

JUST ONCE

Thomas J. Dygard

IDENTIFY

In lines 1–15, underline the words that tell about the Moose's special talents in football. Circle the position he plays.

INFER

Pause at line 21. Based on what you've read so far, what inferences, guesses based on clues in the text, can you make about the Moose's **character**?

VOCABULARY

devastating (dev'ə-stāt'in) *v.*
used as *adj.*: causing great damage.

nurturing (nūr'chər-in) *v.*:
promoting the growth of;
nursing.

Everybody liked the Moose. To his father and mother he was Bryan—as in Bryan Jefferson Crawford—but to everyone at Bedford City High he was the Moose. He was large and strong, as you might imagine from his nickname, and he was pretty fast on his feet—sort of nimble, you might say—considering his size. He didn't have a pretty face but he had a quick and easy smile—"sweet," some of the teachers called it; "nice," others said.

10 But on the football field, the Moose was neither sweet nor nice. He was just strong and fast and a little bit **devastating** as the left tackle of the Bedford City Bears. When the Moose blocked somebody, he stayed blocked. When the Moose was called on to open a hole in the line for one of the Bears' runners, the hole more often than not resembled an open garage door.

20 Now in his senior season, the Moose had twice been named to the all-conference team and was considered a cinch for all-state. He spent a lot of his spare time, when he wasn't in a classroom or on the football field, reading letters from colleges eager to have the Moose pursue higher education—and football—at their institution.

But the Moose had a hang-up.

He didn't go public with his hang-up until the sixth game of the season. But, looking back, most of his teammates agreed that probably the Moose had been **nurturing** the hang-up secretly for two years or more.

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Notes _____

The Moose wanted to carry the ball.

For sure, the Moose was not the first interior lineman in the history of football, or even the history of Bedford
30 City High, who banged heads up front and wore bruises like badges of honor—and dreamed of racing down the field with the ball to the end zone¹ while everybody in the bleachers screamed his name.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 33. What does the Moose want to do?

But most linemen, it seems, are able to stifle the urge. The idea may pop into their minds from time to time, but in their hearts they know they can't run fast enough, they know they can't do that fancy dancing to elude tacklers, they know they aren't trained to read blocks. They know that their strengths and talents are best utilized in the line.
40 Football is, after all, a team sport, and everyone plays the position where he most helps the team. And so these linemen, or most of them, go back to banging heads without saying the first word about the dream that flickered through their minds.

IDENTIFY

Underline, and then number, three reasons linemen usually don't carry the ball (lines 34–44).

1. **end zone** *n.*: area between the goal line and the end line (the line marking the boundary of the playing area) at each end of a football field.

RETELL

Re-read lines 46–67. Then, retell what happens in the sixth game that leads the Moose to “go public” with what he wants.

Handwriting lines for retelling the story.

Not so with the Moose.

That sixth game, when the Moose’s hang-up first came into public view, had ended with the Moose truly in all his glory as the Bears’ left tackle. Yes, glory—but uncheered and sort of **anonymous**. The Bears were trailing 21–17 and had the ball on Mitchell High’s five-yard line, fourth down,² with time running out. The rule in such a situation is simple—the best back carries the ball behind the best blocker—and it is a rule seldom violated by those in control of their faculties.³ The Bears, of course, followed the rule. That meant Jerry Dixon running behind the Moose’s blocking. With the snap of the ball, the Moose knocked down one lineman, bumped another one aside, and charged forward to flatten an approaching linebacker. Jerry did a little jig behind the Moose and then ran into the end zone, virtually untouched, to win the game.

After circling in the end zone a moment while the cheers echoed through the night, Jerry did run across and hug the Moose, that’s true. Jerry knew who had made the touchdown possible.

But it wasn’t the Moose’s name that everybody was shouting. The fans in the bleachers were cheering Jerry Dixon.

It was probably at that precise moment that the Moose decided to go public.

In the dressing room, Coach Buford Williams was making his rounds among the cheering players and came to a halt in front of the Moose. “It was your great blocking that did it,” he said.

“I want to carry the ball,” the Moose said.

VOCABULARY

anonymous (ə·nän’ə·məs)
adj.: unknown; unidentified.

- 2. **fourth down:** In football the team holding the ball is allowed four downs, or attempts to carry the ball forward at least ten yards.
- 3. **faculties** n.: mental powers.

