

Every Saturday afternoon



by BILL MARLING
Chronicle Staff

Coach Bill Meek stands in the low musty locker-room, balancing nervously on the balls of his feet. Around him sit 58 slightly sweaty Utah football players, red-jerseyed, huge, tense, psyching themselves up. They wait for the Coach to speak.

"I'm gonna tell ya right now," he says, "that the key to this whole game is gonna be controlling the line of scrimmage. Now as many times as we throw, sometimes that ball is gonna be bouncing off a guy's fingertips, they can't all be perfect. Sometimes a guy's going up there for it, it's gonna bounce a little bit. So you follow it, we can't win without being where the ball is."

There is a rumble of agreement. "Now we can move that football on the ground or in the air, right Brownie?"

"Right," says Don Van Galder. More rumbles.

"So the key is to control that line of scrimmage. You linemen got to get down there and whip 'em and whip 'em. Control Keithley. You give that guy time to set back there and pick his teeth and he'll connect."

"Put him out of the game," comes a shout. Someone starts clapping and in a second everyone is clapping. Clapping, stamping, shouting. As quickly as it begins, it ends and all the players file from the locker to the bright green iridescence of the Astro-Turf.

Bill Meek walks behind. He looks down as he walks, as if to avoid the clods of turf and mud pies which once dotted his field. There is not much he can do now. The outcome of the game depends on how he has prepared his team during the week, it depends on his scouting, on the physical conditioning of the team, it depends on things Meek did months ago . . . like recruiting and training. The outcome of the game has been determined but it is unknown. Now it will be revealed.

"The Big Reds didn't waste any time convincing the home fans they had come to play," says the announcer. "The first score was set up by a 58-yard punt by Dan Mar-

relli. It was tumbled and finally chased out of bounds on the UTEP two. Keithley's punt was smothered by Gilreath, who knocked it down and then drove it out of the end zone for a safety."

On Friday afternoon of the day before Gilreath had been among those sitting in room 206 of the Physical Education Complex. There was no tension then. Some players walked into the meeting singing "Camp Granada," and an assistant coach was asking who needed a phone call to get up in the morning. They had just finished a light workout on the Astro-Turf before a few spectators. Meek ran them through a few plays and special squad drills on the curving combed green velvet. Then a meeting . . . chatter about 53A charges . . . we don't read a tackle over center . . . strong side rush. Quiet falls as Meek talks.

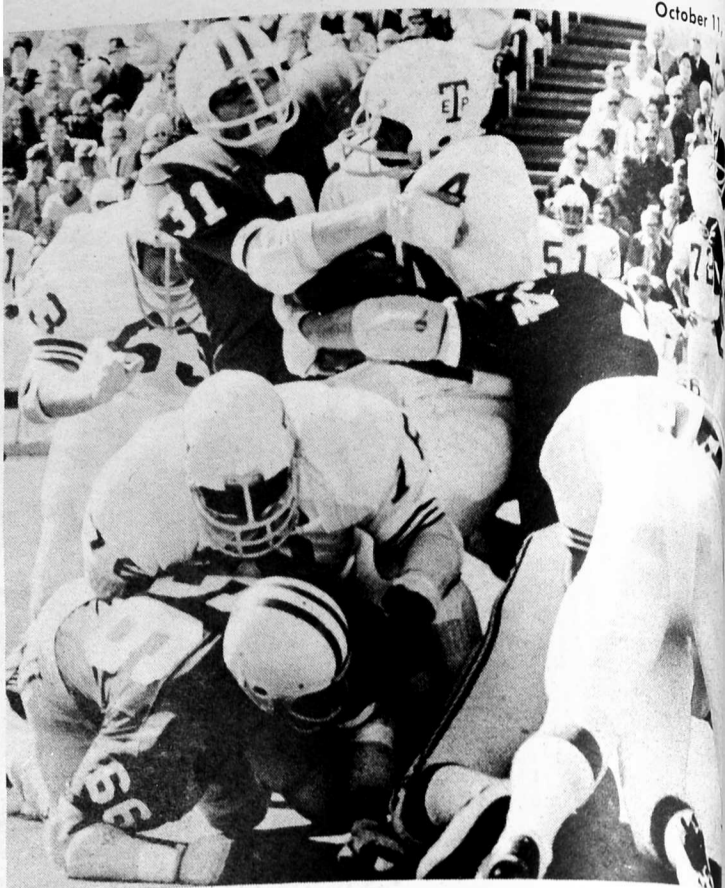
"We are going to be doing things different this week. Instead of going to the Rode-way, we are going to try staying here in the dorms. Several of you boys have expressed to me your desire to sleep in your own beds the night before the game. So we are going to try it out and see . . . but I don't want any messing around. I don't want any girls in the dorm after 10 p.m. Dinner and breakfast will be down in the Union Building."

