

“Saw Losers”

A Blood Bowl short story by David Cartwright

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‘Ow’d dey do it?’

Gobnik Skab wondered, shaking his big green head as the goblin sat astride the cooling engine block of an out-sized chainsaw.

The ‘Dwarf-Dicer 550’, gave off little ‘plink’s and ‘ting’s as it cooled on the still-sacred turf of the backwater stadium.

‘Ow’d da sneaky ‘uman gitz do it?’ the goblin fanatic pondered to himself again.

Sticking a yellowed claw into a bat-wing ear, the gobbo wiggled it around, tongue lolling from between cracked and stained teeth.

BloodBowl players as a whole weren’t renowned as deep thinkers, goblins even less so and goblin fanatics least of all, but as the mists of his fungus-fuelled haze cleared, Gobnik slipped the claw into his mouth, rolling the contents around on his tongue, and thought hard.

Coach Naggletoof was dead and the humans had done it, but with Mork as his witness, Gobnik couldn’t figure out how.

Naggletoof had been a legend once.

There was a time the coach had been a rising star as a chainsaw-wielding fanatic himself.

Some even billed him as the next Blackwart.

He’d survived two whole seasons with the Fungus-Side Thievin’ Gitz and then retired to coach the team amid rumours of Nobbler himself issuing a bounty should Naggletoof take to the field again.

Even Gobnik could count the number of goblins who survived their careers to retire on his gnarled and calloused fingers, the ones he hadn’t lost to the Dwarf-Dicer in any case.

It might not be the Chaos Cup or the Spike! Magazine Open Tournament but the sub-division the Gitz inhabited (largely to make up numbers) still fed teams and players up to the higher leagues.

They might only be of passing interest to the most dedicated followers of the sport but still Gobnik had something like pride for his team (even if no half-decent ball’n’chain gitz would come within a league of ‘em) deep in his shrivelled-up goblin heart.

Until now only the local fans really paid any attention to the scrabbling goblin team, but this! Nuffle knew that this mystery was bound to go down in the history books of the great and sacred game of Blood Bowl.

A team coach murdered on the pitch in full view of the crowd by an unseen assassin employed by the opposition was the stuff of legends.

Gobnik had certainly never heard of the like in his long career, well... not outside the dark elf or skaven leagues anyway.

The fanatic counted himself a veteran.

He’d played nearly half a full season under Coach Naggletoof’s tender guidance and most gobbos didn’t survive their first match. The goblin reached up to rub an ear, still throbbing from a savage clip the coach had given it before the game.

He recalled the day when, as a scrawny young goblin obsessed with all things Blood Bowl, he’d scraped together enough teef for a ticket.

For weeks he’d lurked in alleys behind Orc bars, snatching up scattered tusks right out from beneath the hulking brutes as they fought.

If he thought he could get away with it he’d slipped them from pockets and pouches of the drunken lugs who lay in the alleys passed out, or put the dark byways to more noisome uses.

Finally he’d collected enough for a ticket to come watch the Gitz play, even bought himself a team jersey to boot.

At the height of the match, with fully a third of the Gitz lineout stomped to bloody paste, the knives had come out, literally, and the referee had awarded a foul against the goblins.

With an outraged bellow, the troll supporter next to him had looked around for a convenient projectile

to throw, finally snatching up Gobnik and hurling him at the ref.

Looking back, that giant filthy paw had been the hand of fate.

Scrambling to his feet, he'd scurried desperately away from the oncoming wall of the dwarf opposition's drive.

The Kharack B'osh Brewers had been visiting the Gitz field, their furious charge all bristling beards and brass-studded boots.

In blind panic, Gobnik had run straight into the Gitz dugout.

It was there that his soon-to-be coach, mentor and 'friend' (if goblins had such things) had looked down on the cowering fan and seen something.

Maybe the roughly-formed guts of a potential star, maybe a soft focus reminder of the young gobbo hopeful he himself had once been, or maybe he'd just mistaken him for another one of the ever-changing substitutes.

With a malicious glimmer in his eye, Snaggletoof had thrust the Dwarf-Dicer into Gobnik's hands and punted him back onto the pitch, yelling at him to "Take sum've da beardy gitz wiv ya!"

Now the coach was dead, and somehow the humans had done it, with Gobnik's own chainsaw.

Sure the saw was old, it's paintwork faded and flaking, sure it's engine rattled alarmingly and it needed the occasional boot to get it started, but it was his.

