

Dan McLaughlin

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### Chapter 3

It was another day in the same conference room. We were waiting for Shirley because, well, we always waited for Shirley. Ted and I sat and discussed important stuff.

“No way,” I said. “No way is the seven man on the line the most important rule in football.”

OK, well important guy stuff.

“Yes it is,” Ted insisted. “Without the seven man rule the game would be completely different. The whole game is predicated on having seven men on the line. What you do with the other four is limited by having to have seven on the line.”

“I wonder where Shirley is?” Claire asked.

“OK, I see your point. But there is another rule that if it didn’t exist would really change the game,” I countered.

“Which one is that?” Ted asked.

“Rule 12, Section 1, Article 5,” I stopped.

And waited.

“Oh yeah,” said Ted. “Article 5.”

“Completely changes the complexion of the game,” Charley looked up and joined the conversation with marginally suppressed grin.

“I wonder where Shirley is?” Claire asked.

“Good ‘ol Rule 12,” said Ted.

“Section 1,” I added.

“Nothing else quite like it,” Charley contributed.

We waited. It was Francine who exploded first.

“What the heck are you guys talking about?”

Lines like that don’t get offered that often so we all jumped in.

“Rule 12,” I said innocently.

“Section 1,” Ted said helpfully.

“Article 5,” Charley said confidently.

We waited, again. Francine just couldn’t help herself.

“And what exactly is Rule 12, Section 1, Article 5?”

“The most important rule in modern football,” I offered.

“You really think so?” asked Ted.

“No doubt about it,” I averred.

And waited.

Claire was the one who broke through.

“So what does Rule 12, Section 1, Article 5 say?”

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“AHHHHHH,” we three guys said in chorus.

“An excellent question. Rule 12, Section 1, Article 5 prohibits interlocking interference by linemen in particular or any blocker in general,” I said.

“Interlocking interference,” Claire repeated, “although I am still wondering where Shirley is, what exactly is interlocking interference?”

“Interlocking arms in when you link arms and block. This is the rule which says you cannot do that. Before the rule they had things like the flying wedge where they would link arms and the only way you could get to the ball carrier was to basically kick and gouge your way in,” I explained.

“Or just try and take out the guy’s knees,” Ted added.

“You guys are such idiots,” said Francine.

“So they put in the rule about not linking arms,” I said. “And to be fair, the rule about seven men on the line to open up the game and have fewer deaths.”

“Deaths?” asked Claire.

“Yeah, deaths. Now my point is that the linking arm rule is the most significant because IF you could link arms and had to had seven guys on the lines, you would have a game that would be far different than today’s game, as opposed to if you could NOT link arms but could play as many or few men on the line as you want. That game would pretty much be the same as the game you’ve got right now,” I said.

“Did you hear what I said about you guys being idiots?” asked Francine.

Ted made his point, again. “But no matter HOW they block they have to start up with seven guys all on one line, and that pretty much dictates how much variation you can have in an offensive formation, which in turn dictates what a defense will look like in response. That is what makes the modern game modern.”

“Total and complete idiots,” said Francine.

“And my basic point is that the two rules have to be considered in tandem,” this was from Charley. “You need both of the rules working together to create the modern game. Just eliminating one of them would not be significant because the other would still be a viable constraint on the nature of play. It is like asking a diabetic what is more important, the insulin or the syringe. You can have all the insulin in the world, but if you don’t have a way to get it into your blood, it does not do you any good. On the other hand, you can have all the syringes in the world, but without having anything to put in them you are equally screwed. You just need both.”

“Oh, just shoot me now,” said Francine.

“No, linking arms is more like having the syringes because it is marginally more important to have a syringe,” I said.

“This is what a bad hell must be like,” offered Francine.

“Oh yeah,” said Ted. “How so?”

“You had to ask, didn’t you?” Francine asked.

I like to think on a certain level she was enjoying herself too.

“Well,” I said. “Bottles of insulin by themselves are of no value to anyone as a way to keep you alive, and neither is a syringe without anything to put in it, BUT if you want to commit suicide (because you have no

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insulin and do not want to wait, for instance) you can use a syringe to inject air into a vein thus making a syringe a bit more important if you have to make a choice.”

This was my argument. I pride myself on them. Arguments are my bread and butter.

After a moment of reflection Ted said, “Well, you *could* break the glass of the insulin bottle and then use the shard to slit your wrist.”

Arguments were his bread and butter, too.

“I wonder what I could have done in a past life to justify this?” asked Francine who seemed full of questions this morning.

