

Ritchie

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Almost all of us have some clear memories of high school that remain with us our entire lives. During my four-decade span as an educator in a variety of roles, ranging from classroom teacher through principal, I have seen evidence of this again and again. Recently, I received an email from a former student wanting to “set the record straight” that a paper he had submitted to me was, in fact, not plagiarized. What made this remarkable was that he sat in my class more than forty-three years ago! Now this sixty-year-old man wanted redemption. At my own forty-year high school reunion, I ran into two of my female classmates who informed me that they had just approached the class “bitch” and let her know in no uncertain terms that she had made their high school experience a living hell. Two grown women felt a lot better and one felt damaged, all about their high school experience so many years ago.

Obviously, some of us have positive memories that truly last a lifetime. I know for certain that Ritchie, Class of 1969, carries his memories of high school with him daily. Although we had no formal special education department or program during the 1960s, our school was known for the support services available to students with special needs. Ritchie came to our school and to my physical education class as a special needs transfer student from a community just to the north. Although Ritchie was eager and enthusiastic, in addition to his learning needs, he was somewhat challenged in hand/eye coordination and had limited experience with team sports in a competitive environment. As his teacher, my challenge was to find a way to get Ritchie engaged with a class made up entirely of talented junior and senior varsity football players.

The culminating event of our football unit that year was the traditional championship touch football game in which the juniors challenged the seniors. The honor of captain of the senior squad was given to Robbie Stein, star linebacker on the varsity football team and, later in life, Dr. Robert Stein. He was given specific instructions that Ritchie would not only be on his team, but was required to have some form of contact with the football on every other play of the championship game. He could center the ball, catch the ball, run with the ball, etc., but he must be involved in every other snap. Robbie was very competitive by nature and I can still remember him saying, “But Coach, this is the championship and our pride is on the line.” Never the less, Captain Robbie complied.

Like most years, the contest was close and came down to the last series of downs. The senior squad needed a successful touchdown drive to win the game and, more importantly, bragging rights over the juniors. Captain Robbie, bright and very intense, measured his play-calling to be certain that the “Ritchie requirement” had been met prior to the last play of the game. On the final play, the juniors knew they could concentrate on the best senior players. When the seniors broke the huddle, Ritchie was directed to spread out wide and presumably out of the way. At the snap, Ritchie wandered out and to the corner of the end zone as the rest of his teammates were engaged in a wide sweep in the opposite direction. Suddenly Robbie stopped, turned, and released a wobbly, floating pass in Ritchie’s direction. Only Robbie and Ritchie were not surprised when, uncovered by the defense and alone in the end zone, Ritchie caught the winning touchdown! In an act of spontaneity and exuberance, the seniors raced to the end zone and hoisted Ritchie on to their shoulders. I still have the vision in my mind of those senior football players

parading off the field of play and into the school building with their hero on high, all the while chanting “Ritchie, Ritchie, Ritchie”.

As memorable as the events of that day in 1969 were, they are surpassed by an experience I had just a couple of years ago. I had not seen Ritchie in more than thirty-five years. After high school, Ritchie started work at the local hospital just down the street from the school. One day on my way to school, I spotted what I thought might be a gray-haired Ritchie walking with a cup of coffee in hand. I stopped, got his attention, and sure enough it was Ritchie. I was rewarded with a most enthusiastic “Hi, Coach”, and I offered him a ride.

During our ride, he shared with me that all these years he had worked at the hospital. He told me, “Coach, when you eat in the main cafeteria at the hospital and you finish your meal and bring your tray to the conveyor belt at the window, I am the guy behind the wall that clears that tray and washes those dishes. I really don’t like that there are no windows in my area.” He still lived in the same community to the north and took the train to work. I asked why he got off the train at the station north of town when he could be so much closer to his job if he took the next stop.

“Coach,” he said, “I get off at that station so I can get a cup of coffee and walk on the trail past my school and see the field where I played football and we won the championship and I was the hero.”