Naggletoog had give it 'im that first game and he'd done his best to keep it going.

He'd fed it with fermented squig fuel when it ran out, lovingly bashed it with a hammer when it played up and lubed it, match to match, with as much opposition blood as he could. Looking up from the saw, he surveyed the ground.

The match was over, the crowd still cheering the result from the rickety stands, but the goblin fanatic was still trying to piece together the mind-boggling mystery of Naggletoof's death

'Ow did da sneaky 'umie gitz done it?'

The Steingart Sentinels had come to the Gitz ratty ground on the edge of the Black Mountains, the humans trying to intimidate the gobbos with their swanky armour and even an actual sponsor.

Truth be told, they'd done it when they showed up for the match.

It was a late season game, the top of the division still hotly contested, and the Gitz were right in their accustomed place, narrowly avoiding relegation above a gang of snotlings who'd been put up to it on the promise of a good feed, and an undead team who couldn't afford a full-time necromancer. It was late in the second half.

Coach Naggletoof had called a 'timeout', an obscure regulation Gobnik had never heard of.

The referee hadn't heard of it either, but with the Gitz troll glaring hungrily down at him, he'd allowed it and the teams had hurried back to their dugouts.

Naggletoof had actually given the team less of a chewing out in the dugout than usual.

By a combination of guts, guile and falling over in front of the humie's and tripping 'em, the Gitz had held the sentinels to a no-score draw.

The wiry old goblin had frothed at the mouth, glaring at them out of his lopsided, squinting eyes and twisting his old knit cap in his claws.

The coach jumped up and down and stamping and hollering, but this time, rather than lambasting the surviving team members he was actually chittering about scoring, maybe even winning.

The position wasn't hopeless, even Gobnik could see that.

The chainsaw fanatic could count as high as six and he knew that if twice six Gitz were on the pitch the whistle blew.

He knew that if there were three six Gitz in the dugout the ref'd have words.

Here and now three Gitz were in six pieces in the 'Bitz' box, six more were staring up at stars in the apothecary box, and six-plus-one were sitting here at the coach's rant (Naggletoof insisted the three Gitz under the bench outside didn't count).

Out on the pitch the sun cast the mountains in their namesake deep shadows and the crowd cheered the battered gobbos just in case the flagging team decided to retreat to the changing room to hide, but Naggletoof's words had sparked an unfamiliar sensation, in Gobnik's brain at least.

He felt bigger, somehow stronger, had he known it he'd have recognised determination and maybe even pride in his team.

The ref watched the lineup. As the official, an Estalian maybe (all humans looked the same to Gobnik), turned his back, the Gitz used a pre-whistle play they called 'The Ol' Switcheroo'.

Gobnik's mate Skabiez was a professional 'place filler'.

The team employed them to wear the same number as the fanatic and take the pitch in his place while Gobnik hid with his chainsaw under the bench with the rest of the illicit extra team-members.

Before the whistle blew, when the ref wasn't watching, Gobnik would hoist the Dwarf-Dicer, dashing onto the pitch and they'd quickly swap places.

It might not win matches but, at the very least the goblins' audacity always got a laugh from the crowd.

Back on the pitch the Fungus-Side Gitz were receiving and, as the whistle blew, the shiny human kicker shaded their eyes, took two quick steps and launched the ball deep into the Gitz half.

The play from the gobbo team was a complex but well-practised maneuver Naggletoof had dubbed, 'Da Lob'.

Gobnik and the rest of the Gitz front line had to hold the opposition just long enough for the team's receiver, Nikkit, to get the ball and scramble to Eadfuz the troll.

Eadfuz was then supposed to throw Nikkit over the Sentinels' line so the goblin could run in the touchdown.

In theory it was an ingenious play, there was no-way Naggletoof had stolen the idea from previous, more famous goblin teams at all.

In reality, while most of the team knew the drill well, 'most of the team' didn't include Nikkit and Eadfuz. Nikkit was a new signing and, in practice, Eadfuz kept eating the receivers he was supposed to throw (which was why Nikkit was a new signing).

Maybe the reason behind it was that Eadfuz was a river troll.

The stinking creature played for rotten fish, since the Gitz coffers wouldn't stretch to the upkeep of a more traditional rock troll.

It wasn't that the massive, toad-like beast was dumber than its mountain dwelling counterparts, just more malicious.

A fact confirmed by the sly leer on its face every time the practice runs ended with a massive, cavernous 'belch!'.

None of this made any difference to Grobnik.

