

Infected Gator

by [Gracjan Kraszewski](#) (October 2019)



Football Players, J.C. Leyendecker, 1909

The Nampa High football locker room—red, white, and blue everywhere and all over, and not so much of the patriotic hues but directly related to the school colors which, interestingly enough, may indeed have taken inspiration from the old Stars and Stripes and, yet, even so, that's not the point here, in the locker room—smells like a confluence of sweaty post-workout socks, armpits that have never touched deodorant, and piping hot apple pie just pulled from the oven and set to cool on a wooden counter where root beer and lite beer routinely spill and so freely mix.

Ben and Hans walk past the players changing and shooting the breeze and slapping one another with towels (peculiarly *before* practice, not pre/post post-practice shower, as would be expected, even appropriate) to get to the head coach's cramped office. Herb Johnson—Nampa High Bulldogs football head coach, "Head Ball Coach" his self-fashioned moniker around here, BS Kinesiology, M.Ed.—sits behind his desk, his eyes scanning something on a computer screen. Johnson actually has a whistle drooped around his neck, one that looks like he's a last minute actor flown in to look like he's playing a coach and this is what they had in wardrobe. He has a thick neck. Johnson is a big guy and you can tell this even with him sitting down. He's wearing a white visor. His skin is tan. It's leathery, especially around his neck. He really has a tree trunk sized neck. He's probably between 45 and 51 years old. His hands are thick and meaty. He has many rings on his fingers. One is a wedding band. It's one of those industrial, larger sized, gray wedding bands. Johnson's office doesn't smell like the rest of the locker room. It smells like banana crème suntan lotion. He looks up from his computer at the sound of Hans' knock on the door. He smiles and tells them to come in and sit down.

"If you want someone who knows football inside out, someone who diagrams plays in his sleep, someone who makes the

football mind of Idaho sports legend Kellen Moore look infantile,” Mikloff explains to Coach Johnson, “then Benjamin TyVole is not your man. You see, Coach, Ben knows nothing about football. I don’t even know if he understands the rules. But all this is beside the point, because there is no one, and I mean no one, on the face of the earth or throughout the course of history, who knows how to *prepare* a football team for game day better than Benjamin TyVole. In the field of sports training, he’s second to none.”

“Hans,” Coach Johnson says. “I’m not looking for something revolutionary. I thought I made that pretty clear when we spoke over the phone. The lack of football knowledge doesn’t matter to me. I know football, my staff knows football, my guys know football. Shoot, even the trainer girls know football. I need an Ess’n’SEE (S&C).[\[1\]](#) I need someone who’ll get the guys bigger, faster, stronger. Nothin’ illegal, of course. Within all the boundaries of the rules, someone who’ll get the guys in incredible shape. Shoot, near elite even. Someone who’ll get ’em ready to play and someone that’ll help them recover for the next game. Are you that guy, Ben?”

Johnson stares directly at Ben. Not looks. Not looks at. Stares.

Ben opens his mouth to respond, but Mikloff beats him to the punch.

“Coach Johnson,” Hans says, seguing into his rendition of a north New Jersey, South Orange-attended-at-least-three-semester-at-Seton-Hall-University-accent, “Coach Johnny Appelseedyunderbelly, yeah. Dees-he the right g-eye for-thah job? Pleeese-ase’geta-boudit. (and then the accent is gone, like a summer sunny rainstorm arriving and leaving without warning) Let’s take a look at Mr. TyVole’s resume and allow his accomplishments to speak for themselves.”

Mikloff pulls out a purple binder from his backpack. He

removes a few yellow papers. "Ten years ago, Ben was on a safari expedition to Tanzania. He was supposed to stay a month but ended up remaining there for three times ten fortnights an—"

"Excuse me," Coach Johnson interjects, "what does this have to do with football? I'm all about football. If it's not about football then I'm not really interested. I'm interested in football. Ask my wife if you don't believe me. I read pulp novels about football in bubble baths. You can check with my wife. Our wedding? Not football themed. But basically everything else has been. Our honeymoon? Also not football themed. You think she woulda' gone for that, huh?"