Coach Williams was already turning away and taking a step toward the next player due an accolade⁴ when his brain registered the fact that the Moose had said something strange. He was expecting the Moose to say, “Aw, gee, thanks, Coach.” That was what the Moose always said when the coach issued
 80 a compliment. But the Moose had said something else. The coach turned back to the Moose, a look of disbelief on his face. “What did you say?”

“I want to carry the ball.”

Coach Williams was good at quick recoveries, as any high school football coach had better be. He gave a **tolerant** smile and a little nod and said, “You keep right on blocking, son.”

This time Coach Williams made good on his turn and moved away from the Moose.

90 The following week’s practice and the next Friday’s game passed without further incident. After all, the game was a road game over at Cartwright High, thirty-five miles away. The Moose wanted to carry the ball in front of the Bedford City fans.

Then the Moose went to work.

He caught up with the coach on the way to the practice field on Wednesday. “Remember,” he said, leaning forward and down a little to get his face in the coach’s face, “I said I want to carry the ball.”

100 Coach Williams must have been thinking about something else because it took him a minute to look up into the Moose’s face, and even then he didn’t say anything.

“I meant it,” the Moose said.

“Meant what?”

“I want to run the ball.”

PREDICT

Pause at line 83. How do you think Coach Williams will answer the Moose? Explain.

VOCABULARY

tolerant (təl'ər-ənt) *adj.*: patient; accepting of others.

INFER

Pause at line 99, and think about what you’ve read so far about Moose. What kind of person do you think he is? Explain.

4. **accolade** (ak'ə-lād') *n.*: something said or done to express praise.

INTERPRET

Pause at line 108. **Conflict** is a clash between opposing characters or forces. The Moose is on one side of the main conflict in this story. Who or what opposes him?

Lined writing area for the interpretation question.

IDENTIFY

The Moose tries to get support for what he wants (lines 109–126). Circle the names of the players he goes to. Underline how they respond.

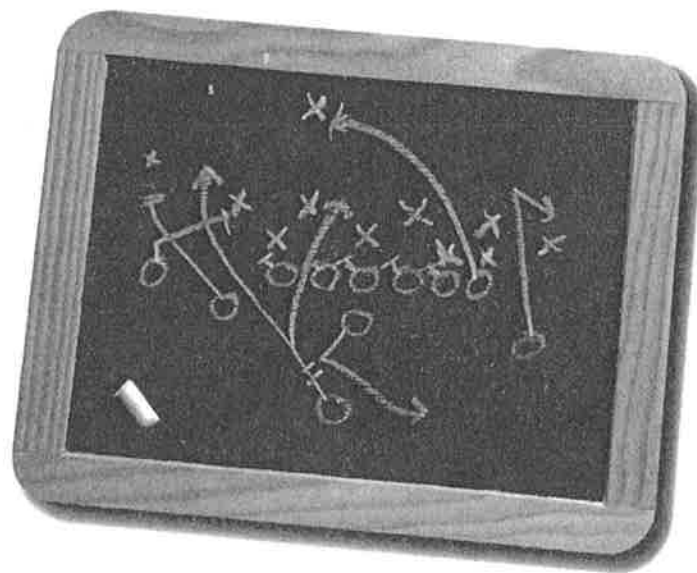
“Oh,” Coach Williams said. Yes, he remembered. “Son, you’re a great left tackle, a great blocker. Let’s leave it that way.”

110 The Moose let the remaining days of the practice week and then the game on Friday night against Edgewood High pass while he reviewed strategies. The review led him to Dan Blevins, the Bears’ quarterback. If the signal caller would join in, maybe Coach Williams would listen.

“Yeah, I heard,” Dan said. “But, look, what about Joe Wright at guard, Bill Slocum at right tackle, even Herbie Watson at center. They might all want to carry the ball. What are we going to do—take turns? It doesn’t work that way.”

So much for Dan Blevins.

120 The Moose found that most of the players in the back-field agreed with Dan. They couldn’t see any reason why the Moose should carry the ball, especially in place of themselves. Even Jerry Dixon, who owed a lot of his glory to the Moose’s blocking, gaped in disbelief at the Moose’s idea. The Moose, however, got some support from his fellow linemen. Maybe they had dreams of their own, and saw value in a precedent.⁵



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5. **precedent** (pres'ə-dənt) *n.*: action or statement that can serve as an example.