“And I wonder where Shirley is?” Claire asked.

“Well OK, yeah sure, maybe,” I answered. “But it would be harder to kill yourself with a shard of glass from a broken bottle of insulin. With the syringe you are using the syringe in the way it was meant to be used, technically speaking. The shard of glass would have to be manufactured and would probably be more painful. So they are not exactly the same and the advantage goes to the syringe. Or interlocking interference.”

“You guys are complete idiots,” Francine said.

She seemed to be oblivious to the fact that she had started to repeat herself.

“It is like the rule in baseball that says a runner has to advance if there is a runner behind him, even if the runner is sure to make an out,” Ted said.

“Did you hear me? Complete idiots,” said Francine. Or maybe she didn’t care that she was repeating herself.

“There is NO way that is like the rule the runner has to advance if all the bases behind him are filled. For one thing, that is not even the core rule of baseball. It is more sort of a corollary,” I shot back.

“What do you think the core rule of baseball is?” asked Charley.

“The prime rule of baseball is elegant in its simplicity. Two runners cannot occupy the same base at the same time,” I said simply.

“Complete, absolute and total idiots,” Francine added.

“That is the rule that forces the runner to run no matter how futile the gesture. Think how the game would be different if the runner could choose whether or not to advance on a play. Two, three, four runners all hanging around a base only advancing if they thought they could make it safely. Games really could for on forever. Or be like cricket,” I said.

I was brilliant.

“And you are a bunch of lunatics,” Francine concluded.

“Then there is basketball,” I went on.

I was on a roll.

“What about basketball?” asked Charley.

“I would submit that it is the absence of such a core rule that will prevent basketball from ever becoming revered as either football or baseball,” I said.

“Wow, hold up Tex, basketball is way more popular than baseball,” said Ted. “More popular maybe, but not as revered. There is no continuity of great-remembered games in basketball. Well, except when UCLA beat Houston and after Houston had hammered Kareem who could like only

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see out of one eye and so Houston beat them by one point and then UCLA came back in the next game and Kareem could see and UCLA creamed them by like 30 points and it was in NCAA tournament. Now, THAT was a GREAT game! But by and large, each era in basketball exists independent of the one which preceded it. On the other hand, go into anyplace where people are talking about baseball or football and what do you find?" I asked.

"Someone like me about to kill herself." Francine answered.

"You find discussions of the great games of the past," I answered myself. "And what allows for people to talk about the same basic games down through the ages? The same basic rules. Have you ever noticed that games from before the adoption of the core rules are not even considered "real" baseball or football games? Now basketball should have a basic core rule. Once basketball gets one of those, then they it will indeed become classic."

"Well there is the 'no traveling' rule," offered Charley.

I brushed that one aside, "Yeah and all of the rules that ought to make it a game of dribbling and passing only. But since the 'continuation rule', the utter lack of the carrying the ball over call and guys athletic and with legs long enough to go up for a jam somewhere around mid court and having it count, all of that means there is no unifying element that holds the game together down though the years."

"Do we have any insulin syringes around here someplace?" Francine had another question. "I thought we did."

She started plowing through the First Aid kit.

Ted said, "Well, I think that is true but you bring up another point that is well worth considering."

“Or there have to be some glass shards, maybe in the recycling.” Francine muttered.

She had clearly moved on to providing answers.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Well the basic rules of baseball and football are easy to understand and administer. Whether there are two men on a base or two or more players have interlocked their arms is a rule easy to grasp and easy to administer,” Ted said.

“Plastic. All we got is plastic. Why don’t they manufacture anything in glass anymore?” Francine said.

She was projecting well despite the fact her voice seemed to be coming from inside the recycling bin.

“Ah, I think I see where you are going on with this. But go on,” I said.

“I wonder if anyone will even notice when I am gone?” Francine said.

Francine had emerged from the recycling bin and regressed back to the asking questions stage.

Ted went on with his main train of thought. “All the traveling rules in basketball involve far more subjectivity, and since the transgressions happen far more quickly than in the other two sports, it is a far more difficult game to administer. Basketball referees therefore have to exhibit and be granted a far wider degree of latitude in the execution of their duties.”

“I have always thought I was a good person and that people would notice the effort I make,” Francine said.



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She was beginning to get on board the self-pity train.

“So because the basic structure of the game is much more free-flowing activity, which by its nature can not be precise, basketball will always be a different game because the nature of the game causes a much more subjective human factor to administer it,” I summarized Ted’s argument.

And I liked it.