"Allow me to explain," Hans says. "During his extended Tanzanian excursion—he was like, it was like, like, if my *nom de familie* be Nyerere, my *prenom* betta be Julius; cause *n'importe quoi d'autre* and Ima look'a-fool-ius—Ben had a lot of down time on his hands. Everyday he would go outside and watch lions fight. He developed a real habit about this. I was like Kant's daily strolls in Konigsberg, you could set your watch by it. That's what it what was like for Ben watching lions fight. Time would pass, and he never worried about it, the time, never had to bring a watch to check, no, he'd just sit there and watch. Watch them 'play fight' I guess is the more accurate description. But look, Ben took notes. Oodles and old world ramen noodles of notes, sir.[\[2\]](#) And when he got back to the States, well, he incorporated some of the lions' fighting techniques into his own methodological, pedagogical, philosophical meta-system personal training."

Johnson tries to interrupt. He fails.

"One moment please," Hans says, index finger raised then into a tap-tap-tap of the air in front of him. "I'm almost finished. Upon returning to the States, the United States of America that is, the USA, Ben opened his own gym. It was here that he pioneered his unconventional style of fitness: a

little bit of the lion technique, some Olympic lifting, a pinch of plyometrics and, of course, lots and lots of bench press. He didn't want to go all out and do the Bulgarian method. Not with the largely mediocre athletes he had then. However—oh'wow—Ben did make them do a ton of max squatting on top of a medicine ball, well, huh, because if you can't actually lift real weights the right way there's no point in learning to do so, that's Ben's philosophy in a nutshell sometimes, approximately thirty-eight percent on a ninety-one percent scale, I'd say. But so again, for those who can't learnt to do it right, well, make up asinine workouts that train nothing, high risk no reward 'workouts' that you think will make those watching you marvel but, in reality, they're like: tool.[\[3\]](#) Then there were all the yeah-foreseeable injuries and so he scratched that from his program. He's not going to make the guys do *that*, okay? Stretching? Never. Ben'll ask you himself, 'does a lion stretch before setting off in full sprint after a gazelle?' Now, wow, oh wow, wow, I could go on all day about his program but I just think it's best if you see it for yourself."

"Ben," Coach Johnson says, "and I want to hear the answer from Ben. Is this true?"

Hans had stuck to the script perfectly. So much so he had said all of Ben's lines for him. But had Hans not said them, Ben wouldn't have. He wasn't going to lie, regardless if a job was on the line.

Ben shakes his head, "No. None of that is true."

Mikloff glares at Ben. Johnson laughs. His laugh sounds like wet tennis shoes bouncing around inside a clothes dryer. "Could you guys step out of the office for a second? I have to make a call."

"Herb," Johnson says, over the phone to his assistant. "I don't even know where to begin. This guy, two guys actually,

are here interviewing for the Ess'n'SEE job and I think they're both crazy. Shoot, I know one of them is for sure. Anyways, they're harmless. Our guys need a break from practice and I think this might be the perfect thing. Whatever they wanna to do, let 'em. Just so long as they respect the Football, The Game, Herb. Respect. The. Game. Always. Have one of the equipment managers film it, what they do, 'cause I wanna see this later. But don't tell the players a thing. Just that these guys are gonna demonstrate some of their training methods, nothing else. Whatever they wanna do, let'm at it. Just sit back and enjoy, 'kay, partner?"

Coach Johnson hangs up the phone. Later on he would wish he hadn't given Hans free reign. But hindsight is, is what, again?

Johnson calls the two back into his office. "Okay, guys. Well-shoot, I have to say that what you've brought in here is unorthodox, but I like that. I've always considered myself unconventional, kind of like the one rooster on the farm who reads the mornin' papers with a cuppa joe, so I'm willing to give you a shot. I have a coaches' conference in Moscow today so I won't be at practice, but my assistant coach, Herb Snopek, knows you're coming. He'll have the guys ready for your demonstration. Get the boys chompin at the bit, they'll get after it a bit, promise you that, they'll circle the wagons, boy. I guarantee it."

Johnson looks at the digital clock on his desk and says, "Well, it's almost time for practice so the guys should be out warming up already. It was a pleasure meeting you, Ben. I hope this is the start of a great relationship between you and Nampa High."

While Johnson had been calling his assistant, Ben and Mikloff had been fighting. Hans was angry that Ben had exposed him as a pathological liar. Ben was angry Hans actually believed such an outlandish pitch would work.

“Okay, let’s put it behind us,” Hans says, surprised to learn they were being given an audition of sorts, if not exactly being handed a contract or any sort of inclination that their services were to be retained long term. “It’s your time to shine. Obviously whatever we said in there worked. Just please stick to the Ben, script . . . the script, Ben. Trust me.”

“Infected Gator,” Ben says.

“Infected Gator,” Hans replies, smiling and giving him a fist bump.