As the days went by, the word spread—not just on the practice field and in the corridors of Bedford City High, but all around town. The players by now were openly taking sides. Some thought it a jolly good idea that the Moose carry the ball. Others, like Dan Blevins, held to the purist⁶ line—a left tackle plays left tackle, a ball carrier carries the ball, and that’s it.

Around town, the vote wasn’t even close. Everyone wanted the Moose to carry the ball.

“Look, son,” Coach Williams said to the Moose on the practice field the Thursday before the Benton Heights game, “this has gone far enough. Fun is fun. A joke is a joke. But let’s drop it.”

140 “Just once,” the Moose pleaded.

Coach Williams looked at the Moose and didn’t answer.

The Moose didn’t know what that meant.

The Benton Heights Tigers were duck soup for the Bears, as everyone knew they would be. The Bears scored in their first three possessions and led 28–0 at the half. The hapless⁷ Tigers had yet to cross the fifty-yard line under their own steam.

150 All the Bears, of course, were enjoying the way the game was going, as were the Bedford City fans jamming the bleachers.

Coach Williams looked irritated when the crowd on a couple of occasions broke into a chant: “Give the Moose the ball! Give the Moose the ball!”

On the field, the Moose did not know whether to grin at hearing his name shouted by the crowd or to frown because the sound of his name was irritating the coach. Was the crowd going to talk Coach Williams into putting

MAKE A JUDGMENT

Pause at line 135. The people in town want the Moose to carry the ball. The coach and some players don’t. How would you vote? Give reasons for your answer.

INTERPRET

What do you think Coach Williams’s “look” means (line 141)?

6. **purist** (pyoor’ist) *n.* used as *adj.*: someone who insists that rules be followed strictly.

7. **hapless** *adj.*: unlucky.

PREDICT

Pause at line 162. Is Coach Williams going to let the Moose carry the ball? Tell what you think will happen.

RETELL

Stop at line 172. Retell what's happened on the field and in the bleachers since the game started.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 188. Who has won the main **conflict** in this story? Underline the sentence that gives you this information.

160

the Moose in the backfield? Probably not; Coach Williams didn't bow to that kind of pressure. Was the coach going to refuse to give the ball to the Moose just to show the crowd—and the Moose and the rest of the players—who was boss? The Moose feared so.

In his time on the sideline, when the defensive unit was on the field, the Moose, of course, said nothing to Coach Williams. He knew better than to break the coach's concentration during a game—even a runaway victory—with a comment on any subject at all, much less his desire to carry the ball. As a matter of fact, the Moose was careful to stay out of the coach's line of vision, especially when the crowd was chanting "Give the Moose the ball!"

170

By the end of the third quarter the Bears were leading 42-0.

Coach Williams had been feeding substitutes into the game since half time, but the Bears kept marching on. And now, in the opening minutes of the fourth quarter, the Moose and his teammates were standing on the Tigers' five-yard line, about to pile on another touchdown.

180

The Moose saw his substitute, Larry Hinden, getting a slap on the behind and then running onto the field. The Moose turned to leave.

Then he heard Larry tell the referee, "Hinden for Holbrook."

Holbrook? Chad Holbrook, the fullback?

Chad gave the coach a funny look and jogged off the field.

Larry joined the huddle and said, "Coach says the Moose at fullback and give him the ball."

Dan Blevins said, "Really?"

"Really."

190

The Moose was giving his grin—"sweet," some of the teachers called it; "nice," others said.

"I want to do an end run," the Moose said.

Dan looked at the sky a moment, then said, "What does it matter?"

The quarterback took the snap from center, moved back and to his right while turning, and extended the ball to the Moose.

The Moose took the ball and cradled it in his right hand. So far, so good. He hadn't fumbled. Probably both Coach Williams and Dan were surprised.

200

He ran a couple of steps and looked out in front and said aloud, "Whoa!"

Where had all those tacklers come from?

The whole world seemed to be peopled with players in red jerseys—the red of the Benton Heights Tigers. They all were looking straight at the Moose and advancing toward him. They looked very determined, and not friendly at all. And there were so many of them. The Moose had faced tough guys in the line, but usually one at a time, or maybe two. But this—five or six. And all of them heading for him.

210

The Moose screeched to a halt, whirled, and ran the other way.

Dan Blevins blocked somebody in a red jersey breaking through the middle of the line, and the Moose wanted to stop running and thank him. But he kept going.