The whistle blew and the heavy thud of boot to leather sounded, as the fanatic, shielded from view by a miscellaneous teammate wearing number six (Gobnik had stopped learning their names until they survived their second match), pulled the chord of the 'Dicer and gripped the throttle tight.

The chainsaw roared to life. Rising from his secretive crouch, he watched yellow teeth fly as the 'umie blocker on the midline kicked number six in his grinning green face.

The blocker's furious scowl turned to a look of wide-eyed fear as Gobnik hurdled the falling goblin, employing Naggletoof's ingenious chainsaw tactic number two, 'Da Side-to-Side'.

He swung with all his tiny might and the saw took the blocker off at the knee.

The human screamed and fell, clutching his brand new stump, but Gobnik was already scanning for his next victim.

To his left, number three had been hoisted up by his stick-like neck, employing the brilliant delaying tactic of letting the 'umie lineman punch him repeatedly in the face.

On his right, number seven was scrabbling away on his haunches as another 'umie leapt at the little green-skin. With astonishing team spirit, and presence of twisted mind, Gobnik brought the throbbing, heavy engine block down on the human's head and watched for a second in satisfaction, as number seven recovered their composure and leapt on the stricken lineman, biting, scratching and gouging at the flailing player in text-book goblin style.

He risked a glance back. 'Eadfuz was staring blankly at Nikkit, the river troll clearly trying to encourage some thought or recollection from it's stagnant brain. Nikkit, ball clasped to his pigeon chest, bounced and waved at the dull amber eyes, gesticulating frantically down the pitch.

Gobnik watched in blank-faced horror as the troll reached down with a long, sinewy arm, its fingers tipped with talons longer than the goblin's massive nose, to grasp Nikkit and raise the goblin up for inspection. A pale green tongue traced hungrily over flaccid, pale lips that dripped with saliva before a spark of recognition fired off in the huge eyes. Eadfuz frowned toward the Sentinel's endzone, then wound back it's arm and threw.

Stunned, Gobnik watched Nikkit arc through the air, howling. The fanatic's gaze nearly brought his face right into the incoming fist of a human blitzter, charging toward him from the back field. The fanatic squeaked in fear and flinched, bringing the Dwarf-Dicer up instinctively. A loud, gong-like sound rang out, accompanied by the crack of splintering bones, and the human spat a string of oaths as he clutched at his wrist, fingers splayed to new and interesting angles as he danced in a pain-stricken circle. Gobnik took the opportunity to employ Naggletoof's essential chainsaw tactic number one, the 'Up-and-Down', raking the human who went from swearing to screaming in the space of a heartbeat.

Checking around for the referee, Gobnik saw number five, the conjoined mutant transfer from up near the Chaos Wastes. Pikit Neetit had proved an invaluable signing, tasked as they were with distracting the referee with whatever shenanigans their co-operative brains could devise. The weird part, Gobnik reflected, was that, even joined together as they were, they weren't even related. Upfield in the Sentinel's half, Nikkit was scrambling desperately to-and-fro as shiny human gauntlets reached for the slippery little gobbo. The viscous coating of slime had been one of the unconsidered, bonus side-effects of getting so close to a river troll. With uncharacteristic courage, Gobnik raised his chainsaw high like the gleaming sword of a hero of old and, screaming a high, thready battlecry, he charged.

Fending off the Sentinel's thrower with Naggletoof's essential tactic number three, the 'Pokey-Pokey,' he ran straight into Nikkit, shoving the panicking ball-carrier away out of the advancing 'umie net and on toward the endzone. Now surrounded, Gobnik wound himself up for the coach's brilliant, genius, secret weapon play.

This was where Naggletoof's ingenuity really showed. One hot and lazy afternoon, as the pair skived off practice and ate toads on the riverside, Naggletoof had turned to the younger goblin. 'Wot 'appenz,' the old gobbo had confided cryptically 'when a chainsaw git, playz like a ball'n'chain git?', and he'd tapped his nose knowingly.

