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Prologue

A Gamble

Tokyo, December 1950

Cappy Harada strode through the Ginza section of Tokyo toward Yurakucho Station. The city had changed greatly since Harada first arrived in 1945 as a U.S. Army lieutenant. Allied bombing had leveled much of Tokyo. Between March 10 and May 26, 1945, five massive air raids killed 115,000 people and destroyed 850,000 buildings, leaving only the commercial center of the city untouched for use by General Douglas MacArthur's occupying force. But now, just five years later, the area bustled. Trolley cars were crammed with commuters, and U.S. Army vehicles and delivery trucks rumbled down the street. Businessmen clad in gray overcoats scurried to and from their offices. Around the corner from the station, facing the Imperial Palace moat, was GHQ, the occupation headquarters, absorbing an unending stream of GIs and government officials. On the sidewalks, street vendors in little wooden stalls sold a myriad of wares. Harada reached the temporary headquarters of the Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan's most widely read newspaper, climbed the four flights of stairs with precision, and announced himself to Mr. Shoriki's secretary. She hastened him to a modest office.

Sixty-five-year-old Matsumoto Shoriki sat formally on the couch. A diminutive, bald man with thick, heavy-rimmed glasses, Shoriki did not seem imposing. Yet the Judo master and former police inspector single-handedly quelled angry mobs during the Tokyo riots of 1918 and 1920. He was a man of action—a risk taker with the ability to see

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opportunities. In 1924, after leaving the police department, Shoriki moved into newspaper publishing. Although he had no experience in the field, he borrowed 100,000 yen (roughly equivalent to $25,000 at the time) and purchased the financially troubled Yomiuri Shimbun. By cutting down on waste and adding sections on the household, radio, and other forms of entertainment, Shoriki quintupled the paper's paid circulation in three years and transformed it into one of the country's leading papers.

In 1929 a friend suggested that the newspaper extend its baseball coverage and sponsor a team of American All-Stars to play in Japan. Shoriki had little interest in the game, but he could recognize a good idea. Baseball, introduced by American teachers in the early 1870s, was the most popular sport in Japan. There were no professional teams at the time, but college games drew thousands of fans. In 1931 Yomiuri sponsored an American All-Star team including Lou Gehrig, Lefty Grove, Mickey Cochrane, Al Simmons, Frank Frisch, Rabbit Maranville, and Lefty O'Doul. The Americans won each of the seventeen games against Japanese university and amateur teams, and the newspaper's circulation soared.

Three years later, Yomiuri sponsored a second Major League tour of Japan. The All-Star's roster included Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx, Charlie Gehringer, Earl Averill, Lefty Gomez, Lefty O'Doul, and Moe Berg, the famed spy. To oppose these giants, Shoriki brought together the best players in Japan to form the All Nippon team. The Japanese, however, were still no match for the American stars. The All-Stars won all sixteen contests (two games were intersquad exhibitions) and scored 181 runs to Japan's 36. Nevertheless, more than 450,000 people attended the eighteen games, and newspaper sales rose again.

Japan was becoming increasingly nationalistic, and not all of Shoriki's countrymen welcomed the American All-Stars. Ultraconservatives claimed that Shoriki had defiled Meiji Jingu Stadium, built as a memorial to the Meiji Emperor, by allowing the foreigners to play on the sacred grounds. In February 1935, a member of the War God

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Society intercepted Shoriki as he reached the entrance to the Yomiuri building. A samurai sword flashed through the air and struck Shoriki's skull. The assassin fled, leaving the newspaper owner for dead. Shoriki crawled into the building and was rushed to the newspaper's dispensary where he lost consciousness. He survived, but spent the next fifty days in the hospital.

Before the attack, Shoriki had decided to keep his All Nippon baseball squad together. He renamed the team the Dai Nippon Tokyo Yakyu Kurabu (The Great Japan Tokyo Baseball Club) and sent them on a 102-game barnstorming tour of the United States in 1935 to refine their skills. Playing Minor League and amateur nines, the Japanese won 93 of the 102 contests. Their name, however, posed a challenge. On the recommendation of Lefty O'Doul, who was now advising Shoriki, the newspaper owner changed the name to the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants (at the time O'Doul played for the New York Giants). Other Japanese companies soon formed teams, and the Nippon Professional Baseball League was created in 1936. The Yomiuri Giants dominated the league, winning eight championships, before Allied bombing made the games too dangerous for the spectators, prompting officials to cancel the 1945 season.

