Frankie was 10 years old. He’d always felt this way from the first time he kicked a football. The feeling of exhilaration, of euphoria.

He’d started playing the pigskin game with his brothers and a few friends. They were older and bigger; he’d been getting bruised and knocked around.

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Scarmazino had seen a football helmet advertised in a Late Tackle magazine. The helmet was black and yellow without a nose protector, but it was sleek, fine, and alluring! With some money he’d saved from his newspaper route, he ordered the helmet and waited in high anticipation for his beauty to arrive.

When he put it on for the first time, he stood in front of the mirror, enthralled. His heart started racing. He had that thrill, the same one he felt now, every time he put it on. It surged through him like a hot flash; he could even feel his breath coming in short spasms. It was a wild ride -- every time. It was his secret, his love.

The first time he wore it to a touch football game in the lot next door, his brothers and their friends laughed and called him a sissy: *“The baby has to have his precious little head covered, so the baby wouldn’t get hurt!”*

Scarmazino didn’t care. Screw his brothers. Screw their friends! He wore his black and yellow crown proudly, and guess what? It protected him from getting kicked in the head over and over, except for the time he broke his nose, his jaw, and had a concussion for eight hours. He woke up in the front yard urinating on a bush.

The cracked jaw lingered for fifteen years; each time he’d try to chew, it not only hurt but clicked -- a phenomenon his high school classmates often complained about.

Several lot games later in the month, some of the other guys also showed up with helmets. Even though the holdouts kept scoffing, eventually, everybody saw the wisdom of protecting their skulls and ended up with some kind of helmet.

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Scarmazino still had his prize. He kept it next to the awards he’d won as a kicker starting with his being named All-Metro at Bryant High School to the Lou Groza Award in the NFL.

He’d traded his black and yellow beauty for an official NFL helmet with all its safety features, certified by the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (NOCSAE).

He’d researched helmets to find out why they worked. They were constructed with a hard shell, inner padding, a chinstrap, and a face mask. The outside was molded polycarbonate, lightweight, durable, and elastic. The form withstands powerful impacts and keeps its shape. Air pockets and shock absorbers came later.

The face mask was composed of a single bar made of metal, plastic, or leather. Soon, visors started being used to block out the sunlight.

The current helmet was a modern wonder, but he still favored his yellow and black sandlot prize. He kept it in his room, no matter where he went. He called it his Black & Gold and had it right there with all his awards. Right in the center was his first football thrill, a prize beyond price, the launch into his NFL career, and the inspiration always with him. The old Black & Gold. Forever and ever …

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