

The Sure Thing
by [MJ Hajost](#)

Mike Stoker watched in admiration as John Gage crammed yet another biscuit into his mouth and chased it with a gulp of milk. "How can you eat like that and stay that thin?" he wondered as he shoved aside his own plate, shaking his head in bemusement.

Gage swallowed with a modicum of difficulty and grinned, licking a few crumbs from his lips in the process. "It's my high metabolism," he replied, patting his stomach in self-satisfaction.

"No one's metabolism could be that high," ventured Marco Lopez. He stood up and gathered his plate and silverware, sliding them onto Stoker's and removing them to the sink.

"Well, I work out a lot, too," insisted Johnny, draining the last of his milk and following his shift mate to the sink with his own dishes.

"Getting turned down for dates doesn't qualify as exercise," called Chet Kelly from the table, where he still sat leisurely finishing his own meal.

"I'll have you know," Johnny told him calmly, turning around to give Chet the full effect of his complacent explanation, "I participate in a full schedule of athletics."

"Oh, I'll bet you do," agreed Chet, fixing his eye on his plate as he pursued a loose pea. "Chasing after the girls and begging for another chance."

Even Hank Stanley was hard put to keep from snickering.

Johnny merely snorted. "A lot you know," he told Chet, turning back to the sink and grabbing the dishtowel his partner handed him. He lifted the plate that Roy DeSoto had just rinsed and placed in the drainer, and began wiping. "It just so happens that I'll be spending part of my Thanksgiving Day participating in the Annual Thanksgiving Day Morning Anyone Who's Available Can Play Touch Football Game."

Roy ceased his dishwashing and favored the younger paramedic with a wide-eyed stare, half-expecting to see Johnny's tongue sticking out in a "told-you-so" gesture. "The what?" he demanded.

Johnny flicked him a sideways glance. "You heard me," he answered, settling the plate noisily onto the stack in the cupboard.

"What the heck is that?" demanded Hank, handing Roy his dishes and helping himself to another cup of coffee. He leaned against the stove and sipped while Gage explained.

"It's just a bunch of guys who get together every Thanksgiving Day and play football." He shrugged. "Like when we were kids. Except," he hastened to add as he saw Chet open his mouth to speak, "the

level of play is much higher, of course."

This earned him another round of scoffing laughter.

"This sounds like a sure-fire Gage idea," muttered Chet, yanking his plate from Stoker's hand and spearing one final crumb.

"Actually, Chet," said Johnny, turning around, "it wasn't. Matter of fact," he went on, his face acquiring a fairly puzzled expression, "come to think of it, I have no idea who started it."

Roy handed him a plate, which Gage dried almost absently as he visibly tried to trace the origin of the upcoming football match. "So, who's going?"

"Oh, anybody who wants to can play," replied Johnny. He made a face as Chet finally dropped his plate into the soapy water so Roy could finish the dishes.

"So, how come you didn't mention this to us sooner?" demanded Kelly, helping himself to a handful of cookies from the jar on the counter.

Johnny shrugged. "Didn't think of it, I guess." He glanced around. "You guys can all come, if you want."

"What time?" asked Stoker vaguely, inserting letters into the crossword puzzle he'd begun.

"How much money you guys lay down?" Lopez wondered, speaking at the same moment as Mike.

Johnny glared at Marco, a hint of amused exasperation in the gaze, but directed his reply to Mike first. "Around eleven," he said, "at McGinley Park, over on Torrance." He turned his attention to Marco. "And, it's just for fun. We don't bet anything."

"Nothing?" Cap's voice carried his mild disbelief.

"Nothing," insisted Johnny. He tossed the dishtowel on the counter and folded his arms across his chest. "Listen, it's just a bunch of guys who wanna spend some time throwin' a football around. Is that so hard for you guys to believe? Sheesh." He dropped his arms and stalked to the table, where he flopped next to Stoker.

"Oh, I believe you, Gage," snickered Chet. "We all know you're too cheap to lay out money on a sure thing."

Gage frowned up at him. "What do you mean, a sure thing?"

"Heck, Gage, everybody knows any team you're on is gonna lose for sure."

"Oh, haha, very funny. You oughta go into show business, Chet." Johnny made a face at the other

man.

"I think it sounds like fun," said Marco.

"It will be," agreed Johnny petulantly, his ego mildly assuaged by Marco's seeming interest.

The conversation might have continued in this vein, but Cap firmly pushed them toward the afternoon drill. "Holidays don't keep fires and rescues from happening," he reminded them unnecessarily.

Johnny, for one, was glad for the change of subject.

Thursday morning dawned clear and cool, and as Roy DeSoto pulled up alongside the McGinley Park field, he wasn't surprised to see a rather large group of men already running around in a confusion of organized chaos. He parked the car, stepped out, and gazed at the game in progress for a minute or so before he closed the car door and approached the sidelines.

Muffled thumps sounded on the turf as the players darted here and there in pursuit of the ball carrier, which Roy determined, after a close scrutiny, to be an older firefighter from 63s by the name of Hayes. Scanning the field in surprise, he discovered that many of the players were guys he knew to be in their forties, and he was marveling at the range of people that John Gage seemed to know when a heard a voice at his side.