“I always bring something homemade for the potlucks even if I have to stay up late or get up early.” Francine said.

This was an interesting point. As IDCRAAs we were the epitome of rule-bound bureaucrats sworn to uphold games with rules that looked on the surface to be quite simple and easy to administer. So on the surface it appeared that our job was closer to that of a baseball umpire. People seemed to think there was a definite rule for each and every possible occurrence and permutation of inter-deitific conflict and all we IDCRAAs had to do was simply find the right rule and apply it.

The truth was far more complicated. There are thousands of Deities and their religions, each with their own multitudes of rules and values and norms each of greater and lesser intensity. Now when you take the rules and values of one deity and their religion and combine them with all the different deities and their religions, you then get billions and billions of possible scenarios, most of which are impossible to determine ahead of time. Thus, we IDCRAAs have to have a much wider degree of latitude in interpretation of the rules than you might suspect. So in that sense we were more like basketball referees.

Except, we’re not in as good of a shape because we don’t do a lot of running up and down a basketball court. We sit behind desks. Body shape-wise we are more like baseball umpires.

Sad, but true.

“I buy Girl Scout cookies from co-workers even when I am on a diet.” Francine said.

Francine continued to list her positive bureaucratic qualities to a largely uncaring audience.

“Well, what about the half court rule?” Claire asked, being drawn into the conversation.

“I always return the office stapler to where it is supposed to be and I always make sure there are staples in it when I am done using it,” Francine said as she continued her list.

“Over and back?” Ted asked. “Take that rule away and you pretty much have the same game, I think.”

“I even sign up to clean the refrigerator, even though I seldom use it,” Francine’s enumeration went on.

“No, not over and back,” Claire said. “The other half court rule. In the first years of basketball they had a rule that some players had to play offense and others had to play defense, and if that was your position you had to stay on that side of the court. There were six players on the team. Two on offense, two on defense and two that could go anywhere on the court. I meant the rule that allows all the players to be anywhere on the court anytime is the prime rule of basketball.”

THAT was an impressive display of sports rule and history trivia that won Claire some serious respect from everyone in the room.

Everyone except Francine, who was lost in her own world.

“Here lies Francine. If only we had known she was annoyed we would have asked her to make some more casseroles (before she killed herself)

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that we could have frozen and then had for company parties for years to come. Oh well. We think of her in passing when we have to look for the right size of staples to put in the stapler.” Francine said.

“I wonder what is keeping Shirley?” Claire asked.

She lost a few points with that comment.

She was too easily diverted.

“Do you think I should go and call someone?” Claire asked.

“Why?” Edith said and looked up from her magazine.

“For Shirley,” said Claire.

“Why would you want to make a call for Shirley? That is her job,” asked Charley.

“Where is Shirley anyway?” asked Edith closing her magazine.

“That is what I have been trying to tell you. She’s not here.”

For a rookie Claire could at times project something of an attitude.

“Well then someone should call someone,” I said.

There was a pause. This had never happened before and I think we came to the realization that we were not quite sure where Shirley even came from at about the same time.

“On the other hand, I am good just sitting here,” I said.

“Why don’t we give her another 15 minutes before we, uhhhh,” Charley began.

“Yes, fifteen minutes before we, ummm, errr,” Edith continued.

“When I was in school if the teacher did not show up within 15 minutes of when the class was supposed to start, that meant we could leave,” said Claire.

“Oh yeah, I remember. Yeah, well, that sounds good,” I said.

Reassured by now having a plan, we relaxed. The momentum of the sports discussion seemed to have dissipated but before another topic could arise the door flew open and Shirley came in, accompanied by a guy in a suit, someone we had never seen before.

“Sorry I am late everyone, but I would like you to meet Mr. Bosably, who is executive premier vice president for IDCRA affairs at UDD. He wants to speak to you all directly.”

Mr. Bosably wore a dapper suit of fine fabric. His hair and nails were neatly trimmed. In his hand was an expensive pen as he opened the file in front of him.

“Thank you, Shirley. I am sorry we are meeting under this kind of circumstances. I try and meet with all of my IDCRA's under less stressful situations, but I am rather new at the job and we have a crisis here and so let's just jump right into it, shall we?”

We had never even heard of Mr. Bosably, but since the most important yet obscure rule of sports game discussion had seemed to resolve itself, we gave him our attention. Despite his crack about wanting to meet all the IDCRA's, we all knew there were thousands of us and we had never actually met anyone as high up in the UDD as this person.

Well, he looked like a person but at the UDD you could never be certain.