The Nampa Bulldogs had been eliminated from the postseason a little less than a week prior. Although their season was over, Nampa was allowed to hold “official football related activities” through the second week of December, right before the start of the winter holiday freetime once called “Christmas break” many years ago.

With coaches allowed to be around the full team for the next two weeks, it was the perfect time to get an early read on next year’s squad. It was also a good time to hire a strength and conditioning coach. As Ben and Mikloff walked onto the practice field they saw the team assembled and stretching. They were wearing red shorts and blue practice jerseys. No pads or helmets today.

Johnson’s assistant sees Ben and Mikloff from a distance and walks over to meet them. “Hi, I’m Herb Snopek,” he says, shaking Ben’s and then Mikloff’s hand, each very firmly. In the style of an ex but never really ex because *semper fidelis* ex-Marine, etc. “I’m the assistant coach here at Nampa.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ben says, taking the initiative. “I’m Ben.”

"I'm Hans," Mikloff says. "Ben's advisor."

"I'm sure Coach Johnson told you he won't be at practice today. I'll be running things. Why don't you guys come over to meet the players and then we can begin the workout."

Snopek blows his whistle and immediately the players stop what they are doing and huddle up at midfield. It's all very Pavlovian.

"Gentlemen," he says, "as you know, we're in the process of finding a strength and conditioning coach. The workout you will do today is designed by one of those candidates. Ben . . ."

Snopek hadn't asked for Ben's last name and so pauses as he points at him.

"TyVole," Ben says, raising his hand. A couple of the players snicker. (Snicker because the name sounds stupid in an un-American dumb last name type of way thought funny by dumb young Americans. Or, perhaps, an alternate theory: the players laughing have knowledge of the Czech language, maybe even speak it fluently, speaking it in steady streams of clear, cold water lucidity at home and so know Ben's last name has the double meaning [each indeed funny, very funny] of, literally, 'you ox,' and the colloquial catch-all word perhaps most close to 'dude' as used by Czechs for many years now. So they know his name is, depending on one's preference, either "Ben YouOx" or "Ben Dude;" each, no doubt, warranting snickers, giggles and ridicule. And so if this alternate theory is true, these young men are anything but 'dumb young Americans').

"Ben is a well known strength and fitness coach who has wanted to apply his methods to the football field for a long time. We are going to be evaluating him and his methods to see if they are a good fit for our program. But remember," Snopek pauses and raises his hand, his eyes scanning the players, "you too are being evaluated. Last year is history. Next year

is a mystery. Tear apart that gift-wrapping paper today, gentleman! Seize the diem, hombres! We need new leaders and new playmakers to step up. Every time we practice is an opportunity to show us what you've got. There are tons of eyes on every inch of your jockstraps at all times, gentlemen. Understood?"

The players nod in unison.

"Good. I want you guys to give Ben your full attention and respect. I want 100% effort. Ben," Snopek says, stepping back and giving him the floor.

Ben had studied Mikloff's mission plan over and over again the past twelve hours. He was confident he could deliver. He walks up to the players and says, with an inauthentically fabricated booming voice and heavily affected false bravado (as the mission plan stipulated),

"Do you guys know why I . . . am . . . here?!"

No one from the team says anything. Ben is very pained at the moment; the false bravado. It really is so false. But they, the players, are used to many speeches beginning in this fashion. This is typical. Ben's thinking they should be snickering at this, not his last name. All eyes are on Ben. One player, a Polynesian looking stocky young man, nods his head without the slightest attempt at subtlety. He's getting zoned in; mouthfroth locked in.

"Two reasons," he says. "Number one is your performance. Number two is your talent. Both atrocious," then he adds Hans' phrase, the exact phrase spelled out in the script, which Ben thinks he must have audibly winced while saying it. "Like a piece of fish left out in the sun for three weeks or something."

Players exchange confused looks. Nampa had finished a few games from the state title on the heels of an undefeated

regular season. Four players from their most recent graduating class had landed full athletic scholarships to Division I schools. Four! That's a good number for a, for all intents and purposes, professional factory/farm system-type high school football program in California, Texas, Florida . . . but in Idaho? Wow, truly special. Ben pauses to let his words sink in. Mikloff demanded he do so each time he made a point.