After the fall of Japan, the Allied occupation force arrested Shoriki, along with many other industrialists and newspaper owners, as a possible war criminal and incarcerated him in Sugamo Prison. No charges were brought against Shoriki, but upon his release on September 1, 1947, he was "purged" by the occupation government until August 1951. Purged individuals were unable to hold positions that could influence Japanese public opinion. Thus, Shoriki was barred from managing the newspaper, but he could still direct the Yomiuri Giants.

The secretary glided out and soon returned with the morning snack of tea and *mochi* (a traditional Japanese sweet made from rice paste and often filled with red beans). She placed them in front of Cappy Harada first and then her employer.

Harada was a second-generation Japanese American, or Nisei,

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born in Santa Maria, California. An outstanding high school baseball player, he played against the Tokyo Giants during their 1935 barnstorming tour of the United States and became friendly with general manager Satoro Suzuki and the Giants' third baseman, Shigeru Mizuhara. Cappy had hoped to turn pro but instead was drafted during World War II. The army made good use of his bilingual ability and assigned him to military intelligence in the Pacific Theater, where he worked with the famed Navaho Ghost Talkers in New Guinea. After being wounded several times, Lieutenant Harada became General William F. Marquat's aide during the Allied occupation of Japan. Marquat, the chief of the Economic and Scientific Section of the occupation force, put Harada in charge of reviving Japanese sports to help raise morale.

The baseball stadiums stood in disarray. Most had survived the bombings, but the Allied forces were using the playing fields as motor pools and munitions dumps. Harada readied the stadiums and, working closely with his old acquaintance Sotaro Suzuki, now a league official, helped restart professional baseball. The Japanese pros played four All-Star games in the waning months of 1945, and league play resumed in 1946. In 1949 Suzuki asked Cappy to help expedite Shigeru Mizuhara's release from a Russian prison camp. Mizuhara, like many Japanese ballplayers, had served in the military during the war and was now languishing in Siberia. Harada was happy to help his old acquaintance. Soon Mizuhara was back in Tokyo at the helm of the Yomiuri Giants, and the Nisei became an informal adviser to the team.

The office door opened and Shoji Yasuda, the chain-smoking general manager of the Yomiuri Giants baseball team, entered. Once Yasuda sat down, Shoriki, speaking in Japanese, got directly to the point. The first Japan Series had just been completed, and his Tokyo Yomiuri Giants, winners of eight of the first fourteen championships under the single league format, had not made it to the inaugural series. Worse still, the Giants had finished in third place in the newly formed Central League, an embarrassing seventeen and a half games behind the Shochiku Robins.

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"What can we do to bring the Giants back to the championship?" Shoriki asked. Then, before waiting for an answer he added, "Can we bring somebody in from the United States?"

Harada and Yasuda started. Although Shoriki had strong ties to the United States, he wanted to create an all-Japanese team strong enough to compete with the Major Leaguers. Importing an American ballplayer would undermine this plan. Furthermore, with anti-American feelings high in occupied Japan, importing a Yank to Japan's beloved Giants was truly risky. It could hurt the team's popularity and fuel anti-American sentiment.

Seeing their surprise, Shoriki added, "We need some help to get us back on the winning track. If I have to bring in a player from the United States, then I'll do so."

Harada thought for a second. "If we bring a Caucasian ballplayer to Japan, he might encounter problems due to the language barrier, living conditions, and different culture. It might be better to get a Nisei. Someone who can speak some Japanese, knows Japanese culture, and can also play baseball at the Major League level. I know of a fellow named Wally Yonamine, who is in the San Francisco Seals organization. He used to play football with the San Francisco 49ers. He would be perfect."

