

**FRED BOWEN**  
**SPORTS STORY**

***Touchdown  
Trouble***

**FRED BOWEN**

  
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Summary: Sam is proud that his touchdown in the final play of a game left his football team undefeated, but when a video-recording of the game reveals that the touchdown was scored illegally, he and the other Cowboys must decide whether to reveal the truth. Includes facts about a similar situation faced by Cornell University's team after a game with Dartmouth in 1940.

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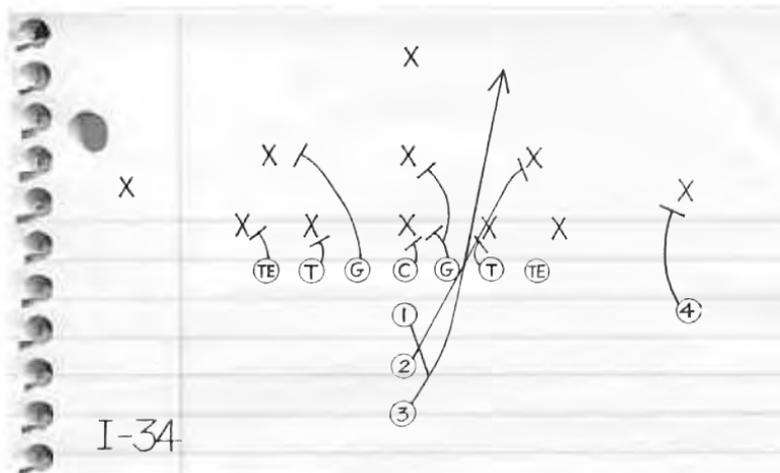


## Chapter

Sam Danza reached above his desk and grabbed his favorite book from the shelf. He flopped down on his bed, turned on his side, and propped himself up on one elbow. For a few seconds, he just smiled and stared down at the book. It was a red three-ring binder. The cover read: *Cowboys Playbook*.

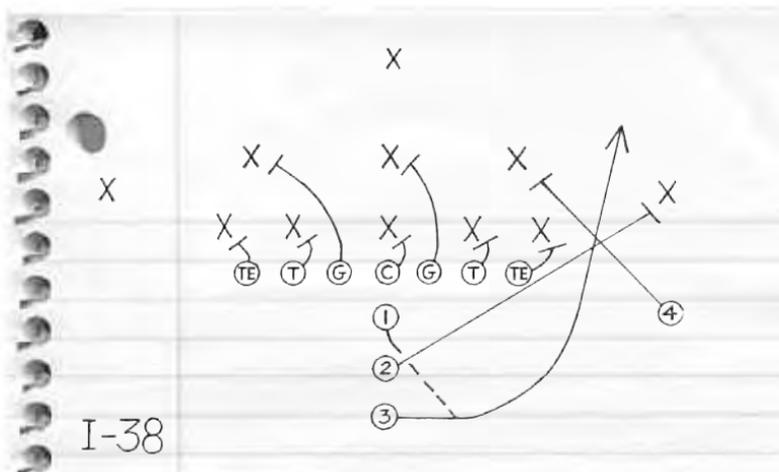
Sam was twelve years old and the star running back for the Cowboys in the Woodside Football League. He loved studying his playbook.

Sam leaned over to turn on the lamp next to his bed and opened the book. The first page had a diagram of his favorite play, the I-34.



Lying back in his Cowboys shirt, Sam closed his eyes and imagined himself lining up behind Eddie Ching, his friend and the team's fullback. He saw Trey Johnson, the Cowboys quarterback, get the hike, turn, and slip the ball to him. With his eyes still closed, Sam imagined himself running with the football. He could feel the tacklers grabbing for his legs and feet as he pulled away, still running. He could hear the crunch of the players against each other. He could even smell the grass, sweat, and dirt.

Sam sat up and flipped through the pages to another play, the I-38. In that play



Sam took the handoff and ran around the right end. Sam closed his eyes again and lay back on his pillow. He imagined Trey calling out the signals.

*“Ready...set...”*

Again he saw the Cowboys linemen getting into their three-point football stances in time with the signals. He felt the whole team ready to surge forward the moment Trey yelled *“Hut!”*

Just then Sam’s father knocked on the door and poked his head into the room. “What are you doing, Sam?”

“Huh?” Sam said, his eyes popping open. He was surprised to find himself in his bed,

surrounded by football posters on the walls. Then he realized that his father was at the door. “Oh, I’m just studying the plays for tomorrow’s game against the Steelers,” he said.

“You already know those plays pretty well,” Mr. Danza said. “You’ve played four games and you guys haven’t lost yet.”

“Yeah, I guess. But I don’t want to be the one who messes things up.”

“Well, okay, but turn off your light soon,” Mr. Danza said. “You know your mom doesn’t like you staying up late when you’re with me.”

Sam nodded. His parents were divorced, and he spent every Friday night during the football season at his dad’s house. “I’ll go to sleep in a little while,” he said. “I need to go over a few more plays.”

“Okay. See you in the morning.” Sam’s father closed the door behind him.

Sam looked back at the binder and turned the page. His dad was right. Sam knew every play by heart. But he loved reliving the plays and games as he lay in

the quiet darkness of his room, lit only by his small bedside lamp. He closed his eyes again and saw himself running with the football, leaving the tacklers in the dust. He heard the crowd cheering as he sprinted down the field.

