

Telling the story of A Coach's Life

Written by Dan Kellams

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(Editor's Note: Dan Kellams, a Marion High School graduate, is the author of "A Coach's Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians," the fascinating biography of one of Iowa's greatest high school coaches. Kellams played four sports under the coach.)

At first, I had no intention of writing a book. Certainly not one that would take 10 years to finish.

The task began when I attended the 45th reunion of my Marion High School class in 1999. I had not seen most of my classmates for years, and the experience left me weak with nostalgia. Les Hipple, the coach who had dominated our high school days, had died a few months earlier. I told my classmates I was going to write something about Coach Hipple.

As the research began, word started going around that I was writing a book about Les Hipple.

"No, no," I said. "I'm not going to write a book. Something else ... an article maybe. I can't do a book."

Eventually I realized that Les Hipple's story had to be a book. The influence he had on so many athletes required it. And the arc of his career at Marion, where he rose to glory and fell in disgrace, had elements of classic tragedy that could not be summarized in an article.

Hired in 1945 to bring discipline to the school, he was fired in 1965 for being too strict. When everything around him changed, the coach did not, and it cost him a job he loved.

Further, as I came to understand, there was no one like Les Hipple. His strict rules, his tremendous dedication — coaching five boys sports — his work ethic, his extraordinary winning record, all the funny Hipple stories, and the sad ones, too, demanded a book. And I was stuck with the responsibility.

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Writing about Hipple had been in the back of my mind for a long time. I was well aware of the influence Hipple had on my life, although that awareness came to me later than it did for many of his players. A few recognized it while he was coaching them. Many others realized it when they joined the military.

In basic training, or paratrooper school, they sensed they possessed a physical and mental toughness, a confidence that some other recruits did not — and they traced it to Hipple's coaching.

One man, badly injured in a car wreck, insisted it was Hipple's training that gave him the endurance to crawl out of a ditch and wave down a passing motorist.

But it was not until 15 years after high school that I realized how profoundly the man had affected me.

I was trapped in a disastrous marriage and seeing a counselor. One day, I told my counselor, "You can't quit. You have to keep driving ahead. You can't give up."

"Oh yes you can," he replied. "You can pull over to the side of the road and just sit there for a while."

A feeling of great relief swept over me. I was almost euphoric with the realization that my life could change in ways that had never seemed possible.

Later, thinking about that experience, I realized whose voice was at the base of my skull, constantly saying, "You can't quit. Try harder. Quitters never win and winners never quit." It was Les Hipple's voice, and in this case he was wrong. Sometimes, if you give up, you can start again.

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But for most of my life his lessons had guided me well. Many others felt the same way. Hundreds of men are proud of having played for this coach with his strict rules, his stern demeanor and his relentless insistence that each boy, each day, do his best.

Today, they laugh about all the laps he made them run when they failed to follow his rules, but there is pride in their laughter. They are pleased to call themselves Hipplemen.

So, many months after my rash promise at the reunion, I set out, more seriously now, to write the book, deeply aware that I could not possibly honor Hipple's memory without doing my best.

There was a lot of research to be done. Hipple lived 86 years, of which he spent 54 in Marion, 33 as a coach and teacher at Marion High School.

I believed from the start that I couldn't tell the story of the man without telling the stories of the high school and the town, and this drove me to the Marion library, where I discovered its priceless collection of bound volumes of the weekly Marion Sentinel. Instead of squinting at a microfilm projection, I could read the actual papers, turning real pages. Through them, I became absorbed in the town and its doings.

I started with the Sentinels of 1943, when the U.S. was deep in World War II. I stopped in 1965, the year the U.S. first deployed combat troops in Vietnam.

Those 23 years roughly paralleled Hipple's coaching career at Marion, and they were a time of sweeping change. The national spirit of solidarity fostered by WWII was followed by the economic boom of the early 1950s. This gave way to a period of explosive social upheaval -- the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, widespread anti-war protests and urban riots.

Marion, too, experienced wrenching change from a population surge that has continued to this day. A small town was transformed into a small city and the Linn-Mar school district was born out of bitter controversy.

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All this was reflected, in various ways, in the old Marion Sentinels. In all, I read about 1,200 Sentinels, and enjoyed every minute of it — except for the frustration of having to stop and return to real life.

It's a good thing I enjoyed reading those old papers, because I had to fly 2,000 miles roundtrip to do it. I lived in New York City, working as a freelance writer and editor for businesses. Their assignments always took precedence over the Hipple Project, and in that decade, I was, thankfully, very busy. The book had to be put aside for months at a time. The project languished.

But every six months or so, I arranged a week-long trip to Marion to read old Sentinels and conduct interviews. Then came visits to the Cedar Rapids library to read the old Gazettes spanning the same 23-year period, this time on microfilm. My pockets were loaded with quarters to feed into the microfilm printer and the parking meters outside, thus financing a day at the library.

The great flood of 2008 destroyed the microfilm section, and I was afraid I would have to finish the book without that valuable resource. But Nancy Thornton, one of several volunteer researchers, discovered that old Gazettes could be accessed online through the Marion library web site.

I spent hours in my home, sometimes into the early morning, immersed in those old papers glowing on the computer screen. This provided added detail and turned up several stories that were crucial.

I spent two days visiting the libraries in other WaMaC towns — Tipton, Anamosa, Monticello, Manchester and Independence — scanning their old newspapers for telling anecdotes.

Of course I talked to Hipple's former players. Their memories tended to be fuzzy and incomplete, like old snapshots, but most of them had at least one good story. And most remembered their coach with immense respect. A few had less positive recollections, and among this group, several felt it would be improper to talk about Hipple at this late date.

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The few people still around who were contemporaries of Hipple had more complete recollections, especially Lynn Brown, who was his assistant coach for many years. Hipple's daughter, Pat Turner, and his sisters, Bess, Floss and Shirley, were invaluable resources.

All during this research, I worried about getting enough detail, and getting it right, so Hipple's story would come out of the context of his times.

By 2009, after about a decade of this, it was apparent that drastic action was necessary. I bit the bullet and told my business clients that I would be taking a sabbatical to work fulltime on the book. I realized this could cost me a favored position on their supplier list, but there was no other choice.

Now I could work on the book every day. Chapter piled upon chapter. However, at one point I experienced, for the first time in my life, a serious case of writer's block. It occurred when it came time to write the chapter in which two very good basketball players were forced to leave their team. Although I had interviewed them both, I couldn't bring myself to write about it. I stared at the screen every day for about a week, then finally started typing and got through it.

The first draft was completed that fall, and several people, including my wife, read the manuscript critically. After many changes based on their comments, the manuscript went to the publisher in December.

Reviews and editing suggestions from the publisher led me to cut out nearly 20,000 words — in my quest to add context, I had overdone it. Further cuts were suggested, but I refused, convinced the material was essential to the spirit of the book.

"A Coach's Life" came out in the summer of 2010, and we launched it with a wonderful party in uptown Marion at Campbell-Steele Gallery, which had been Kendall's Hardware during Hipple's glory years.

The reaction to the book from readers and reviewers has been highly positive. Every week there is at least one e-mail from a reader who enjoyed the book. "I feel as if you reached into my mind

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and stole my memories,” wrote one. Paul Ingram, the respected buyer at Prairie Lights bookstore in Iowa City, wrote, “It’s not just a book about one man and his accomplishments ... it’s a thoughtful piece of American small-town history.”

Sometimes people ask how Les Hipple would have reacted to the book. I really don’t know, but there’s one thing I can say for sure:

Coach, I didn’t quit.

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