The three men understood the challenges this player would face. Japanese were especially distrustful of Nisei. Much of the population viewed them as traitors for not joining their mother country during the war. Furthermore, many of the Giants' stars were war veterans. Would they accept an American as a teammate? Even in 1950, five years after Japan's surrender, living conditions in Tokyo were still harsh by American standards. High-quality food was difficult to obtain and even fuel for heat was scarce. Would this player be able to adapt to the rugged lifestyle, or would he immediately return to his homeland? The three executives knew that it would take a special man to succeed.

Shoriki thought for a moment and announced, "Well, I guess you better see if we can get Wally Yonamine."

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1 "Just a Country Boy from Olowalu, Maui"

Today, Olowalu on Maui's west coast is part of paradise. Tourists fly from around the world to relax on its pristine beaches, snorkel in its dazzling coral reefs, and be pampered in luxury resorts. But it wasn't always paradise. In the 1920s and '30s, when sugar cane plantations dominated the area, life was hard. Thousands of immigrants toiled from dawn to dusk in the cane fields for poverty-level wages. The work was dangerous, and many dreams were shattered by wayward rail cars and grinding mill machinery.

Life in Olowalu, however, prepared Wally Yonamine for the challenges of integrating both Japanese baseball and American professional football. Growing up poor on a Maui sugar plantation taught Wally how to overcome adversity, face difficult conditions, and gave him the drive to succeed. His early success in athletics prepared him for the public spotlight, while his family taught him modesty, enabling him to maintain his focus and not get sidetracked by the many diversions facing professional athletes.

Wally's father, Matsusai Yonamine, was born in Okinawa on July 31, 1890, and grew up in a small house with an attached pig sty—a common feature in rural Okinawan homes—in the coastal village of Nakagusuku near the spectacular ruins of Nakagusuku Castle. Soon after his seventeenth birthday, Matsusai's older brother married and following Okinawan custom lived with his wife at his parents' home. Custom dictated that younger brothers had to move out once they reached adulthood. Matsusai could have built his own home nearby, but he dreamed of a better life than rural Okinawa could provide. For the past few years, recruiters had been canvassing the island for labor-

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ers to work in the far-off archipelago of Hawaii. More than six thousand had already made the journey. Letters home complained of hard work and tough conditions, but they also contained much-needed cash. Matsusai didn't mind hard work—he was used to it. Deciding to start a new life, he left for Hawaii. After an arduous three-week passage spent mostly in cramped below-deck quarters, he arrived in Honolulu in late 1907.

Almost immediately, Matsusai was assigned to work on the Olowalu sugar plantation in Maui. The village of Olowalu, also known as a camp, was created by the Olowalu plantation to house its three-hundred-plus workers, most of whom were unmarried men. Japanese predominated the workforce, but there were also Puerto Ricans, Hawaiians, Koreans, Chinese, and a smattering of miscellaneous Europeans. Matsusai settled in a small house with two young Japanese men and was set to work loading sugar cane stalks onto carts to be transported to the mill.

A typical day started at 5:00 a.m. After breakfast, laborers trudged to the fields and began working at 6:00 a.m. Overseers, known as *lunas*, supervised from horseback and carried whips to drive the field hands at their tasks. Workers took minutes for lunch and then toiled until 4:30 or 5:00 p.m. Afterward, the Japanese bathed, ate dinner and socialized until the 8:00 p.m. whistle signaled bedtime. One laborer noted that "life on a plantation is much like life in a prison."

In Olowalu, the different ethnic groups lived in clusters, and nearly all of Matsusai's immediate neighbors were Japanese. A few houses away lived the Nishimura family. Isaburo Nishimura, his wife Hisano, and eldest son Tetsugi, immigrated to Hawaii in 1899 from Hiroshima. They soon settled in Olowalu, and the family grew as four daughters and another son were born. Before 1920, Matsusai Yonamine had moved in with the Nishimura family as a boarder. In early 1920, he and the Nishimuras' eldest daughter, Kikue, who was nearly eleven years his younger, eloped.

The elopement was shocking, but at that time, any marriage between an Okinawan and a mainland Japanese was unusual. Even

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though white Hawaiians rarely distinguished between Okinawans and Japanese, the two groups viewed themselves as markedly different. Mainland Japanese, calling themselves *naichijin* (people of Japan homeland), considered Okinawans backward and not true Japanese, as many Okinawans did not speak the standard language. Likewise, Okinawans often considered the *naichijin* to be stuck up. Although thrown together by plantation managers, the two ethnic groups rarely socialized prior to World War II.