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Entity was a safer term.

“Now this is the group that had Professor’s Dunbar’s Religious Studies final, yes?” he asked.

“That was one of yours, Frank,” Shirley prompted.

“Oh yeah,” I struggled to remember. “The DIONWARIC, the great god Po who eats Anchovies on its pizza or something.”

Mr. Bosably looked like he had just swallowed something bitter and then seemed to collect himself. He continued.

“Well, it seems that this group was the group that *Gotted* a DRIP from a Ms. Janet Robertson to the DIONWARIC God Bo of the Church of Wanna-kwenawab Tinatunaluna, AKA the Church of the Holy Anchovy, and as a result received a grade higher than which she was destined to achieve, is that correct?”

Since I am sure it was on file someplace there seemed to be no reason to deny it. Say what you will about the UDD, it does keep very accurate records. We sort of pride ourselves on them, actually.

“Yes,” I said carefully.

“Mr. Neeregem, what do recall about the DRIP?” he asked.

“Which DRIP?” I asked back.

I was honestly having trouble tracking here. Usually we disposed of our cases and moved forward. After we passed probation, agents seldom, if ever, were invited back to revisit what had been done before.

“The DRIP to the God Bo of the Church of Wanna-kwenawab Tinatunaluna AKA the Church of the Holy Anchovy for a Divine

Retribution on behalf of the supplicant Janet Robertson,” he supplied.

Oh, that one.

I wasn't liking the sound of this, not one bit, but everything I had done was on record and I was pretty sure my wiggle room in this particular complex was unit number none in a thousand suite hotel.

“I'm sorry Mr. Bosably, if I can help you with this matter, I would be happy to do so,” I said.

“Please, just tell me what you recall of the DRIP, would you Mr. Neererem?” Mr. Bosably asked as he put down his pen to look at me.

“Um I really don't...” I was struggling to recall this specific incident and DRIP because quite frankly I had no idea what it had been. “Ummm I don't really recall anything that unusual, ‘Dear deity, I really promise to be/do better, please, please, please give me something that I want blab la bla, Please give me something. I guess a better grade. I really, really need an ‘A’ because I am going to get a ‘C’ in chemistry no matter what so I need the ‘A’ to balance out my GPA. Oh you are a great god, especially if you grant me what I want. Thank you thank you thank you.”

I admit it was a shot in the dark.

“Your powers of recall do you credit, Mr. Neererem,” Mr. Bosably said dryly.

I admit it was not my best moment.

“Well with the work load and all, one DRIP is pretty much like another, right?” I said.

I admit it was a mistake of trying to offer a justification before knowing what the problem was.

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“Not quite, Mr. Neererem,” Mr. Bosably said. “While the applicant Ms. Robertson did a remarkably good job of researching and translating from the original liturgy of the Church of Wanna-kwenawab Tinatunaluna AKA the Church of the Holy Anchovy some of the concepts had not been adequately preserved in the mundane record and so there were some basic flaws in the applicant’s plea as it was approved by this group.”

Oops. It was my job to check for stuff like that.

“Care to look over the original DRIP?” He asked.

I pride myself on my ability to recognize rhetorical questions. This was one of them.

He passed over the paperwork, and I went over the plea and cross-tabbed it with the original ritual.

“Care to tell me what is wrong with it?” he asked.

I think this too was a rhetorical question.

Oops. There was the problem. Janet Robertson had thought she had performed a DRIP using the words of the Church of Wanna-kwenawab Tinatunaluna AKA the Church of the Holy Anchovie a Deebl he he denab blunk ho. What she had actually performed however was a DDRIP a Deebl he he ha ha denab blunk ho ho ho. It was subtle, yes, but I should have caught it.

Oh, a DDRIP is a Direct Divine Retribution Impact Positive, which is the request for the deity to show up and personally attend to the needs of the supplicant. By their very nature they are much more rare than DRIPs, although at the time of this incident they both were printed on the same type of creamy white paper. Later, and I suspect due in

large part because of the events told in this book, this practice was discontinued, and a new series of forms were printed in distinctly different colors. I believe the DRIPs are now a nice Goldenrod Yellow and the DDRIPs are a bright Firehouse Red.

There is a related form for when someone requests his or her own deities come and smash the people they are annoyed with in person, which is a DDRAIN, Direct Divine Retribution Applied Impact Negative. This form is now printed in Kunzite Purple.

But back to the meeting. It might have been a rhetorical question, but it seemed to call for an answer. Now for some reason someone once told me when I was a lad to just stick to the facts, and don't try and be too bald-faced in weaseling out of something. Take your medicine and move on.