"You here to play, DeSoto?"

Roy shook his head and grinned as he looked up. "Oh, I don't think so," he replied. "I'll just stand here and enjoy." He held out a hand. "Happy Thanksgiving."

Dutch Masters took the offered hand and they shook amiably.

"How come you're not out there?" Roy asked, eyes straying back to the field.

Dutch held aloft the paper cup in his hand. "Takin' a breather," he explained. A sudden burst of shouting on the field drew his attention. "And it looks," he added, tossing aside the unfinished drink, "like it's time to get back out there. All right, let's get some points here!" he shouted, trotting back onto the field.

Roy watched with some amusement for a while longer, enjoying the cool breeze of the autumn morning and the general camaraderie of the players and spectators alike. There were nearly as many people on the sidelines kibitzing as there were on the field actually playing the game. Everyone was having a good time, though.

Johnny had come off the field two or three times already to greet his partner and chat. He was in high humor, thoroughly enjoying himself. His team was up by fourteen points. "Way to go!" he shouted

suddenly as someone fumbled the ball and one of his teammates grabbed it. He rushed back onto the field to take part in the new drive.

There was no formal game plan, it seemed. Players came and went at will, and the number on the field at any one time varied from eleven to fifteen on either side. It didn't seem to make any difference in the manner of scoring or defending, as the game consisted mostly of one player deeming himself receiver while another became the quarterback, and the only certainty anything seemed to have was that one team kept the ball until it either scored points or lost the ball—as Gage's team had just done.

Roy glanced at his watch and realized with a little reluctance that he had to get going. He and Joann were due at her sister's for dinner, and they had to be on the road in an hour if they were to be on time. He paused before he turned to leave, smiling again at the good-natured ferocity on the field. It was obvious that everyone was there merely to have fun, and that no one seemed to care who won in the end. Maybe next year he'd play....

"Rich! Over here!"

Roy laughed at Johnny's frantically waving arms as his dark-haired partner sought the attention of the current quarterback for his team. Rich Hermann lobbed the ball in Johnny's general direction, and Gage jumped up to catch it.

He never saw the locomotive that hit him.

When the stars had stopped swirling around his head, and when the breath at last returned to his lungs, and when he was once more coherent...he managed to surprise even his best friend with the words that flew forth. Finally, he calmed down enough to tell the crowd hovering over him that, yes, it was his ribs, that it felt as if he now had twice as many as he'd had before the train hit him, and would they all please shut up and back off, it was hard enough as it was to breathe, damn it.

The most concerned face he beckoned back.

"What...the...hell...did...you...do...that...for?" he hissed between shallow gasps for breath.

Dutch grimaced, and apologized for what seemed to be the forty-third time in as many seconds. "I...I guess I got carried away," he muttered, running a shaking hand through his hair. "I am really sorry, Johnny."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," grunted Gage. He struggled to sit up, but stronger hands pushed him back.

"No you don't," said Roy. "Just lie still until the ambulance gets here."

Johnny sighed and complied. "Man..."

Roy glanced at the miserable Dutch, then patted him lightly on the shoulder. "Don't worry," he smiled, "I don't think you broke them. Cracked a couple maybe, but they're not broken. You really didn't hit

him all that hard."

"Says you," came sourly from the figure on the ground.

Dutch shook his head. "Dumb. Just plain dumb."

"I'll go along with that."

The wail of the ambulance siren put a stop to further conversation. Fifteen minutes later, Gage was bundled into the back and whisked off to the hospital. Roy turned to Dutch.

"You gonna head on over and check on him?" he asked.

Dutch nodded. "Guess so. Looks like the game is finished, anyhow."

Roy followed his gaze to the field, where someone had gathered up the football and where the remainder of the players were beginning to drift back to their cars. "Too bad," he said. "It was a good game."

Dutch brightened. "Yeah," he agreed, a slow grin spreading across his face. "And Gage is gonna owe me money."

Roy lifted a questioning eyebrow.

"A small wager," shrugged Dutch.

Roy shook his head. "You really think you're gonna collect on that, after the way you ended it?" He began to make his way to his car, Dutch walking beside him.

"Without a doubt," said Dutch firmly. Spying Roy's continued skeptical look, he went on. "Didn't bet on the outcome of the game," he said.

"You mean...?"

Dutch nodded, his eyes gleaming. "It was like taking candy from a baby," he nearly chortled. "It was a cinch he'd get hurt. Ribs were a bonus. Didn't think I'd be the one to do it, mind you. But," he sighed, "that twenty bucks is gonna come in handy on my date tomorrow night."

With a wave, he strolled off toward his own car, whistling, if Roy's hearing were to be trusted, cheerfully.

Author's note: Alice, for you, dear. Stupid Bears.

July 2010: As I reread this one, I can't wait to see how Alice repays me for my Hawks' win over her Flyers. Not that she really knows all that much about sports, she claims.