The young couple moved next door to the Nishimuras, and their first child, a daughter named Litsuko, was born on September 4, 1920. Akira, the eldest son, came on March 23, 1923, and was closely followed by Kaname (pronounced "Ka-na-may") on June 25, 1925. Eighteen years later, Kaname would adopt the nickname Wally, the name he will be known by throughout this book. The couple had four more children, Satoru (born December 31, 1928), Noburo (born June 15, 1932), daughter Alma Harumi (born April 9, 1934), and Kenneth (born May 4, 1937).

The Yonamines lived in a small frame house with a wraparound porch. It was a typical one-story plantation home with a kitchen, living room, and three bedrooms. The bath and toilet were in a separate building. With seven children, the house felt cramped, and the youngest kids often slept in the same room as their parents. The Yonamines sparsely furnished their home in the American, not Japanese, style. For example, there were no tatami mats and the family used chairs rather than sitting on the floor. The kitchen contained just a wooden board fashioned into a table and some old chairs.

Life on the plantation was hard. Matsusai had been promoted to a bulldozer driver, but he still woke before dawn and reached the fields around 5:30 in the morning. A highly skilled operator, he was responsible for bulldozing the fallows for planting the cane, which kept him occupied until dark. With seven children to feed, he rarely took a day off. Kikue remained at home caring for the children and keeping her home spotless. To earn extra money, she did other plantation workers' laundry.

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Despite the hard work, the Yonamines remained poor. Plantation wages were low and Matsusai received only sixty to seventy dollars a month. The family purchased goods at the company store on credit, and at the end of each month most of the family's income went toward their account. Wally remembers, "I didn't realize it at the time, but growing up on the plantation was so hard. If I wanted to buy a stick of candy, I didn't have any money. And my father couldn't buy it for us because he had seven kids to feed." Through frugal living, the family got by. They raised chickens and vegetables in the backyard, and Kikue cooked Japanese and Hawaiian one-pot meals, chopping up the meat and vegetables so that there would be enough to go around.

Because Matsusai immigrated alone and Kikue remained close to her family, the Yonamine children saw themselves as Japanese rather than Okinawan. They were proud of their heritage even though they adopted many Hawaiian and Western traditions. Matsusai kept a picture of the emperor in his bedroom, and the children attended Japanese language classes after their regular school let out. At home, the family spoke mostly English as Kikue was a native English speaker, and Matsusai, who spoke Okinawan, addressed the children in broken English. The children grew up thinking of themselves as Japanese-Americans, or more specifically, Japanese-Hawaiians.

By general agreement, Wally was the rascal of the family. Akira recalls Wally being a lazy child, unwilling to do his chores or homework. He once told his mother, "I don't have to study. I'm going to be a good ballplayer."

Wally was inseparable from his older brother Akira. There was not much for the boys to do in Olowalu. The family didn't have enough money for toys or commercial entertainment, and Wally wasn't much of a reader. The village didn't have a movie theater or even a library. Like adventuresome, bored boys everywhere, the Yonamine boys explored the area around the village pursuing mischief.

The two were usually hungry and often went looking for the fruit that grew throughout the island. They could regularly be seen at the

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tops of mango trees or along hilly trails searching for mountain apples. The most tempting treats were a nearby farmer's juicy watermelons. The farmer, however, watched his crop closely and discouraged both animals and trespassers with his ever-present shotgun. One day, Wally and Akira decided that the watermelons were ready for harvesting and crawled under the fence to help themselves. Akira picked two small ones, one for each hand and easy to carry, while Wally went for the largest he could find. As they started toward the fence, they heard the farmer ordering them to drop the watermelons. Naturally, the boys held their spoils tighter and ran. Suddenly, a shotgun blast roared nearby. Akira dropped his watermelons and sprinted over the fence to safety. Wally refused to abandon his prize, tucked it under his arm like he would a football years later, and ran with more determination. Another blast rang out and a pellet whizzed by his ear as he hurtled the fence. Safely away from the farm, the boys cracked open the watermelon to savor the fruit that they risked their lives for. It was still white inside and not even near ripe!

