

# SISTER MARY MUMMY

by  
Greg Hoffman

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What a team! What a coach!

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We stared at the approaching nun with fear and amazement. Since the football practice field was located nearly four blocks from the school her appearance seemed to indicate that one of us was in deep trouble. Several of my teammates donned their helmets in subconscious gestures of self-defense while well-rehearsed looks of innocence automatically plastered themselves on the faces of those of us who chose to remain unmasked. I conducted a hasty review of my recent activities but was unable to recall anything that would cause a nun to leave the convent, track me down at football practice, and take me into custody.

As she ambled across the end zone, she paused to give the goal post standard an affectionate pat. A large manila envelope was clutched in her right hand.

"Good afternoon, boys," said the nun. Her name was Sister Mary Mummy and she was only slightly larger than our entire starting backfield. She was also out of uniform. A pair of high-topped

black tennies had replaced the clunky leather shoes she usually wore, and instead of her rosary, a silver whistle dangled from the chain that encircled her waist.

"Good afternoon, Sister," we chorused, blending our voices in a manner that would have made the Lennon Sisters envious.

"Boys—" she said, "or maybe I should call you men." She paused and the team shared a nervous laugh. "I have an announcement to make," she continued. "Some of you won't be very happy with what I'm about to say. In fact most, if not all of you, will be disappointed to some degree."

Thoughts of mass suspensions raced through my mind.

"I," said Sister Mary Mummy, "am your new football coach."

Her announcement was greeted by silence, bowed heads and a lot of self-conscious foot shuffling. We had managed to develop into a fairly incompetent team under the guidance of the recently departed Coach Howell and

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had come to love his complete lack of football knowledge. If we somehow managed to run two offensive plays in a row, we considered it a "drive," and holding the opposition to less than fifty points was an outstanding defensive effort worthy of celebration. Now, saddled with a nun for a coach, we were sure to be laughed (if not run) out of the league.

Marty Shea was the first to summon up the courage to speak. "Watcha got in the envelope there, Sister?"

"Plays," she said. "When I was asked by the Monsignor to fill in until a replacement for Coach Howell can be found, I decided to work out a few simple offensive plays."

"But we already got some plays," protested Dudley Mack. He was our first-string quarterback and one of the few players on the team able to hold onto the football for more than three or four seconds at a time.

"We already *have* some plays," corrected Sister Mary Mummy. "I'm well aware of that, Mr. Mack. However, I think these plays, unlike the old ones, will be effective."

She began to distribute mimeographed pages covered with neat little *O*s and *X*s. Our previous playbook had consisted of crudely drawn sketches executed in loose dirt by the stubby finger of Coach Howell and I was attempting to cope with this new

efficiency and professionalism when I was singled out as the recipient of her first insult. Insults are considered to be an art form by most coaches and they are dispensed at regular intervals.

"Where did you get that helmet, Hoffman? Off the back of a box of Wheaties?"

"Actually," I replied lamely, "it was a box of Cheerios." The helmet in question was a snazzy red-and-green antique my uncle had given me several years before. It was made of pliable leather and was far more decorative than protective.

I decided to quit the team.

But Sister Mary Mummy had another announcement. "Men," she said solemnly, "I want to be treated exactly like you treated Coach Howell. Just forget that you spend every day in my classroom."

"Sure thing, Sister," I thought to myself. "And while I'm at it I'll forget the Pope's Catholic."

Before we had a chance to disperse for calisthenics, little James "Jimmy" Sullivan, our feisty halfback, positioned himself next to our new coach. The team valued Sullivan's presence on the team because he provided us with an overwhelming sense of togetherness: we all hated his guts.

"Can I have your attention, guys?" he yelled. About half the team began doing calisthenics and several others

wandered off in groups of twos and threes to discuss the merits of Sister Mary Mummy's plays. Sullivan, as always, was oblivious to the lack of attention he commanded. "Fine," he continued.

"Now as you know, guys, we have a mighty big game coming up with St. Francis. If we work hard, and more importantly, if we work together, we can show those guys over at St. F. how this game of football was meant to be played. Sure, we've had our problems, but now we have a new coach, new plays, and new determination. From now on a touchdown will be more than something the other team does every few minutes." Sister Mary Mummy looked agitated, but nothing was going to stop Sullivan. He was really rolling.

"So come on, guys," he screamed, "let's go out there and win one for the Sister."

"Thank you, Sullivan," said Sister Mary Mummy.

"A quitter never wins and a winner never quits."

"Thank you, Sullivan," said Sister Mary Mummy.

"Defeat is worse than death because you have to live with defeat."

"Thank you, Sullivan," said Sister Mary Mummy.

"Winning isn't everything, it's the *only* thing. Remember, guys: GOD IS ON OUR SIDE."

"Shut up, Sullivan," said Sister Mary Mummy, and he did.

"Those slogans are very impressive," she said, "but I don't think they'll even come close to winning a football game. Also, I really think God will be fairly objective about our game with St. Francis."

Sullivan muttered something about St. Francis being undefeated and went off to practice being a left halfback.

Practice that day was, unlike any previous one, an exercise in efficiency. Sister Mary Mummy halted our usual tendency to run several offensive plays at the same time and she gently pointed out that not everyone should go deep on pass patterns.

"Actually, someone should try to hang back and block for the quarterback," she said. "Preferably some of you linemen."

She also outlawed our most successful offensive weapon: the forward fumble. We had spent a lot of time perfecting that particular maneuver and were quite upset at having it removed from our arsenal.

Surprisingly, by the end of the week we were actually playing as a team, an experience I found to be quite enjoyable. I decided not to quit the team. Of course, my decision was slightly influenced by Sister Mary Mummy's excellent judgment in promoting me to first string. I was unable to hold onto Dudley Mack's

bulletlike passes, but I was the only one stupid enough to try.

"Like this," Coach Mummy said after I dropped another one. She sprinted downfield about ten yards, then cut sharply to her left. Dudley rifled the ball to her. He failed to lead her properly, but she just reached back and hauled it in without breaking stride.

"Right," I mumbled.

Dudley, in an obvious attempt to impress the coach, suddenly began calling signals in fractions.

" $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{5}{16}$ , *Hike*," he would say.

"Whole numbers will do, Mr. Mack," said Sister Mary Mummy.

He then began showing up at practice with fistfuls of highly complex plays, carefully diagramed. Sister Mary Mummy glanced at the plays and suggested that if he put half as much effort into diagraming sentences he might find himself in possession of a passing grade. "Besides," she said, "I doubt whether the Baltimore Colts could execute any of these plays in less than five minutes." If Dudley was disappointed he didn't show it, although

I thought I detected a slight increase in the velocity of his passes.

Finally, Game Day arrived.

Sister Mary Mummy waited in the bus as we put on our traveling uniforms in the church basement.

"She's not a bad coach after all," someone said.

"Yeah," another agreed, "she's like a regular person."

A few minutes later we joined Sister Mary Mummy on the team bus. During the ride to the game she announced her retirement from coaching. A permanent coach, a nonclerical male, had been found. We said we wanted her to be our coach.

"Thank you, men," she said, "but I'm sure you'll do very well with a proper coach. I just want you to know that I'm very proud of all of you. All of you."

We were proud of her, too, but we didn't say anything. I think she knew it anyway—at least I hope she did.

I'd like to be able to say that we slaughtered St. Francis that day, but we didn't.

The final score was 63–zip.

### Comment

1. a. When the narrator first sees Sister Mary Mummy at the football practice field, what inference does he make?
- b. What leads him to this incorrect inference?