220

His reverse had caught the Tigers' defenders going the wrong way, and the field in front of the Moose looked open. But his blockers were going the wrong way, too. Maybe that was why the field looked so open. What did it matter, though, with the field clear in front of him? This was going to be a cakewalk;⁸ the Moose was going to score a touchdown.

Notes _____

FLUENCY

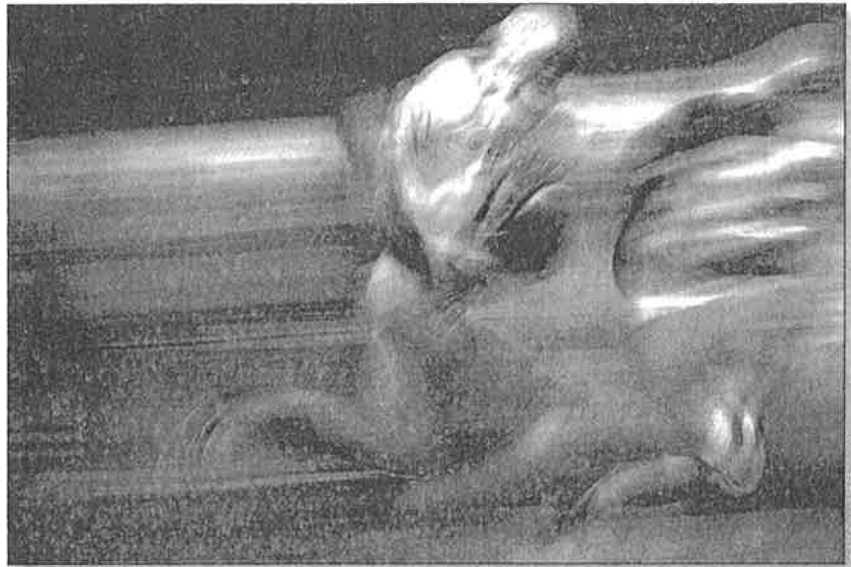
Re-read the boxed passage aloud until you can read it smoothly. Pay attention to the punctuation marks as you read. Notice especially the questions and exclamations that make this dialogue between characters sound like real conversation.

INFER

Pause at line 210. What inference can you draw about how Moose feels at this point? Underline the details that lead to your inference.

8. cakewalk *n.*: easy job.

Notes _____



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VOCABULARY

ponder (pän'dər) v.: think over carefully.

VISUALIZE

Re-read lines 231–238. Circle the details that help you picture what's happening. Which of your senses do most of these details appeal to?

Then, again—"Whoa!"
Players with red jerseys were beginning to fill the empty space—a lot of them. And they were all running toward the Moose. They were kind of low, with their arms spread, as if they wanted to hit him hard and then grab him.

A picture of Jerry Dixon dancing his little jig and wriggling between tacklers flashed through the Moose's mind. How did Jerry do that? Well, no time to **ponder** that one right now.

The Moose lowered his shoulder and thundered ahead, into the cloud of red jerseys. Something hit his left thigh. It hurt. Then something pounded his hip, then his shoulder. They both hurt. Somebody was hanging on to him and was a terrible drag. How could he run with somebody hanging on to him? He knew he was going down, but maybe he was across the goal. He hit the ground hard, with somebody coming down on top of him, right on the small of his back.

The Moose couldn't move. They had him pinned.
240 Wasn't the referee supposed to get these guys off?

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Finally the load was gone and the Moose, still holding the ball, got to his knees and one hand, then stood.

He heard the screaming of the crowd, and he saw the scoreboard blinking.

He had scored.

His teammates were slapping him on the shoulder pads and laughing and shouting.

The Moose grinned, but he had a strange and distant look in his eyes.

250 He jogged to the sideline, the roars of the crowd still ringing in his ears.

“OK, son?” Coach Williams asked.

The Moose was puffing. He took a couple of deep breaths. He relived for a moment the first sight of a half dozen players in red jerseys, all with one target—him. He saw again the menacing horde of red jerseys that had risen up just when he’d thought he had clear sailing to the goal. They all zeroed in on him, the Moose, alone.

260 The Moose glanced at the coach, took another deep breath, and said, “Never again.”



INTERPRET

By line 255 you’ve found out who wins the main **conflict**. Read on to learn of an **internal conflict** the Moose faces. What does Moose decide?

EVALUATE

This story could have been called “Never Again.” Write a sentence evaluating the story’s title. Tell which title you prefer: “Just Once” or “Never Again.” Give a reason for your answer.