With the Sentinel's glowering back-field stalking ever closer, Gobnik licked dry, cracked lips. Gouts of foul smoke belched from the chainsaw as he revved the engine to new heights of mechanical

fury and heaved the Dwarf-Dicer in a great arc, spinning and spinning as hard as he could. He'd admit afterwards that, once the saw got moving, the main difficulty was holding on to it, but at the time he clung to the weapon, howling in equal parts fear and desperation. The engine roared in concert with the fanatic as the weight of the spinning machine threatened to rip his spindly arms from their sockets. The field became a blur for the fanatic as humans and goblins alike screamed, panicking and running from the

unpredictable path of the whirling steel-toothed dervish. In the eye of the storm of choking dust and exhaust, Gobnik thought he saw the flash of a striped jersey diving for cover. A big-eared, yellow-toothed and strangely familiar green skinned head sailed through his field of vision trailing dark green blood. He whipped around the Sentinel's half, dicing and dismembering, with no more control over his passage than Eadfuz had over his digestive impulses. His world a candy cane vision of dust, smoke and blood, and his brain scrambled with the gut wrenching fear of the vicious spinning blades, he whipped around in wild, screaming abandon. A great shower of sparks told him he'd collided with the goalposts and, lowering the saw to the ground he chewed a great furrow in the brittle yellow grass, ploughing to a halt in a rank cloud of dust and squig-fuel smoke.

Panting and swaying, the confused fanatic surveyed the trail of destruction. From the pitch, moans and wails of agony arose from brutalized players, human and gobbo alike, but the stands were silent for a moment before they exploded into cheers.

It slowly dawned that the fans were cheering for him, cheering for Gobnik Skab, their voices hammering the dizzy goblin like the hails of thrown rocks he'd endured as a youngster.

Nearby his dazed and confused eyes spotted the decapitated body of Nikkit, the gobbo's elongated brown head sitting just over the line.

Wait, that wasn't Nikkit's head. Nikkit's head had bigger ears and was way over there in the hands of the human coach who stared down at it in pale-faced horror. The thing on the ground was something else, something important.

There was something he was supposed to do, but his thoughts wouldn't come together as he

staggered from side-to-side, the stadium swimming around him. Back at midfield, Eadfuz was picking up severed limbs, leisurely eating them, savouring the morsels almost delicately. Goblins staggered through the dust stirred up by the whirling fanatic, chased by the few remaining upright humans.

Closer to him, three humans, their shining blue and silver pads glittering in the late afternoon sunlight, raised themselves from the dusty turf, coughing and spitting. Coming together one pointed, first at Gobnik and then at the ball.

The ball, that was what it was. The ball, the game, the score!

The humans roared and charged, their cries muffled by the roaring crowd. The fans in the stands might be cheering for Gobnik, but the trio of charging humie's wanted to break every bone in his fragile goblin body and sell them off as souvenirs.

The only thing that could save his little green hide now was the whistle.

Staring down three-to-one odds with no teammates to throw under the trampling boots, Gobnik gripped the handle of his chainsaw. On wings of uncompromising cowardice, the fanatic leapt toward the ball. Time flowed like cave-fungus treacle as he sailed toward it, the 'umie's charge coming closer and closer. Images of gobbo players, their bodies crushed to a thin green paste under the bronze-shod boots of the Brewers in that first match, flashed through his panicked mind as the ball came closer, ever closer.

Gobnik hit the ground with a 'whuff!' of expelled breath, curling up with a shriek of fear, expecting at any moment to be assailed by the savage studs of the humans but they never came. The shrill three-blast call of the whistle sounded Gobnik's salvation and he realised he could feel the smooth, slightly sticky, skin of the ball under his outstretched claws. He clambered unsteadily to his feet, ball in hand, as the human players tailed off their death-sentence dash, growling and swearing oaths in their anger.

Dazed, Gobnik raised the ball high in slightly confused hope. The crowds' cheering reached new heights as the ref held up flat palms to signal that the dying seconds' touchdown was good.

Sitting in the aftermath, with the crowds filing and fighting their way noisily to the exits for an

aftermatch pint, Gobnik thought hard. He'd definitely had the Dwarf-Dicer in his paws as he'd celebrated the touchdown. He'd held the trembling engine high as he ran down the pitch to his teammates to celebrate the win. Coach Naggletroof had given him a reluctant nod, as of one equal to another, and Gobnik had thrown the shining, spinning saw high in celebration, turning away from the coach to raise his outsized green fists to the fans in triumph.

Somewhere in that moment, in revenge for their epic beating by the vastly superior gobbo team, somehow right then, one of the sneaky 'uman gitz had taken the saw. They must've taken the saw and killed Naggletroof because, when he turned around, the twitching green body of the coach lay there, bisected neatly by the Dwarf-Dicer 550 that sat, throbbing innocently, in the turf between the leaking pieces.

'Ow did da sneaky 'uman gitz do it?' he thought to himself once more.