Sam loved football. He loved being the Cowboys' best running back, the guy everyone counted on to carry the ball and score touchdowns. But most of all, he loved that feeling he got when the Cowboys were all working together—when they were pushing the other team back, gaining yardage on every play, and getting closer and closer to the end zone.

He closed the playbook and thought about the next day's game. That was what he loved most about football: knowing that the Cowboys were really a team.



## *The Real Story*

**I**n November 1940, Cornell was the best college team in the country. The Cornell Big Red was a football powerhouse, just like the University of Southern California, Ohio State, and Oklahoma are today.

Led by Coach Carl Snavely, Cornell had gone undefeated in 1939 with a record of 8–0 (college teams played fewer games in the old days). Cornell had won its first six games of the 1940 season, crushing their opponents by a combined score of 181–13. If Cornell won its remaining two games against Dartmouth and the University of Pennsylvania, the Big Red would win its second straight national championship.

The game against Dartmouth on November 16 should have been an easy win for Cornell, even though Dartmouth was playing at home. Dartmouth's record was just three wins and four losses, and Big Red had beaten Dartmouth 35–6 the previous year.

But the Dartmouth head coach had prepared his team well for Cornell. He had planned some special defensive formations just for the Cornell game.

The new Dartmouth formations worked. The Big Red offense that had averaged more than 30 points a game sputtered in the first half. The score was tied 0–0 when the teams headed to their locker rooms at halftime. Still, the Cornell team wasn't worried. As the Cornell captain and quarterback Walter Matuszak recalled many years later for an article in the *Boston Globe*, "Everyone thought we had a real fine chance of winning."

But Cornell continued to struggle in the second half. The late autumn afternoon in New Hampshire grew darker and colder.

Early in the fourth quarter, Dartmouth kicked a 27-yard field goal to take a surprising 3–0 lead.

By then, snow had begun to swirl in the air. Cornell and its eighteen-game unbeaten streak—and its number one ranking—were in real trouble.

Finally, late in the game, Cornell forced Dartmouth to punt. The Big Red got the ball on its own 48-yard line with only a minute and 30 seconds left on the clock. Two quick passes and a defensive pass interference call against Dartmouth moved the ball to Dartmouth's 17-yard line. Mort Landsberg, the Cornell fullback, blasted through the Dartmouth defense to the six-yard line and a first down.

With less than a minute remaining and time running out, the Dartmouth defense held on. Three Cornell running plays moved the ball down to the one-yard line. After a penalty against Cornell moved the ball back to the six-yard line, Cornell tried a pass into the end zone that the Dartmouth defense swatted away.

With two seconds left on the scoreboard clock and the snow falling harder, confusion reigned on the field. Some Dartmouth players and even one official thought it should be Dartmouth's ball because Cornell had not scored in the regulation four downs. But the head referee pointed to the official scoreboard in Dartmouth's Memorial Stadium (there were no sideline down markers in 1940). The officials running the scoreboard in the snow and the confusion surrounding the final Cornell drive had missed a play. The scoreboard mistakenly indicated that it was fourth down. Cornell had one more chance to score.

Thinking that it truly was fourth down, Cornell decided not to kick a tying field goal and instead threw a touchdown pass. Cornell had won—or seemed to have won—by a score of 7–3.

Following the game, some Dartmouth players and fans insisted that Cornell had won the game on a mistaken fifth down. But the game was in the books as a 7–3 Cornell victory, and no rule allowed Dartmouth to change it.

The next afternoon, Coach Snavelly reviewed the game films and saw the officials' mistake. He called in his players and showed them the final minute. "We must have looked at that film a hundred times. There was no doubt about it," team captain Matuszak recalled. Cornell had scored the winning touchdown on a fifth down.

Coach Snavelly left the decision of what to do to his players. The Cornell team elected to give Dartmouth a 3-0 victory. "I think the vote was near unanimous," Matuszak remembered.

The next day, Cornell athletic director James Lynah and Coach Carl Snavelly sent a telegram to the Dartmouth athletic director that read, "In view of the conclusions reached by the officials that the Cornell touchdown was scored on a fifth down, Cornell relinquishes claim to the victory and extends congratulations to Dartmouth." The Dartmouth athletic director wired back, "Dartmouth accepts the victory and your congratulations and salutes the Cornell team."

With the exchange of telegrams, Cornell's

unbeaten streak and its chance for a national championship were gone.

The Cornell players' decision, like the decision made by Sam and the Cowboys, was not an easy one. The game was over and Cornell had officially won. No rule required the Cornell players to give the victory to Dartmouth. According to the Cornell University website, the 1940 Cornell-Dartmouth football game remains the only time a college sporting event has been decided after the completion of the game.

Fifty years later the University of Colorado football team was presented with a similar situation. Because of a referee's mistake, Colorado scored a touchdown on a fifth down to beat Missouri 33–31 on the final play of the game. When shown evidence of the referee's mistake, the Colorado coaches and team decided to keep the victory.

By giving the win to Dartmouth, the Cornell players showed they were true champions. And, as Sam's father said, the good sportsmanship of the Cornell players

is still remembered. “As the years went on, nobody remembered the undefeated season,” Matuszak said. “They [remembered] the fifth down.”