

# Antidote for a football junkie

by Jeff Greenfield

This is being written by a man on the nod.

It is a Monday morning. Yesterday I scored off the sports section of the Sunday Times, hungrily devouring accounts of the Rangers' victory over Toronto, anguishing over the Knicks' loss to the Lakers, checking the match-ups for Buffalo's game against the Jets and the Giant-Colt slaughter, and reading the pronouncements of Danny Murtaugh and Earl Weaver concerning the seventhanddeciding—that's one word, by the way, seventhanddeciding—game of the World Series, from which tomorrow there is no.

At noon, feeling the early withdrawal symptoms, I turned on ABC and was turned on by beautiful color film of yesterday's college games, only one of which I watched. ("You don't watch college football, eh?" my wife sneered at me. "Only on Saturdays," I replied brightly.)

At 1 p. m., the Giant game came on the radio, and I earnestly began pleading for their humiliation; since they have announced the Great Leap Westward, my unrequited love has turned into a hatred that burns with a bitter blue flame. During time-outs, I dialed into the Jet game.

At 2 p. m., the radio still on, I turned on NBC's World Series telecast. (Actually, I turned it on at 1.40. You never know when guys like Curt Gowdy and Chuck Thompson are going to tell you things you never thought about: like "that Clemente can hurt you so many ways," or maybe "that Robinson sure came to play." Just once I want to hear ChuckBobRickFrankPhilBill say, "Boy, he sure came to watch the guys undressing in the locker room.")

By 4.15 the Series and the football games were over; I staggered into the bright sunlight, wheeled, and went straight back

up to my apartment. Idiot . . . idiot! The Packers-Viking game had just begun. That completed—with an occasional check at the Cincinnati-Cleveland game, which could decide the Ohio pro football championship—I turned on the cable channel's broadcast of the Ranger-Montreal hockey game.

I then fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. In about 12 hours, Monday night football will be on. And who will say that any man can miss the Pittsburgh-Kansas City game and sleep well?

Into this junkie's world has come Larry Merchant, sports columnist for the New York Post, blessed with a cheerful cynicism and a most remarkable willingness to dispute the significance of his own craft. Merchant has written what must be the first book on professional football to argue that professional football is professional football. It is not the War in Vietnam. It is not the Battle of Hastings. It is not Lourdes or Las Vegas. It is a way of holding the attention of tens of millions of people such that these people will make a substantially smaller group of people very, very rich.

Larry Merchant's book, " . . . And Every Day You Take Another Bite" (Doubleday), is an apt reflection of Merchant's attitude. It is not a book to be taken seriously, analyzed, or put on the machine for instant slow-motion replay. It is a book to be read quickly and straight, as an antidote. It is peppered with illustrations from Peanuts, photos of 280-pound behemoths selling shaving cream, and key football diagrams such as the "Carry the Coach off the Field Special." And it is full of observations which come under the general heading of "Oh, come off it."

Last Year's Superbowl? "This was Superbowl V . . . the Baltimore Colts then beat the Dallas Cowboys XVI to XIII on a field

goal with V seconds to play . . . It featured a total of XI fumbles and interceptions and XIV penalties for MLXIV yards."

Political football? Merchant doesn't buy any of it: not Richard Nixon's "jock-sniffing" telephone calls to locker rooms, not the left's equation of every blitz with a bombing raid over Hanoi. ("If they can play football at Haverford, with the president of the college leading the cheers, and at Chicago U., with an old ice box crowned homecoming queen to symbolize all the frigid homecoming queens of the ages, it isn't the game that's the problem, it's the sanctimonious people who are exploiting it. . . .")

The jargon? Here is Merchant's translation:

"The Bills were in an over-shifted odd defense with the strong-side linebacker blitzing and the weakside safety in a rotating zone and Csonka was stopped for no gain."

An end run failed.

Larry Merchant's own view of the whole carnival—from mergers to pre-game prayers to the 145 "truly great" plays which happen every quarter of every game—is summed up in his first paragraph. He is "someone who thinks that football is a terrific game and a colorful spectacle and—you won't believe this, sports fans—no more, no less. Someone who sees the rest of the pro football mystique, from the cosmic musings of deep thinkers to the patriotic posturing of shallow thinkers to the huckstering Barnum of double thinkers, as a perfect spiral of lunacy."

One caveat, which is nobody's fault except the last two or three Chief Executive Head Coaches. This is a 191-page book (not including the pictures). It sells for \$6.95, which may set a new all-time record for a non-pornographic book by a New York sportswriter. On the other hand, if the cheapest seat at the Garden for a Ranger game is \$4, and if the



**ELLY STONE** will sing at Carnegie Hall on Saturday, November 6, at 8 p. m.

New York—sorry, the East Rutherford Midgets—can get \$6 or \$7 for the show they put on every Sunday, maybe this price isn't so bad. It will be a lot more rewarding skipping the Midgets for one week and looking at football through the slightly jaundiced colored glasses of Larry Merchant.