

2SHORTGRASS.DOC

August high school football workouts opened on the practice field last week across the street from the town house. Coaches sweated the summer lull from the eager teenage boys.

Hidden behind facemasks and suited in body pads, the players were recognizable only to the parents and the coaches. One mighty important part must be hand clapping. From my front porch, a staccato develops from the young palms slapping together at the finis of every exercise.

Cars park against the practice field fence. Parents are the most likely prospects. In the old days, boys hoped dads would not come by to take them to the ranch to work after school. Nowadays, were there any ranchers left young enough to have a high school age kid, the herder would count himself lucky to see the boy at the ranch, except in a deer blind or on a field trip.

Good to be in contact with the ol' gridiron on the eve of the autumn season to divert attention away from August. I don't think I have any grandsons left young enough to be in high school. The great-grandchildren surely aren't old enough to play.

The sport was easier to keep up with in the six-man football days. Last trip to Austin, no one was on crutches, or in a cast, so they must not be involved in any sports.

For five or six years in each of my sons' football careers, at shearing it seemed one or two of the pack had trouble loading wool from a game hind leg or a gimpy shoulder from spring practice. In the fall, we kept a bottle of Dr. LeGear's horse liniment in the saddle house cut with five parts water to soften the throes from the Miles and Water Valley games when a feed truck had to be unloaded on the weekend, or early calves marked.

John Noelke, I'm nearly sure it was, discovered the Dr. LeGear prescription the spring "Jaybird" fell with him on the steep trail, herding goats from under the rim in the Round Hill Trap.

John noticed the way he bent over to doctor "Jaybird" helped relieve the pain in his hind-leg where he spilled liniment. He claimed it seemed like the better "Jaybird" became, the more he recovered. But he'd have thought Dr. LeGear's if the Big Boss had still been around.

The time that stinging lizard of a insult to the word stallion, "Marijuana" fell in an anger fit with "Little Maxie" Tankersley over in the Gillis pasture on a big gravel bar, the Boss raced into Mertzon to Doc Kerbow's

drugstore and charged 29 dollars' worth of veterinary medicine and sterile pads to the ranch. The cook found four aspirins in the bottom of his suitcase to treat "Little Maxie." (That fall, after a vet castrated Marijuana, he forgot his falling-down act.)

We were afraid to doctor "Little Maxie" with Dr. Le Gear's. His fever shot so high and pain became so intense that he'd have caused the liniment extract to separate in the Le Gear formula. As it was, his body's trauma reconstituted the dissolved aspirins back into pill form.

Football practice may soon change my routine of walking laps down at the playing field every morning. The setting now is cool and private at five to six a morning. To the south, a chicken crows reminiscent of Pinkie Freitag's game rooster days. A dawg bays just like the hound O' Shuford Masters kept tied to a windmill leg for so long. And two saucer dawgs yap behind a tall fence to prove Mertzon's lenient laws and test good neighbor policy.

The thing that hasn't changed is Possum Martin, the old windmill man. He still keeps a vigil light on in his living room window across the road from the track. Windmill men work in so much solitude, they begin to believe in outlandish things, like their ships are gonna' come in the night. You begin to believe in wild things, fishing for

check valves in 300-foot holes and making grabs to catch broken rods.

The part that's different in Possum's neighborhood in Mertzon from 30 years ago is that some mornings, a male voice behind his house yells what sounds like either "Help" or "Stay Back." With the traffic noise from the big transport trucks thundering by on the highway, it's hard to tell, especially if your ears, like mine, are not trained to a married state.

In the old days it seemed the town fielded several red-haired wives who'd cause the husbands to scream both those warnings. I couldn't spare the time from my walk to investigate. The purpose of the walks is to heal my heart, not cover the domestic scene. Maybe next time I see Possum at the post office, he'll know the deal.