

WASHINGTON HUSKY BASKETBALL

How many George Hickman's have you missed?

Longtime newsletter group members know that most of my life lesson's were learned from my Papa (Jimmy Lee Neighbors) or my Granddad (Hughes Bridges). They could not have been more different in their methods of teaching or the language they used in explaining them. Many times they differed in their views of things, but there was one that they both staunchly agreed upon...

“Assume everyone you meet is a good person until they prove you otherwise”

I would like to tell you that is advice that I have followed my entire life, but the fact is, I didn't always heed this wisdom. My justifying side would argue that times have changed since they were young men and the world just isn't a place you can trust everyone. Our motto growing up in the 80's was more of “Don't Talk to Strangers”. There was plenty of evidence of people trusting people only to be harmed in some way. And now in the 2010's, we have LIFELOCK and identity theft companies to protect us from others.

At my very best, I would estimate I fail in this area more often than I succeed. As a result, I always wonder how many times I have missed getting to know a George Hickman.

It was our first game at the University of Washington last season. As usual on game day, there are a host of volunteer ushers and security guards around our locker room area. Some are checking pass credentials. Some are guarding the officials locker room. Some are helping fans locate their seats. Most of the time, people in general are wrapped up in what they are doing and have little or no patience for someone in a yellow usher's vest. With the pressures of an impending game, I have too often fallen into that same trap. But there was something different about this season. There was something about the little, old man guarding the hall between the game court and our locker room. Something drawing me to find out more about this 88 year old man in charge of securing our area. This was one of the times I felt safe to heed the wisdom of my grandparents.

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During our pre-game I watched as he patrolled this sensitive area of the arena. At all of 5-5 and a “buck-o-five” this man must have some kind of command to earn the respect of people trying to access restricted areas. It wasn't like he was a bouncer. He didn't resemble the secret service. Yet no one got by him. He would rise, place his unimposing frame between himself and our door like he was 6-5 and 245. Before the person could be off in their redirected path, our security guard would U-DUB High Five them and return to his chair... (a UW high 5 is a normal high five with your two middle fingers crossed to form a “W”)



When it came time to hit the court, he greeted every single player with his patented high five and said “Go get ‘em Coach” as I walked by. And after losing a heartbreaker on a buzzer beater in that first game, he was there with the same high five saying “good game Coach, your team played hard and you coached hard.”

After we consoled our young team following the gut wrenching opener, there was this “volunteer” still at his post long after the halls had cleared and fans were well on their way home. I asked jokingly, “Do they ever let you go home.” He said, “I don't leave until you do Coach!”

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I finally introduced myself to him and learned our dependable locker room usher was one George Hickman.

I went upstairs to do all the things we coaches do after a two-point loss. The last thing I wrote down on my to-do list for the next day was FIND OUT WHO GEORGE HICKMAN is so I could send him a note.

George Hickman as it would turn out was way more than a volunteer usher. He was born in 1924 and dreamed of being a pilot. After high school he joined the Army. During that era of our country's history, African Americans hoping to be pilots were met with much resistance. But George would not let his dream die. He would become part of the famed Tuskegee Army Airfield and 99th Air Squadron that would become famous for breaking the color barrier during World War II. In 2007, George along with the other surviving members were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. A job and an instructor at Boeing, brought George to Seattle and for over 30 years he served as an usher for the Huskies and the Seahawks.



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For the rest of the season, win or lose, George was there for our team. I didn't miss a chance to spend a few minutes with George. It became part of my pre-game routine. I had him sign my copy of the Laurence Fishburne movie *The Tuskegee Airmen* which he told me wasn't nearly as realistic in the treatment his unit faced. He and my Papa Neighbors had served in many of the same areas and I couldn't help but wonder if their paths had ever crossed. I like to believe they did.



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George Hickman died of a heart attack in August. While he was absent from his post during our season opener last week, his presence will always be felt in the halls of Hec Ed and Alaska Airlines Arena and his chair will remain unoccupied.

I know I missed many opportunities to meet other “George’s” early in my coaching career.

I can assure you I won’t miss another.