"Odom returned the free kick from the Utah 20 to the UTEP 38 to set up the first touchdown," recaps the announcer. "In only six plays Van Galder had the Utes' first touchdown in the newly-named Rice Stadium. Ike Spencer took a pitch-out at the six and went in, Flemming Jensen secured the point after and the Utes went ahead nine to nothing only half-way through the first quarter."

Odom and Van Galder eat dinner at the table with the coaches the night before the game. Van Galder is The Star. Odom is the Good Guy, he smiles a lot. Dinner is steak, potatoes, beans, ice cream, coffee, milk, and hard candy. The coaches are discussing Van Galder's head; they can't find a helmet large enough to fit it. Meek claims that if he cut his hair, his helmet would fit. Odom says the helmet would fit if he let the air out of Van Galder's head. The star says his head is large because it is the CONTROL center and has a LOT of things going on in it. Odom laughs.

The players eat quickly and vanish while the coaches are drinking coffee. Meek and Jim La Rue, his chief assistant, talk of other schools they have coached at. Meek is suddenly nostalgic about Maryland, the misty hills near Annapolis, the computer perfect grids of cadets at attention as the sun rises over the Potomac. His deeply tanned face becomes pensive and open. He talks of recruiting at high schools in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Chicago, and California.

"Utah pressures a bad punt and Marrelli then punts the Miners deep into their own territory. UTEP quarterback Keithley is chased into the end zone, and swarmed under by Pritchett and Gilreath. Another



safety! Utah takes the lead 11-0 at the quarter."

On the day of the game Meek walks across the misty overcast campus to a 9 p.m. meeting in HPER 206. On the board he writes "BEAT THE HELL OUT OF UTEP." He shows films of UTEP's last game, commenting play by play on the strengths and weaknesses. He runs the film forwards and backwards. Each play is dissected, analyzed, and solutions are offered. The lights flick on, and everyone slides quietly and tensely away to breakfast.

Copies of The Tribune flip open to the sports pages over breakfast. High school scores are discussed . . . "Hey Coach, did you hear about Olympus?" Two fraulein type waitresses deliver stacks of hotcakes and hamburger . . . they forget to serve Meek. The Star arrives wearing rose-tinted sunglasses and a leather hat.

Bill Meek sips his coffee . . . quiet, reflective. He talks about athletic problems at Utah. Clearly, he views himself as a man on the spot in a period of athletic re-evaluation. He is sensitive to fire. "We've got 97 football scholarships here — we took a cut this year — and our last three opponents have 150 each. They got 2 to 1 odds on us before we even start. That could have worked in one platoon football, but with two platoon we're lucky to be two deep in good players at each position."

"The Miners have made their first long drive into Utah country . . . Gilreath and Pritchett dump Keithley for an 18-yard loss . . . Keller and Pritchett drop Keithley for 11 . . . looks like he'll punt. It's a long one . . . and . . . STEVE ODOM grabs it. He dropped it, he's almost in the end zone. He picks it up . . . he's on the 25 . . . the 40 . . . the 50 . . . he's got daylight . . . the 45 . . . could go all the . . . the 30 . . . he's clear . . . Odom runs 95 yards for a touchdown"

After breakfast Meek responds to a question on why there aren't more Black athletes at Utah.

"There's two reasons; the weather and the social set-up. When we bring guys out here it's February and there's snow piled all over. Then they go down to Arizona and feel that sun. They just don't want to go to school where it's cold; they like that fast dry track. And socially, well, there's not much life here. It's a pretty tough fix, as you can well imagine."

Meek and the coaches disappear until shortly before the game. The players straggle over to the athletic complex to have ankles taped, muscles massaged, and old wounds padded. The equipment man gives each player a jock, shirt, and shorts wrapped in a towel. An air of studied tension develops: everyone is concentrating on getting themselves psyched. They sit on benches facing one another, quiet, thinking of plays, patting and pep-talking one another.