Stunts like this infuriated their father. "Our father got so mad at us one day," Akira remembers, "that he just picked us up and put us in the chicken coop in the back yard. He locked the door and left us there! We're 10 and 12 years old. Finally late that night, my mother unlocked it so we could come out."

In the 1920s and '30s thousands of Filipinos came to work on the sugar plantations. Most were unmarried men, uneducated and born in poverty. At times, their gatherings could get rough. Sometimes when the Yonamine boys got bored, they would wander down to the Filipino section of Olowalu. There, they met Mac Flores, a small, wiry Filipino laborer ten years their senior. Flores was one of the village's better baseball and football players, and the boys latched onto him and followed him everywhere. He played third base for the Pioneer Mill company baseball team, so the Yonamines became the team's bat boys and traveled with them around Maui. Eventually, Mac Flores would marry Kikue Yonamine's sister and become Wally's and Akira's uncle.

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Like many Filipino laborers, Flores was an avid craps shooter. The boys used to watch him play, and by the time they were ten, they played alongside him. Their parents, of course, did not approve—often in the midst of a game they would hear their father bellow "Yonamines, come here!" and the boys would flee into the cane fields. On one occasion, Wally and Akira were on a roll and won nearly a hundred dollars. Realizing that this was more than their father earned in a month, they decided to take their winnings home. As the boys began to go, the gamblers snarled that they had better not leave with their money and one pulled a large knife. Coming out of nowhere, the diminutive Flores struck the aggressor with all his might and yelled, "RUN!" The future center fielder and his even faster older brother streaked home. Back at the house, they gave the money to their sister, Litsuko, to hide. "If our father found out about the money," Wally adds, "we would have been back in that chicken coop for God knows how long!"

The boys' love for sports probably kept them out of even more trouble. In a field below the village, the Yonamine brothers played softball, basketball, volleyball, soccer, and Wally's particular favorite—football. Since they didn't have enough money to buy a football, the boys took a can of Carnation creamed corn, wrapped it in newspaper, and used it instead. There were few boys their age in the village, so by the time they were young teens, the brothers joined the men in pickup basketball, softball, soccer, and even football games.

Even at a young age, Wally was highly competitive. The boys' marble games could get fierce. The older brother usually won, but Wally would not quit if he was losing, even when their parents called repeatedly for them. Akira would usually give in and let Wally win back what he lost. At eighty-one years old, Akira still argues that Wally would claim that he lost more marbles than he actually had!

Growing up in Olowalu, Wally knew little about the outside world. He remembers, "We lived in the country so I didn't know who Joe DiMaggio was. I didn't even know who Babe Ruth was. So I didn't have a favorite ballplayer. My hero was my brother, Akira. He was a good football and baseball player. He could run really fast and actu-

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ally held the Maui record for the 40-yard dash until just a few years ago. I wanted to be like him."

When Wally was eight or nine years old, he began listening to the local games on the radio. The family's old box radio stood on the porch, next to where his fifty-five-year-old grandmother usually sat. Occasionally, Wally would join her. He had little interest in the serial shows or the news but could easily convince her to tune in sporting events. His favorites were the Honolulu interscholastic (high school) football games and the Hawaiian Baseball League games. At that time, high school football was one of Hawaii's most popular spectator sports; tens of thousands of fans watched the games each weekend at Honolulu Stadium. Both the Honolulu and Maui newspapers covered all the games and sometimes even practices, making the star players local celebrities.

The radio also introduced Wally to organized baseball. Formed in 1924, the Hawaii Baseball League consisted of seven semipro teams, each affiliated with a different ethnic group. Games were played at Honolulu Stadium, and the quality of ball was very high. The Asahi, an all-Japanese squad, quickly became one of the top teams—many Nisei boys dreamed of making the team. Dick Kashiwaeda, one of Hawaii's greatest players, called the first day he put on the Asahi uniform "one of the proudest moments in his life." As he listened to the games, Wally began to dream of playing at Honolulu Stadium.

