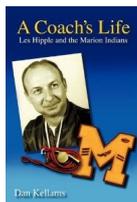


“A Coach’s Life”: Fascinating portrait of Les Hipple and Marion

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 28 December 2010 15:49 - Last Updated Friday, 31 December 2010 11:36



Marion native Dan Kellams gives readers a rare treat with his new book on former Marion High School coach Les Hipple, well worth the time for anyone interested in the school or the city itself.

Kellams, a Marion High School graduate who played for the legendary coach, provides a poignant biography of the stern taskmaster whose teams dominated the Wamac Conference in the 1940s and 1950s, while also providing a keen historical look at the city of Marion itself.

Hipple compiled a 105-42-10 record in 18 years as Marion’s head football coach from 1945-62 and won seven conference titles; collected a 310-120 record in 20 years as the boys basketball coach from 1945-65 and captured 12 Wamac crowns; coached the boys track team from 1945-62 with five league titles, and also won eight state cross country titles in a row.

Hipple is a member of the Iowa Halls of Fame in both football and basketball, one of the few coaches to hold both honors, and his basketball teams were among some of the best in the state, regardless of classification. Marion High School named the school’s athletic fields after him in 1978, a fitting tribute to his career, but numbers and honors don’t do justice to the man or the book (“A Coach’s Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians”).

Hipple, who died in 1999 at age 86, was a strict disciplinarian who placed heavy demands on his players. He received strong support in the community during the glory years from parents and administrators, but times changed and support waned. He became a controversial figure and ultimately was fired, leaving behind a legacy of success, outstanding athletes, love, respect and some bruised feelings.

Hipple treated all his players alike — stars and deep reserves — and often said he didn’t care what his players thought of him at the time, but cared deeply about what they’d think of him in the future when they were grown men. There are several moving tributes to Hipple by former players, who indeed grew to respect the values he instilled in them as boys.

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His rules were among the strictest in the state:

- 1) No smoking or drinking.
- 2) In bed by 10 every night, except Friday and Saturday, when a midnight curfew was allowed.
- 3) Dates with girls must be kept to a minimum. No going steady.
- 4) Cannot miss practice without permission.
- 5) May not drive cars except on Sundays (remember, this was the 1940s and '50s.)
- 6) Use only proper language at all times.
- 7) Take best possible care of equipment.
- 8) Keep dressing rooms clean, home and away.

Players who violated rules were ordered to run endless laps, while serious or repeat offenders were kicked off the team.

“You, as a Marion Indian, cannot do some of the things other students do,” Hipple wrote in 1952. “If you think more of smoking, drinking, dating or going steady, staying out late at night, or riding around in automobiles, then you are not willing to ‘pay the price’ and it is best for you not

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to take out a uniform ... To be on a championship team you have to be a champion yourself.”

There are still numerous “Hipplemen” in Marion, successful businessmen and fathers who learned valuable lessons from their coach. But no mistake, they feared the man and knew they risked dismissal, with no chance for appeal.

Kellams does an excellent job of describing some of the big games and championship seasons, but it’s the historical backdrop of the town and its rapid growth during this period that grips the reader. There are fascinating behind-the-scenes stories about Marion principals, superintendents, school board members and the athletes themselves, along with the role disgruntled parents played in Hipple’s demise.

There’s a telling segment about racial discrimination at the municipal pool, along with detailed accounts about growing up in Iowa in the early and middle parts of the 20th century.

Kellams gives a balanced account of Hipple’s life, stressing his triumphs while not ignoring the shortcomings, but the author’s deep respect for the man comes shining through.

How to obtain a copy

The book is available at Marion High School, Barnes & Noble Booksellers, Amazon.com and other outlets.