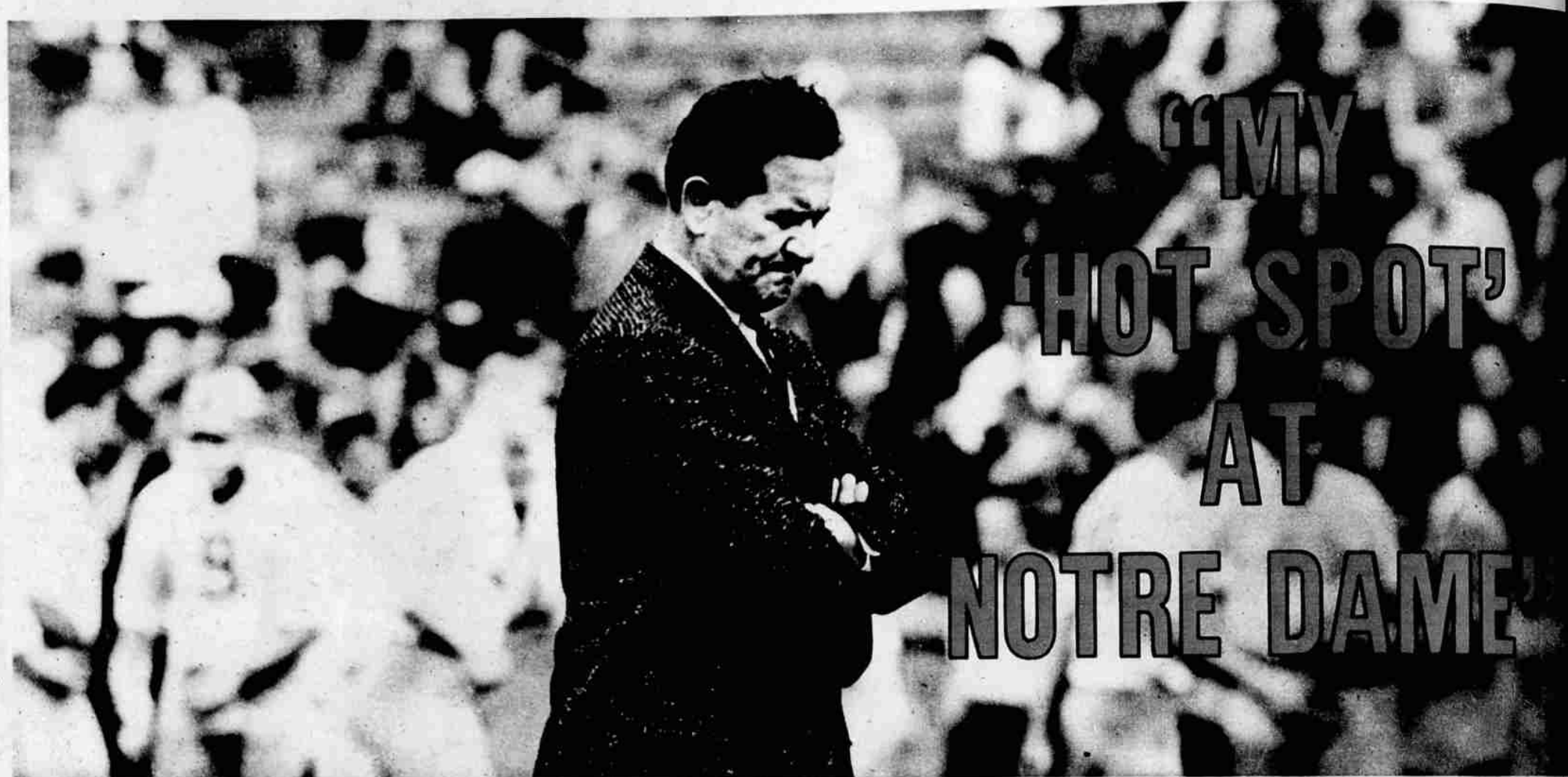


Coach Joe Kuharich tells:



by Bob Driscoll

I WAS WAITING to be joined for lunch by Joe Kuharich, who will be starting his freshman year as head football coach at the University of Notre Dame this season. The restaurant was overflowing with college football coaches scouting players and red-hot football fans who were in Hershey, Penn., for an all-star high-school game that evening. I couldn't help overhearing the excited conversation

"I hope he loses them all after what they did to Brennan," one said in the loud voice peculiar to grousing sports fans.

