the fastest players on the field, but the secondary defenders are close, and excel at running backward and changing direction at full speed as they mimic the receivers’ zigzag routes.

Defenses ordinarily design their schemes to funnel running plays toward the line-backers, who, as a group, are the best tacklers. Cornerbacks make sure that running backs do not get outside of them, and try to push ball carriers inward. When a corner-back has too much success thwarting the run, offenses often try to draw him off the play by sending a wide receiver toward his sideline: does he take the bait, or still read the running play? Defenders play cat-and-mouse games of their own. “Sometimes we bait the quarterback to throw to a certain location by making it look like we are out of position,” Hayes explains. “You act like you’re covering a different zone, and leave a wide-open area to throw into. Then when he throws there, you go get it.”

“Sometimes we bait the quarterback to throw to a certain location by making it look like we are out of positon.”

That can lead to pass interceptions or breakups. In his first start at cornerback, as a sophomore, Hayes had a nation-high five pass breakups against San Diego. When disrupting a pass, “You always want to secure the tackle with one hand, and with the other hand knock the ball away,” he says. Interceptions with runbacks rank among the game’s most exciting plays. They are superb opportunities to move the football, because the opponents’ offense, not defense, is on the field, and they are likely in a disorganized state—they were trying to complete a pass, not stop a ball carrier. In the meeting room, Harvard defenders like to joke about the razzle-dazzle plays they plan to make: “When I intercept the ball, you come up behind me and I’ll pitch it to you.”

In real life, the first rule of interception returns, Hayes explains, is for another defensive back to immediately block the intended receiver. “They are the closest to the ball, and, besides us, the fastest guys on the field, so they have the best chance of catching up with whoever made the pick.”

Hayes, a psychology concentrator, is also active off the field in the Phi Psi fraternity, Harvard Men Against Rape, and the Porcellian Club. On the gridiron this fall, he’ll take the field with stalwarts like defensive end Zach Hodges ’15, last fall’s Ivy League Defensive Player of the Year. And in the secondary, his mission is clear. “Our job,” he says, “is to make sure that whatever happens in front of us, we’ll be there to save the day.” That, and a DVD of Space Jam, may be all that Hayes, and Harvard, need.

~CRAIG LAMBERT

“Cleat” Hands Off

Among many other accomplishments, John T. Bethell, this magazine’s editor from 1966 through 1994, covered a lot of Harvard football games. He began writing, beautifully, about the sport he loves, in the Harvard Alumni Bulletin of September 20, 1971, reporting on new coach Joe Restic’s first day of practice. That dispatch appeared above Bethell’s initials. But for the October 11 issue, he adopted “Cleat,” the nom de football used by an earlier editor, Bill Bentinck-Smith, who may have thought it up. Bethell says undergraduates had long confected the Bulletin’s football columns; lacking a suitable candidate, he assumed the task “temporarily.” Now, he is hanging up his cleats.

It has been a remarkable run. Readers have come to rely on the archetypal “Cleat” dispatch, full of the historical resonances and records—long thought invincible, only to be overcome—that make college athletics such vivid fun. Of late, “Cleat” has upped his game, filing weekly online reports, e-mailed to registered readers. “I think I’ve seen all but two or three home games over the past 43 seasons,” Bethell recalls. “Haven’t traveled to Ithaca since the early 1970s, and had to skip a few other road games.” But only last September, beginning what became his final season, “Cleat” was there when the Crimson opened their campaign at the University of San Diego. His final dispatch, “Over the Moon” (January-February, page 34), taking in a 34-7 win in The Game, concludes on this characteristic note:

Harvard’s seven-game winning streak eclipses what had been the longest streak in the H-Y series, a string of six shutouts posted by Yale from 1902 to 1907. How long will the current streak last? “Statistically, this is unsustainable,” said coach Murphy at his postgame news conference. “Yale is coming back.” Time will tell.

But Bethell/“Cleat” won’t do the telling. Happily, however, the magazine’s tradition of rich, nuanced football coverage continues, in the capable hands of Dick Friedman ’73, who spent two decades as an editor and writer at Sports Illustrated. One of his most enjoyable tasks was helping edit SI’s The College Football Book (2008), for which he could call on more than a half-century of watching Crimson football. Friedman saw his first Harvard game at the Stadium at age seven, in 1958. Harvard lost to Penn, 19-6. “I was too young to know it, of course,” he says, “but that first chilly plunge readied me for a lifetime of disappointments and triumphs.”

His forthcoming history of the golden age of Harvard football, Crimson Autumns: When Harvard Was Number One, chronicles the 1908-1915 teams coached by the brilliant, innovative Percy Duncan Haughton, A.B. 1899, who “would be thrilled by the brainy play of current coach Tim Murphy’s teams.” Look for Friedman’s dispatches, continuing the “Cleat” tradition, online after games and in print throughout the season.

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