Wally and Akira began playing organized sports in 1939 when Mac Flores created a softball team for the teenagers of Olowalu and entered them in an adult league. Wally had just turned fourteen years old, but his hitting led the team to the championship before they lost to a more experienced adult team in the territory finals at Hilo. Soon after, the Yonamine brothers were invited to join the Plebs Baseball Club in Lahaina. The Plebs were on the same level as an American Legion club and consisted mostly of boys fifteen to seventeen years old. At fourteen, Wally was young for the team but he was big for his age and a natural athlete. The team traveled around Maui and even to the other islands for league games. Lahaina was six miles north of

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Olowalu, but the boys already attended school in town. After practice, their coach, Seke Sasaki, or their father, who now worked for Pioneer Mill in Lahaina, would drive them home. Wally played first base and pitched while Akira caught. Money was still tight for the Yonamine family, so when Wally joined the squad, he did not own a glove or spikes. The team lent him an old glove but it was for a righty and Wally threw with his left. After he caught the ball, he had to take off the glove to throw with his left hand or toss the ball with his weaker right arm. Eventually, his father bought Wally an inexpensive left-handed glove and a pair of cheap spikes.

With his constant climbing and playing sports, Wally got more than his share of childhood injuries. As plantation health care was adequate at best and often incompetent, Kikue Yonamine would take her ailing children to the town of Wailuku—an hour away by car—to see a local faith healer named Margie Carvalho. A plump mother of six, Margie was soft-spoken and genuinely kind. She saw patients at her home in a small room decorated with a large crucifix and religious pictures. As Wally lay on the bed, Margie would touch him, pray, and diagnose the problem. She would then perform the needed treatment, followed by more prayer. Patients who believed in her methods and prayed with her often recovered quickly from their ailments. Although Kikue Yonamine was a Buddhist, she found nothing unusual or worrisome about Margie Carvalho's Catholic approach to healing. Like many Japanese, who managed to incorporate Shinto weddings with Buddhist funerals, she took an eclectic approach to religion. But Margie's abilities and faith had a lasting effect on Wally. As he grew older, he became more interested in Catholicism and eventually became a devout Catholic.

The Yonamine children spent their summers working on the plantation to supplement the family's income. Wally would get up at 4:30 in the morning and work for eight hours in the fields, cutting cane with a machete. The work was arduous. At harvest time, cane stalks reach twelve to fifteen feet in height. The plant's leaves are stiff with saw-tooth edges that, if drawn quickly at the wrong angle, can slice

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through skin, leaving a deep gash. The supple stalks can also spring back on an unwary cutter, whipping him with their razor-sharp leaves. To protect themselves, cane cutters wore heavy clothes and hats. Although this shielded them from the plant, it made the work nearly unbearable and led to heat exhaustion. "I used to really hate that job," Wally remembers. "I got paid only twenty-five cents a day, but it was the only job that I could get. At the time, I told myself that I never wanted to work in the cane fields again. That is where my drive to always try my best and never give up came from. I never wanted to work in the cane fields again."

In 1941 Wally finished eighth grade and enrolled at the renowned Lahainaluna School in Lahaina. American missionaries founded Lahainaluna in 1831, making it the oldest continuously running American school west of the Rocky Mountains. Over the following century, the school transformed into an academy for the Hawaiian elite before becoming a public school in 1923. During the forties, Lahainaluna boarded 125 students and accepted nearly 300 day students. Each of the 125 boarders—Wally among them—worked three hours a day on the school farm. The students awoke at 5:00 a.m. to begin their chores. Wally's task was to get a hundred pounds of grass for the cows each day, and he had to climb a nearby mountain to collect his quota. The chore strengthened Wally's legs, and soon he had twenty-five-inch thighs as a high schooler, which allowed him to roll off opposing players on the gridiron.

At Lahainaluna, Wally got his first opportunity to play organized football. The school had a strong team with many big Hawaiians and Samoans, as Lahainaluna's free board attracted players from throughout the islands. Although relatively small, the speedy Akira Yonamine had starred for the team the year before, winning the Maui Interscholastic Outstanding Player Award. The team used the single wing formation, and as a freshman, Wally made second string.

In the first game of the '41 season, Wally sat on the bench hoping that his team would beat Roosevelt High and that he might see a little playing time late in the game. Early in the first quarter, however,

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