He was referring to Joe Kuharich who has replaced Terry Brennan, the popular boy-wonder coach at Notre Dame for the past five years, whose unexpected firing last December triggered one of the stormiest controversies in the turbulent history of collegiate football. Everywhere I went that day, the football-conscious throng debated the most important change in college football to date: Kuharich for Brennan.

Those who knew Kuharich collared him and asked the same question: "How ya gonna do, Joe?" The answer was noncommittal but friendly.

As Joe leads his inexperienced team into its killing schedule, the fan in the restaurant isn't alone in wishing Joe badly in his new job. It's not a personal thing — many of them never heard of Kuharich until he replaced Brennan — but more of a sympathetic reaction to what they felt was Terry's unfair dismissal. Notre Dame has long been the adopted

alma mater (once football starts) of thousands of otherwise unattached fans. They take a fanatical interest in whatever affects the fortunes of their teams, and Terry Brennan was one of their heroes, first as a star player, then as a coach. In his case they were even willing to forgive a sub-par 64 percent success record as opposed to an 80 percent mark for the past quarter-century. It was inevitable that they would cast Terry's successor as villain in the upheaval.

Unfortunately for Joe, the chances are that his "hot spot" will fairly sizzle as the season progresses, for he has only 14 returning lettermen (three of them centers) from a team considered "mediocre" by Notre Dame standards.

If he doesn't win — which appears likely — he'll have to face a burgeoning chorus of "I told you so's," and if he does perform a miracle and turn in an acceptable record, he'll have to expect a disgruntled "He did it with Terry's team."

WHY DID Joe jump into this "hot spot" when he already had a better-paying coaching job with the professional Washington Redskins, the support of the fans and an almost incredibly tranquil relationship with George Preston Marshall, the fiery owner of the Redskins?

"When I went to Notre Dame as a freshman in 1934, I wanted to be a football coach," he answers. "Some boys want to be doctors or engineers, but I never wanted anything but coaching as long as I can remember. I always have felt that the head coaching job at Notre Dame was the top of the ladder for me. That's why I returned to Notre Dame in

spite of the fact some people think I'm juggling a hot potato. The things we want the most aren't always the easiest, but I find that they're worth the effort."

Joe prefers to ignore all the fanfare and controversy involved in his succeeding Terry Brennan.

"When the university officials make a change, I'm sure they have their reasons," is the stand he takes. "If they feel, for instance, that I'm not the man for the job after I've had a chance, then I think it's their right to discharge me. I don't really know why they decided to let Terry go, and I surely didn't anticipate it. I didn't apply for the job in any way. As a matter of fact, I had four years to run on a five-year contract with the Redskins. I wouldn't have signed if I thought I was a contender for the job at Notre Dame."

"Some people have said that I'm also on the spot professionally. That may well be, but my problem is to coach a team, not do a public-relations job."

"Personally, I think the change puts my wife, Madelyn, on the spot more than it does me. She had to tear up roots and resettle. And if there is to be any ill feeling (we haven't noticed any yet), she'll feel it as much as I do."

"Our boys, Larry, 14, and Billy, 6, are all set. Larry's found the golf course — he plays a better game than the old man — and a six-year-old isn't long in finding new friends."

If anyone can douse the fires of controversy currently raging over Notre Dame, Joe Kuharich seems to be the man. By tradition, temperament, talent and training he is ideally suited for the crucial role.

Joe is big and powerful, but he speaks softly. He never swears, never loses his temper, but under-