

BRIAN'S SONG When Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo, both running backs for the Chicago Bears, began rooming together in 1967, it was a first for race relations in professional football. It was also a first for both of them. Sayers had never had a close relationship with a white person before, with the possible exception of George Halas, and Piccolo had never really known a black person.

One secret of their growing friendship lay in their similar tastes in humor. Before the 1969 exhibition game in Washington, for instance, an earnest young reporter entered their hotel room for an interview.

"How do you two get along?" the writer asked.

"We're okay as long as he doesn't use the bathroom," said Piccolo.

"What do you fellows talk about?" asked the businesslike reporter, ignoring the guffaws.

"Mostly race relations," Gale said.

"Nothing but the normal racist stuff," Piccolo added.

"If you had your choice," the writer went on, "who would you want as your roommate?"

Sayers replied, "If you are asking me what white Italian fullback from Wake Forest, I'd have to say Pick."

But submerged beneath the horse laughs and the digs lay a fierce loyalty to each other, and as the moving Brian's Song poignantly depicted, the friendship between Sayers and Piccolo deepened into one of the best relationships in the history of sports. Then during the 1969 season, Piccolo was cut down with cancer. He fought to play the season out, but he was in the hospitals more than he was in the games. Gale Sayers flew to be beside him as often as possible.

They had planned, with their wives, to sit together at the Professional Football Writers annual dinner in New York, where Sayers was to be given the George S. Halas Award as the most courageous player in pro football. But instead Pick was confined to his bed at home. As he stood to receive the award, tears sprang to Sayer's eyes. The ordinarily laconic black athlete had this to say as he took the trophy:

"You flatter me by giving me this award, but I tell you here and now that I accept it for Brian Piccolo. Brian Piccolo is the man of courage who should receive the George S. Halas Award. I love Brian Piccolo and I'd like you to love him. Tonight, when you hit your knees, please ask God to love him, too."