

STAND BY FOR MARS
A Tom Corbett Space Cadet Adventure
by Carey Rockwell

Words: 1001

"The next event will be," Warrant Officer McKenny's voice boomed over the loud-speaker and echoed over the Academy stadium, "the last semifinal round of mercuryball. *Polaris* unit versus *Arcturus* unit."

As two thousand space cadets, crowded in the grandstands watching the annual academy tournament, rose to their feet and cheered lustily, Tom Corbett turned to his unit-mates Astro and Roger and called enthusiastically, "O.K., fellas. Let's go out there and show them how to play this game!"

During the two days of the tournament, Tom, Roger and Astro, competing as a unit against all the other academy units, had piled up a tremendous amount of points in all the events. But so had Unit 77-K, now known as the *Capella* unit. Now with the *Capella* unit already in the finals, the *Polaris* crew had to win their semifinal round against the *Arcturus*, in order to meet the *Capella* in the final round for Academy honors.

"This is going to be a cinch," boasted Astro. "I'm going to burn 'em up!"

"Save it for the field," said Tom with a smile.

"Yeah, you big Venusian ape," added Roger. "Make points instead of space gas."

Stripped to the waist, wearing shorts and soft, three-quarter-length space boots, the three boys walked onto the sun-baked field amid the rousing cheers from the stands. Across the field, the cadets of the *Arcturus* unit walked out to meet them, stopping beside McKenny at the mid-field line. Mike waited for the six boys to form a circle around him, while he held the mercuryball, a twelve-inch plastic sphere, filled with air and the tricky tube of mercury.

"You all know the rules," announced McKenny abruptly. "Head, shoulders, feet, knees, or any part of your body except your hands, can touch the ball. *Polaris* unit will defend the north goal," he said, pointing to a white chalk line fifty yards away, "*Arcturus* the south," and he pointed to a line equally distant in the opposite direction. "Five-minute periods, with one-minute rest between. All clear?"

As captain of the *Polaris* unit, Tom nodded, while smiling at the captain of the *Arcturus* team, a tow-headed boy with short chunky legs named Schohari.

"All clear, Mike," said Tom.

"All clear here, Mike," responded Schohari.

"All right, shake hands and take your places."

The six boys shook hands and jogged toward respective opposite lines. Mike waited for them to reach their goal lines, and then placed the ball in the middle of a chalk-drawn circle.

Toeing the line, Tom, Roger and Astro eyed the *Arcturus* crew and prepared for the dash to the ball.

"All right, fellas," urged Tom, "let's show them something!"

"Yeah," breathed Astro, "just let me get my size thirteens on that pumpkin before it starts twisting around!"

Astro wanted the advantage of the first kick at the ball while the mercury tube inside was still quiet. Once the mercury was agitated, the ball would be as easy to kick as a well-greased eel.

"We'll block for you, Astro," said Tom, "and you put every ounce of beef you've got into that first kick. If we're lucky, we might be able to get the jump on them!"

"Cut the chatter," snapped Roger nervously. "Baldy's ready to give us the go ahead!"

Standing on the side lines, Warrant Officer McKenny slowly raised his hand, and the crowd in the grandstand hushed in eager anticipation. A second passed and then there was a tremendous roar as he brought his hand down and blew heavily on the whistle.

Running as if their lives depended on it, the six cadets of the two units raced headlong toward the ball. Tom, just a little faster than Roger or Astro, flashed down the field and veered off to block the advancing Schohari. Roger, following him, charged into Swift, the second member of the *Arcturus* crew. Astro, a few feet in back of them, running with surprising speed for his size, saw that it was going to be a close race between himself and Allen, the third member of the *Arcturus* unit. He bowed his head and drove himself harder, the roar of the crowd filling his ears.

" ... Go Astro!... Go Astro!..."

Pounding down for the kick, Astro gauged his stride perfectly and with one last, mighty leap swung his right foot at the ball.

There was a loud thud drowned by a roar from the crowd as the ball sailed off the ground with terrific force. And then almost immediately there was another thud as Allen rose in a desperate leap to block the ball with his shoulder. It caromed off at a crazy angle, wobbling in its flight as the mercury within rolled from side to side. Swift, of the *Arcturus* crew, reached the ball first and sent it sailing at an angle over Tom's head to bounce thirty feet away. Seeing Astro charge the ball, Tom threw a block on Allen to

knock him out of the play. The big Venusian, judging his stride to be a little off, shortened his steps to move in for the kick. But just as he brought his foot forward to make contact, the ball spun away to the left. Astro's foot continued in a perfect arc over his head, throwing him in a heap on the ground.

Two thousand voices from the stands roared in one peal of laughter.