

## HUSTLER.

By James Collins.

If you were a rabid Yankee fan in the 1950s, you probably felt you had to go to Mecca. In the Bronx Mecca was Yankee Stadium at 161st St. and River Avenue. Once you were in your seat and you needed a soda, beer, hotdog or peanuts you waved to one of the vendors all dressed in white known as hustlers. Wearing a white Kepi hat like the French foreign Legion, the hustlers were usually local high school age kids. They showed up en masse before the game for a shape up. Some were hired and then assigned a particular product to sell for the day.

Late in the baseball season, New York weather got cold and management added hot chocolate to the mix of products offered. If you with a Hustler identified to sell hot chocolate, you knew you would be carrying a 35-pound tank on your back filled with liquid hot chocolate. The cups would be in a carrier on your left-hand side; and the dispensing nozzle would be on your right hand side. All day, there would be seepage from the nozzle. It would hit you on the leg and you would get burns unless you put something on your leg to prevent it. Hustlers normally found a newspaper; took out a few sheets; wrapped around the leg and held them in place with rubber bands. Then they put the white pants on over this protection.

At age 14, I was 5 foot 2 and weighed about 110 pounds. For this day, my sales area was the upper deck, which I hated. I do not like height and the steps in the upper deck, are extremely steep pointing down towards third base. Luckily, the vertical steps are wide, bisected by a long pipe railing running the entire length of the aisle. This was my lifeline and I worked in the middle of the aisle leaning against the railing with my left arm wrapped around the pipe. There were many customers and I was very busy. Suddenly hit from behind; lifted off my feet I found myself bent over the railing with hot chocolate seeping out of the cover and pouring down the back of my neck. My left arm held me to the pipe; several sets of arms grabbed and righted me. My customers all around me were young men in their 20s. I was holding the back of my neck and trying to brush off the heat from the hot chocolate.

"Are you all right kid?" asked a concerned customer.

"Yeah I'm all right. But what happened?"

Pointing down the stairs at a vanishing young man, my customer said, "that guy came out of the aisle and stiff armed you to get by."

They were all very solicitous they help me pick up so my cups and I got back to selling hot chocolate. I was very glad I kept my arm around the pipe and there it remained.

About 5 min. later I was still vending hot chocolate when one of my customers said, "look out kid here he comes again."

I looked down the aisle to see this 20-year-old, about 5 foot 8 and a 160 pounds, on a dead run coming up my side of the of the aisle. I figured this was time to get even. I timed it well. Just as he

came up the steps to my right, I backed into the aisle; he was startled and bumped into me. I started to holler, "Hey I'm only a little kid. Why are you picking on me?" At the same time, I slammed him into the pipe ran my left arm around the pipe and grabbed his belt so he was pinned to the pipe. Then I opened the jet and sprayed hot chocolate down his pants leg and filled his shoe, all the time I'm yelling," hey I'm only a little kid. Why are you picking on me?" He was jumping around and screaming, "I'm being burned."

All my customers who were also were young men decided to help. They grabbed him and started to punch him. I released him; backed away from the fray; walked down the stairs; checked out and went home.

The moral of the story is, never mess with a Bronx street fighter no matter how small he is. He will teach you a lesson; you probably did not want to learn.

THE END