

Going to the Big Dance

I am often asked how did I ever wind up teaching for now some twenty-five years. In the spirit of full disclosure I must admit that I was never going to teach. Anything but that, teaching is the family business. My mother and father both were teachers. My daughter has taught elementary for some ten years now. Her husband is an educator/administrator, my daughter-in-law is a high-school teacher. My mother's mother, who only went to the eighth grade, taught in a country school in Terrill County, Georgia. What can I say? Teaching is in my blood. Fifteen years in high school and now some ten years at the college level, my relationship with students has been long-standing.

That being said I must admit that I enjoy teaching more now than I ever have. "Me no must work. I-n-I work 'cause me a workin' man. But see, me no like my job, I-n-I feel no way, me fire that job." I have been teaching critical thinking for the past six years and I see part of my role as a ferry driver on our way to curiosity and knowledge. College students away from home for the first time can be interesting specimens. Most of them have no idea what they have gotten themselves into, especially division one athletes. If you are a professor at a division one institution, know your students and are a sports fan, then you know official basketball season starts in October. Gym rats have been in the gym since August when the first semester started, lifting and preparing themselves for the season to come.

There is schoolwork to be done on campus, family business to worry about at home (births, deaths, break-ups, hook ups) and the general ups and downs of college life. I am athlete-friendly, having lettered in high school in both football and tennis, I understand the mentality. I have coached girls' softball and a bit of girls' tennis. All this means is I am little flexible on deadlines but all, and I do mean all, work must be turned in. These kids travel hundreds of thousands of miles by plane and bus, some of them have never been out of the state of Georgia before.

Considering all that, I have to say something about our women's basketball team that made it to the big dance. That means that they won their conference and went to the NCAA tournament. One of the best sixty-four teams in the country. That is pay off in and of itself. Being one of the best out of thousands lets you know all your hard work was not for naught. There were times when, for the men's basketball team I had taught four of the five kids on the court. I only taught two of the girls on the women's team, though they played they didn't see the same floor time as the boys. One of the girls, Shanikwa Buie, was a gifted freshman who will (if she stays eligible and healthy) see a future somewhere on the planet playing for money.

You see these kids struggling to get to my eight o'clock class after lifting or running or both and I wonder how they make it, some of them do and some of them don't. For some of them this is not their first try and some have fallen to Savannah State from other programs, some are just lucky and glad to have a full ride to a division one school. I currently have the "Great White Hope" for the football team. He is a six foot four, two hundred and thirty-five pound Jewish kid from California come to play at historically Black SSU. He is a great kid and they say he can flat out throw and nobody, especially me, cares that he is White and Jewish; if he can deliver us some wins what does that matter.

That is part of the magic of sport. On the court or the field it doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, White or Black, Jewish or Baptist. What matters is if you can play and are you a winner. Friendships are made for life during the travels of the team. Times are created that will be talked about for life. I must say something about seeing these young people enter as freshmen and men, barely able to grow a mustache or are still "high-school-thin". Five or six years later they have full beards and broad shoulders, glasses and braces have been replaced by contacts and beautiful smiles.

It is in that spirit that I congratulate all the athletes that gave it their all win or loose, but I especially want to congratulate the SSU women's team and Shanikwa Buie for making us all winners. On the men's team I could mention names like Smith, Washington, Pinkett, or Fenner... I could go on I have had a lot of athletes both male and female and I root for them all both in the game and in life.

I remember a kid sitting in my office explaining to me why he didn't want to go home and bury his father. I explained to him that no one wants to bury his father but it is something that must be done. He knew his mother and his younger brother needed him even if she and his father had been estranged for quite some time. This same kid, who should have been red shirted but under the wise tutelage of the coach, played five man as a true freshman even though he looked like a doe in the headlights. Three years later this same kid was snatching rebounds out the air and dunking like he owned the gym, they also won the MEAC that year and went to the "Big Dance".

If you follow college basketball then you know that there are athletes who look age appropriate and then there are guys who look like their uncles playing underneath the basket at three, four, and five men. The "bigs", as they are called, can sometimes be seen to have bald spots, receding hairlines, beards, and bodies of men.

I am often questioned about social concepts and I like that as well. No one has told them, "If you want a date on Friday you start looking on Monday." No one has told them, "If you want to be successful with women look for who is looking for you." The "game", as it is called, was handed down to me by seasoned pros all over the world so I try and hand some of it down to them. I make the girls realize they better "hook their wagon to somebody going somewhere that is going to make something of themselves." I have had students stop me in the street and tell me, "That is the one thing you said that I still remember to this day." I have also been heard to say, "I could teach you more in a week of hanging out than in the four months of a semester in class." That is what I do: teach.

So what I hope to do with this "Teacher Features" is relate some of the experiences teaching has provided me with; important things like "Hey Professor Fletcher, take those creases out of your jeans, you look like my father with those creases." Or, "If you are going to wear Nike sneakers you have to make the rest of your gear Nike." Without question the apparel I wear that they are drawn to, everyone else seems to like as well. Y'all help keep "the old man" current and relevant.

So in hopes of saying some memorable things I will be submitting their "Teacher Features". I also hope to have young people report and write for the website as well. All this is to come in "Teacher Features".

db... May 2015