate the three-second rule.

**AI:** Did they have a roughness call on Tom?

**John:** No. They've decided nothing illegal happened and the goal is legal.

**AI:** It's official. Viewers at home heard it here first. The Braves are going to the series for the first time in six years.

**John:** Stay tuned for the post-game analysis. After that, we'll bring you films and analysis of the Gorilla Sumo matches in Japan. Keep watching.

\* \* \* \*

Mike looked at the cast. It looked garish in the fluorescent lights of the medical bay. "Thanks."

"You won't thank me when the painkillers wear off," said Wilson. "But you'll be in fine shape for the series."

"So my hand will be okay?"

“Oh, yeah. I froze it as soon as you ran off. That’s why it’s really going to hurt.”

“It’s still pretty amazing you can just plug it back in.”

“You people play games with pint-sized dinosaurs and you think that’s amazing?” Wilson laughed and gave him a bottle of pills.

As soon as Wilson was out the door, Myrna came in. She looked different—same short hair, same tiny nose. Eyes were the same color but wet: she’d been crying.

He didn’t have time to see much more. She was hugging him. “You got your arm bit off. I’m going to smack Tom.”

“He didn’t mean it.”

“He did. He’s a dinosaur. He can’t help but mean it.”

Mike didn’t argue. He liked the feeling of her breasts beneath her shirt. He liked the way she talked. He liked her smell. He could tell things were going to get better. He had a feeling for these things.

She pulled back and looked at him and he figured out what it was.

“What’s the white stuff on your face?” He touched it. It felt like sand.

“Tile dust.”

“Ah.” He started to take both her hands, thought better of it, took only one.

She smiled and it made the whole room light up. They didn’t speak for a moment.

“I almost missed you today,” she said in a faint, scared voice.

He understood she wasn’t going anywhere. “Me, too.” Mike nodded and took a deep breath. “Me, too.”