Where's the team doctor? "They keep him in an office," says Dan Jackson, "so he won't give us high powered pills and shots." There is nervous laughter. In the tape room the Detroit sound is blasting out of KCPX radio. Flemming Jensen complains that the numbers on his jersey are so big he must tuck them into his pants. "How much time?" is muttered, everything assumes a clock-work. Soon players board an air-conditioned

Lewis Bros. Stages for the one-hour to the stadium. They have a police

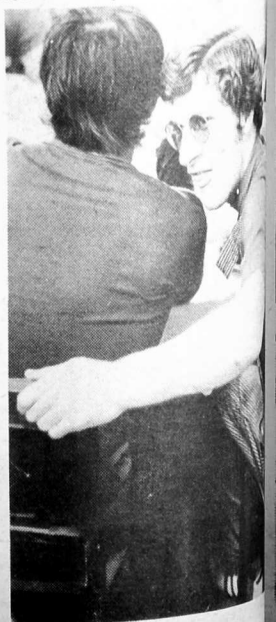
"Van Galder drops back to pass . . . complete to Armstead for 38 yards for the touchdown. The speedster puts Utah ahead 25-0. The ball on a fumble after the kick Galder is intercepted by UTEP. Armstead throws . . . complete to Greg Taylor for 38 yards and a touchdown. Utah 25-0. The kick . . . Utah's 20 . . . Van Galder drops back, fakes to Belczyk, throws . . . Armstead has it . . . goes in TD."

There comes a moment in football marked by the sharply drawn line of 20,000 breaths — that must be seen as an instant of pure beauty. It is Odom, considering the field before the though it held 21 chess pieces, sliding into the gaps and flowing through the holes . . . pausing to pick up blockers, sprinting to elude a tackle finally 95 yards later, loping into the zone. It is a physical symphony, a concentration of body-crunching blocks, teeth, and skinned elbows. Like a once it is completed, it is forever gone that it remains only in the slow motion of the mind's eye. Such is the bobble of Armstead as he tried to latch on to Galder's pass. The ball dances on the air — an artistic problem is set — tucks it away, the problem solved.

After his touchdown Odom returns to the bench in a mob and rubs the back of his trainer; for good luck. It works. week. Mojo, he says.

"For the first half-time in several years we'll hear the Ute Pep Band. Boys are to have them back. They add songs to these home games. And the Utah course. The stadium will be officially dedicated the Robert Rice Memorial Stadium a few minutes."

Heat waves are rolling off the stadium. People only 40 yards across the field appear to have wavy legs. President Fletch introduced as "President Fletch" a chorus of catcalls. The Utah fans finished flashing their rhythmic legs. Bob Rice says a few words about





ing one of the finest athletic facilities in the country. A student yells out "Have you ever seen the puddles in the Athletic Complex?"

The second half begins as an anti-climax. By how much will Utah win? Fans sense a blood-bath and lick their lips. UTEP pours on to the field and you can read fury on their faces. Can they reverse the tide?

"The kick-off is to Number 24 . . . that John Frech, he returns to the left tackled at the 22 yard line . . . oh-oh looks like he's hurt. Van Galder keeps on the option play . . . now they've got John Frech up and he walks back to the bench . . . a big hand for him."

After the injured player has been down for several minutes, the doctor cuts off his ankle tape and feels the bones. He calls for ice. A trainer brings ice and some water. The doctor opens a small white bottle and pushes three pills into the player's mouth, which are quickly washed down with water. The little white bottle disappears. Three minutes later he gets up and is aided to the bench.

Flemming Jensen is kicking imaginary field goals on the sidelines. Step, woosh. Why do they call Don Van Galder "Brownie?" I don't know," says Jensen, "I guess that's what they called him in high school." Step, woosh.

"UTEP has finally gotten into an offensive gear. They're down on the Utah 11 . . . but . . . oh-oh Utah intercepts. Mike Stevens gets Keithley's pass and downs it in the end zone . . . Utah has driven 80 yards now . . . Little Gene Belzyck races around the right end . . . and . . . he's inside the flag . . . a TD . . . score Utah 39 and UTEP 7 with 6:44 to play."

Belzyck has burns all over his hands and arms when he comes out. Blood is on his pants . . . Astro-Turf produces bad burns apparently. Belzyck has carried 21 times for 116 yards and a score. Belzyck is the co-captain, married, and from the steel belt of west Pennsylvania. He might never have gone to college but for football. Though quiet, Belyzck admits he likes living in Utah.

"UTEP picked up 82, 77, and 56 yards in final drives," the announcer recaps," but after the third quarter Utah had the game put away for keeps. Coach Meek put in some of his second line for experience and they played a little looser. The final score again, was Utah 39 and the University of Texas at El Paso 20."

Before the game ends, the fans are leaving. They try little test bounces on the Astro-Turf in the end zones. One has found that super-balls bounce very well on the turf. He unleashes them. On the sideline Bill Meek stands aloof, letting his assistants run the game. Next Saturday he will do it all again. He must worry about tomorrow.

