

JANUARY 27, 1972

Pregame playoffs of the Super Bowl started in the Mertzson coffee house before the teams ever arrived in New Orleans. Town gossip was brought to a standstill. News that calves were going higher was lost in the speculation on the big game. One bottle of liniment was all it would have taken to turn the cafe into an authentic locker room.

The old boy that I stuck for a sack of feed on last year's Super Bowl game acted like he'd quit gambling. Two or three times I brought up the subject of a return match, but he wouldn't respond. He kind of reminded me of the way bankers act in a drouth. You know what I mean when I describe that looking-off sort of frog-stabbing strategy. People on crowded elevators try to copy the same expression. Put a spider under a microscope some day and you'll see the identical look on his face. It's particularly vivid right after a spider has caught a fat fly.

Anyhow, I kept hanging around later every morning, listening to the football talk. Though I didn't notice it at the time it was happening, the conversation began to drift toward how feeble the Dallas Cowboys were becoming. Field goal kickers were developing corns on their toes and the defense sounded like they were going to have to play on crutches. The reformed gambler's brother-in-law led the discussion. I was hearing only about every third word, but what I heard was enough to convince me that the humane society would probably force the Dallas club to forfeit the game.

Calves kept sounding higher in the paper and the politicians kept glorifying the prospects for 1972, so finally I blurted out one morning that I'd put two salt blocks on the Dolphins if I could get a six point spread. Like I think I told you one time before, the Lord should have made more people mute than He did.

I don't know to this day why I had to smart off. Old women who couldn't tell the lace side of a football were getting the Dolphins and 14 points. The most loyal fans in all of Florida wouldn't have gone for a six point deal. But there I was, a dumbheaded shepherder who'd never set foot in the state of Florida, coming in behind them as if my kids were playing on the team.

At this late date, I don't have to tell you what the Cowboys did to the Dolphins. Sports writers who called that one-sided stampede a contest should be sent home to study their dictionaries. I bet the people who named it the Super Bowl were ashamed to go down for coffee the next morning. The tail end of General Custer's last stand was less of a route than that event was. If I'd known what a mismatch it was, I wouldn't have bet a shaker full of salt that the Dolphins were going to be able to pull their cleats out of the turf on the first kickoff.

Blowing that bet was inexcusable. As many southern calves that pass into the Shortgrass Country, I should have known to check to see if the Dolphin coach had vaccinated the players for shipping fever. The short ride up the coast was probably all it took to put the players to wheezing and falling. I knew you shouldn't move a swamp-raised steer 16 feet without squirting him full of medicine. Why I didn't think about the same thing happening to a quarterback is another reason that I have to keep wearing worn-out boots.

The boys at the coffee house have been mighty heady since the big game. They remind me of a right young hound that has caught his first housecat.

Well, the boom has ended for them. The next salt blocks they get from me will take more than a corrupt brother-in-law and a bogus sick report. Luck never was my suit; Florida football teams should be limited to intramural bouts.