Ben continues, "If any of you think that last year, or the last few years, are acceptable, you're mistaken. And not only mistaken but you need to leave. Get out, RIGHT NOW! Because not winning a game the last half millennium is downright embarrassing. I saw game tapes of you guys in action. You call that football? I wouldn't even call it sports. Maybe intramurals, the kind where everyone makes the team and the teams are co-ed because the guys on the team just want to meet girls; they don't even care about winning. Don't even care about winning, let that sink in a bit, guys. You have no idea how much physical pain the thought of not being obsessed with neon numbers on a scoreboard indicating final results makes me. You have NO idea! It's time to get real about life, about what's important. No idea because you're young and stupid and have no idea that life only goes downhill after this. You have no idea that those rare and brave middle aged men still basking in the long forgotten sunlight of glory days gone by, gone bye-bye, are beacons of light in the darkness of daily dogshitedness. And you know what else? You can't tackle, can't run, can't throw, can't think. I really think you don't even think about not being able to think. Think about that. That's why I'm here. To grab you guys by the abs and deadlift you into the winner's circle."

Ben is almost out of breath. He looks over at Mikloff who flashes him a toothy smile. Ben had nailed the monologue.

"Increase talent to amplify on-field performance," Ben says, having regained his breath and ready to hammer home the final nails. "That's why I'm here, men. To make you better so

you can play better, fellas. The way I'm going to do this is through one simple drill that I've spent the last half-decade of my life designing, boys. It's called *Infected Gator*, homies. *Infected Gator* has a little bit of everything you need to become an absolute football freak show, groovy *brothas*. It trains balance, strength, speed, toughness and desire. This one catchphrase should tell you all you need to know: 'If you're still Peter Pan, it'll make you a man . . . not a lil' bitch.' "

"Hans," Ben says, motioning to Mikloff, "hand me the whiteboard."

Mikloff reaches into his backpack and pulls it out along with an eraser and a few markers.

"I'm going to diagram *Infected Gator* for you and then we're going to give it a few test runs. Coach Snopek, can the guys get on their helmets and pads?"

Snopek is caught off guard by the request. "Uh, just give me a second."

Snopek walks away from the group and calls Johnson.

"Ted, the trainer guy wants to use pads. What should I do?"

"What did I tell you, Herb?" Coach Johnson asks. Silence. The silence continues.

"I told you to let the guy do whatever he wants," Johnson says. "*Whatever he wants*. Stop being so uptight and enjoy yourself for a change. We'll tell this clown and his idiot friend we're not interested the moment they're done."

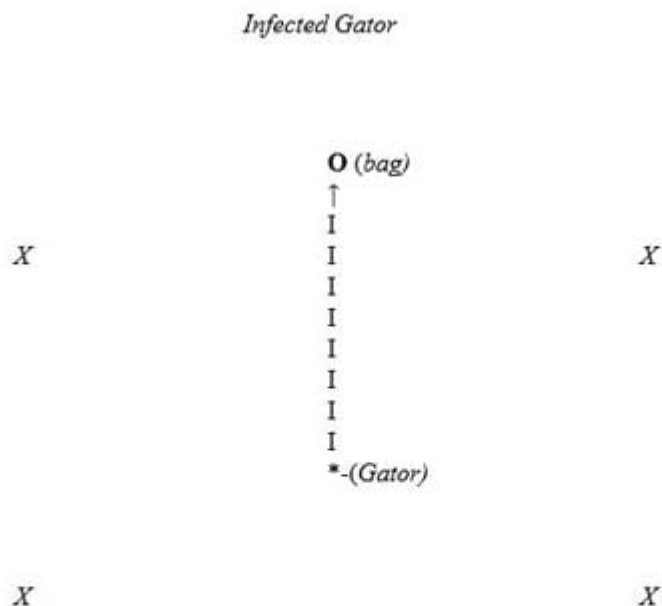
"But what about injury? I'm concerned for-

"Whatever he wants," Johnson says with a distinct tone of finality. "Have you been videotaping this thing like I asked?"

“Yes. One of the sports med students has a camera set up.”

“Good, I want this on tape,” Johnson says. “Conference was cancelled last minute so I’ll see you soon. I didn’t even make it that far outta town. But buddy boy, I’m hightailing it home as we speak, you’re on speakerphone and I’m about to throw in the biggest dip in Idaho history, the biggest, Butch Otter style, so keep the camera rollin, brother.”

By the time Coach Snopek returns to the huddle Ben has diagrammed *Infected Gator* and is about to explain it.



Key:

O=bag, the destination point for the Gator (*), placed 30 yards from the Gator.

X=Hitsticks. Four players set up to tackle the Gator before he reaches the bag.