“Um, yes, it seems that an inadvertent DDRIP was performed upon the Great God Bo by Janet Robertson for the purposes of granting a better grade. Her BPER was a .76 which translates to basically a B-. After intervention by this group, and oversight performed by myself, she received an A+. We assumed that this increase was due to a granted DRIP. This assumption appears strongly to have been an error and was more likely, strike that, far more likely a result of the aforesaid DDRIP. I take full responsibility for this error and look forward to suggestions on how we can move forward from here.”

Of course, there was no point in being stupid and bold about it.

“What does that mean?” Claire asked.

“Uh, I made a mistake and think we should move forward,” I said.

“No, the other, long winded part,” she clarified.

I think more or less honestly.



Everyone else waited for me to explain.

“It means the Great God Bo was summoned from its celestial slumber and is now probably now inhabiting the plane of existence inhabited by Janet Robertson,” I answered.

“Well the blame is not entirely all yours, Mr. Neeregem. When you all say *Gott Mit Uns* that means you all signed off on it,” said Mr. Bosably.

Aside from Claire who was much closer to the days in the academy we struggled to remember that particular lecture in the class Introduction and Ethics of the IDCRA 101. It was one of those classes that everyone was supposed to take to give us all the sense of being in the same profession before we all scattered and lost contact with our larger peer group. I believe, and again I think it is because of the events told in this book, that particular lecture was entirely rewritten and later an entire course given on just this situation.

And this book is used as a primary text.

And so many supervisors said I would never amount to anything.

A new course at the Academy. Different color forms. All because of me.

Ha.

“So what does that mean?” Claire asked as she persisted in trying to accumulate knowledge.

Ah, youth.

“That means we have to go to the mortal plane of this Janet Robertson, see if the Great God Bo is actually there, and generally just sort of tidy up any complications that may have arisen,” I said.

“Yes, that is correct Mr. Neeregem. I am glad that you know and understand what needs to be done. I can safely assume that you are going to be the volunteer to do this?” said Mr. Bosably.

“Yes sir,” I said.

Like I said, I was an authority on rhetorical questions and the answers they required.

Shirley already had my travel documents and vouchers prepared and slid them across the table.

“Now I can’t stress enough how important this assignment is. This Great God Bo is a Paleolithic Deity and Paleolithic Deities by their very nature can be somewhat, how shall we say, rough around the edges,” intoned Mr. Bosably.

He did the air quotation thing with his fingers with ‘rough around the edges’.

“Dealing with them can require an IDCRA with a high degree of expertise, finesse and tact,” said Mr. Bosably, who then turned and looked at me. “Maybe we should send someone else.”

“Hey!” I said, “I can handle the Great God Boo.”

“Bo,” he corrected.

“Bo. Boo. Whatever. This was my mess and I can clean it up,” I said.

“Well I would feel better if you went with someone else; after all it was a collective decision and so you are not the only one responsible,” he said.

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“Well, sir, if I may, I would love to accompany IDCRA Neeregem into the field,” Claire piped up.

She was practically bouncing in and out of her seat with excitement. Everyone else was finding someplace else to look. The field frankly sucked, and this particular assignment, cleaning up after a big mistake, had nothing at all to recommend it. Ted seemed to be making copious notes on his note pad. Francine mumbled something about her kids and back to school night or some school play. Edith had some doctor’s tests coming up, and Charley just slumped lower in his chair and looked pathetic. Claire’s hand was raised with the intensity of a kid who really had to go to the bathroom very, very badly.

“Sir,” Claire said. “I really would like to go into the field to see what happens once we make our decision. Sir.”

“You are Agent...” fumbled Mr. Bosably.

“Ruzanna, sir,” said Claire.

“Ruzanna,” added Shirley less than a beat later. “She just joined us. Here is her file.”

“Agent Ruzanna...” said Mr. Bosably as he opened her file and began to read.

“Sir, I took all the labs for fieldwork, and they were my most favorite classes and I got ‘A’s in almost all of them,” Claire rushed to add.

He glanced through her file and then looked around the room at everyone else for whom, suddenly, making eye contact with him was a very low priority. He closed her file.

“Nice. OK. Yes, you can go too,” he said.

“Oh, thank you sir. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” Claire said.

Me, I was in no position to say anything, so I just kept my mouth shut, but I felt like I had just been worked over by the ‘SC line practicing interlocking interference.

All seven of them.

And so I was going back out to the field.

Oh, swell.

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