*=Gator. Blindfolded ball carrier who tries to get to the bag (he must run in the straight-line diagramed above) before being tackled by one of the four Hitsticks (who are not blindfolded).

All action begins with the coach’s whistle. Players rotate playing all positions.

Before Ben can begin his explanation, Mikloff catches sight of Coach Snopek

and asks, "So's what's about the pads and helmets, Herbie?"

Snopek presents an uncomfortable smile and gives a matching, wary, thumbs-up.

"Great!" Hans exclaims. Some players stand up to get their gear but Ben asks that they sit down. "Wait, guys. Before we do anything I have to explain the workout to you. As you can see," he holds up the whiteboard, "this is *Infected Gator*. The concept is straightforward and simple. This is the goal," Ben points to the circle on the board. "I call it the bag."

"The bag is thirty yards away from the star of our show: the Gator. The Gator is the ball carrier. It's his job to make it to the bag before being tackled and without fumbling. These guys," Ben points at all fours 'X's' on his diagram, "are called hitsticks. It's up to them to stop the Gator before he can complete his objective."

"Everyone gets in their positions and waits, just like you see here. A coach blows the whistle and the Gator takes off for the bag, the hitsticks after him. If you want to make it fun you can keep score. The Gator gets a point, three points, six whatever, for getting to the bag, hitstick points can be rewarded individually or for a team stop, whatever you want to do. Sounds pretty simple, right?"

The players nod.

"There is, however, one final aspect to *Infected Gator*," Ben says, holding his index finger in the air. "A twist not even the ancient filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan (Hans is a huge, huge fan. He considers *The Village* to be Shyamalan's magnum opus) could have imagined in his wildest nightmares. The Gator is blindfolded."

Snopek looks furious—immediately, and almost the exact way that Ben's brother Steve goes from placid to blowing his

top—and tries to speak up but Mikloff holds him back by patting him gently on the shoulder before plunging a few fingers deep into Snopek's trapezius which Snopek seems not only to not mind but even like. Snopek is tranquilized; just like Ben before his bouncer interview; just like Ben with Blanche Delilah (*Blanche . . . Blanche . . . Blanche*, Ben often thinks to himself, *sweet female perfection, Blanche. Blanche, oh Blanche . . .*). Maybe Snopek was somehow intrigued or mindful of Johnson's words to give Ben and Mikloff a free hand. Maybe the massage was really that blissfully debilitating. Regardless, he didn't say, or do, anything. He just continued to enjoy the extemporaneous and, reading his facial expressions, near sublime upper back massage.

And so again, he says nothing.

"I know what you're all thinking," Ben says, "this is crazy. But let me assure you that it's not. Remember, I've spent years upon years designing this method and I'm confident that it's foolproof. I was also in medical school for a week, in Brazil (obvious lie in a thick pack of them)." Ben drops his head a bit before delivering the next line of the Hans written monologue.

"What I'm saying is: trust me, I'm a doctor, okay?"

Ben pauses, in the fashion aimed at drawing attention to the immediately forthcoming conclusion, then says, "In a few moments you're going to get your pads on and have at it yourselves. Then you will see the genius of my system. But before that happens let me leave you with a final thought and take you, step by step, through the system. Let's say that the Gator isn't blindfolded. It's still a good drill. The Gator has to use speed and strength to get to the bag, outrunning or overpowering the four defenders in his way. But he is blindfolded, hence the 'infected' part of Gator. Do the analysis: the simply uninfected *Gator* drill still requires speed, strength and football skill, but the added element is

priceless. Because he can't see a thing, the *Infected Gator* has to demonstrate what I term 'wild-prairie-jackrabbit-abandon'. The point is that the *Infected Gator* has to run in a full sprint, in a straight line, and be ready to take a huge hit, or multiple hits, from defenders that he can't see but can see him. Most *Infected Gators* won't make it to the bag standing up, but if you are one of them that do, immediately come over to me after the completion of the drill and give me your autograph because that will be so amazing. Anyways, the whole point I'm trying to make, what I'm getting at, is this, in the true and ultimate bottom line: If a guy can run blindfolded at a target and take huge hits and does it with wild-prairie-jackrabbit-abandon well, gentlemen, I want that guy on my team. That guy is a winner, a 'we are the champions,' champion."

At the start of the speech, the players thought they were in for well-worn coachspeak tropes. By the end of Ben's talk they didn't know what to think. Was this for real? Snopek, reluctantly, breaks the silence. "You heard him, men. Get your pads and let's do it. Jason," he says to one of the smaller players, "you'll be the ball carrier