

HOOK IT, KIKER

This story was prompted by my regaling Janet yesterday morning with stories from my glory (at least in my mind) days, most of which, except some of the following, she's heard more than once.

I had played Little League baseball for two years but my first school team sports were in 8th grade at McClintock Jr Hi in Charlotte. I played JV football and as soon as the season ended I started JV basketball, coached by Joe Coulter. My annual is in Louisville and I'm here in Bakersville, so I'll name my teammates that I remember: Danny Epps, John Corne, John Lagana, Chris Proctor, Billy Crutchfield, Carl Helms and Kenny Kiker.

Kenny was from Oakhurst. I began school at Oakhurst and went there through the 5th grade, going to Idlewild in the 6th after we moved to our new house on Rama Rd. I don't remember Kenny from Oakhurst. He was a guard and a pretty good dribbler and ball handler but played behind Epps at point guard. His hair was longer than most of ours and slicked back, a little Elvisy, combed into a duck butt in the back. On our first away game, after we had gotten dressed in the visitors' locker room, Jose (as we sometimes perjoratively referred to him, though I'm not sure why, as he wasn't Hispanic, though he was black haired and had a fairly swarthy complexion. Nicknames proliferated at that age. Lagana started calling me Codfish, which quickly shortened to just Fish, which he called me through high school. Funny though, I don't remember anybody else having nicks) said someone should pass around one of the little bag brought our uniforms, jock and tennis shoes in as a "valuables bag", in which we would put our wallets, watches and stuff we didn't want to get stolen (I guess our clothes weren't that valuable, and certainly mine weren't, except to me) which he would keep under the team bench in the gym. When the bag came to Kenny, he put his hawk-billed knife in.

Kenny and I played on the varsity basketball team in the 9th at Mc, on the JVs in the 10th and varsity in the 11th and 12th at East Meck. I was 6' tall, the tallest kid at Mc in the 9th grade and reached the pinnacle of my bball career that year, though, as I said, I kept playing (actually, I was a starter on JVs in the 10th but no longer, on the varsity, my last two years-others kept getting better and a couple taller, though I stayed the tallest in my class, topping out at 6'2" my senior year). By my senior year, of those I played with in the 8th grade, I think just Lagana, Crutchfield, Epps, Proctor and Kiker and I were still playing. Tommy Cox joined us from Eastway and Bill Calvert from Matthews. Lagana quit before the season was over. Most of the starters were juniors.

Baker Hood, a cigar smoking character from Morganton and Catawba College, as were several other East coaches, was the varsity coach and a history teacher (not advanced). Haywood Hamilton, a Wake Forest educated math teacher was the JV coach. In 10th grade, sometimes we JVs would practice at the same time as the varsity, using opposite ends of the court, and sometimes our practices would overlap so each could have the full court for part of their practice and, during the overlap, the varsity could beat up us on JVs in practice. Myers Park was our hated rival, as it probably was all the other schools in

Charlotte. One Friday night, MP whipped us and the varsity pretty soundly at their place. We dreaded Monday's practice. We were prescient. We practiced with the varsity and I can still hear Coach Hood's words to the team managers, which are probably still ringing in the East gym, "Lock the doors. We're going to turn this place into a racetrack", and with that, we began lapping the gym till we were all on the verge of puking and/or collapse. Why did all the sports I played require incessant running and were coached by masochists? I wish I'd played tennis or, better yet, been on the debating team. Naaaw!

By the time I was a senior, I'd gotten to know all my coaches pretty well, especially Coach Hood, who was also the JV and an assistant football coach. I think he respected and appreciated the fact that I stuck it out even though I was a senior scrub. I didn't smoke cigarettes then but I did occasionally smoke a cigar, mainly, I guess, to be an outlier, inhaling infrequently. Once I lit one up in the dressing room after practice and Coach Hood came in, saw me smoking it and asked if I'd take it outside. Lee Edwards High in Asheville was the only 4A school in western NC and they were in our conference. We played them up there on a Friday night in their cramped gym with a balcony running along both sides and one end, supported by posts that were off the playing floor by only 3-4'. They were wrapped in wrestling mats to prevent a player going after an errant ball from getting killed. We were coming home after the game on a Trailways type bus, the JVs and varsity players and both sets of cheerleaders, the coaches sitting in the front. I was sitting in the back and cracked a window and lit up a stogie, as did a couple of younger players who bought one when I did. After a bit, Coach Hood smells the smoke and comes back to see what's going on. He told the 3 or 4 younger guys to "put out those stinking cigars-Tommy, you can keep yours", and I kept puffing. The ultimate senior privilege.

Toward the end of the season we were playing a home game and, either winning or losing by a rather large margin, Coach put Kenny in near the end. Kenny would fool around before and after practice working on a Globe Trotter type hook from way out and got where he could hit with some frequency. So, Kenny's dribbling around out beyond the top of the key and some of us from the bench got to yelling, "Hook it, Kiker". After he heard us, we could see him get a gleam in his eye and a little grin on his face, and he launched a hook from almost half court, AND IT WENT IN!!! The stands erupted. The bench consisted of a couple of rows of folding chairs pulled up close to the baseline. Coach Hood was sitting on the end of the front row, and when Kenny let fly, Coach jumped up and threw his arms in the air and when it sent in, he tumbled forward and fell face down on the court, beating his hands on the floor in hysteria. I'm not sure I've ever laughed so hard, before or since. It was one of the all-time great moments of my sports career. At graduation, if I'd thought about it and had had the chutzpah, when he walked across the stage at Ovens Auditorium and received his diploma, I would have yelled out, "Hook it, Kiker." Since Caldwell is before Kiker alphabetically, I would have already gotten my diploma and there wouldn't have been much principal DK "always remember who you are and where you're from" Pittman could have done.

We played Lee Edwards for the conference tournament championship at the Charlotte Coliseum on Feb 25, 1964. The reason I know the date is because I googled the Cassius Clay-Sonny Liston fight which was shown on closed circuit TV in the Coliseum after our early evening game was over. After the game, they ran everybody out before admitting the fight customers. Several of us hid in a closet in the locker room,

escaping notice when we heard them open the door to be sure everyone was out, then coming upstairs to watch the fight. Larceny, pure and simple.

Coach Hood started the seniors. I jumped center against their 6'3-4" center who went on to play at Furman and I got the tip. Either on a fast break off the tip or on our first possession, I scored the first points of the game. On their first offensive foray, they worked it in to the center, who I was guarding. He tried a turn around jump shot and I blocked it. Shortly after, Coach called time out and took me and the other non-regular starters out of the game. We sat on the bench where we watched the rest of the game until with a minute or so to go, and the game out of hand, he called time out and told me and the rest of the seniors to go in and finish the game. I said "Coach, I'm not going in with the scrubs" and sat down and watched them end the Eagles season and my basketball career from the bench. I didn't want to be on the floor for the loss.

But it had been a memorable season. We went up and played Raleigh Broughton where Pete Maravich, the NC State assistant, Press's son, a sophomore or junior, threw in a school record against us. He'd let fly soon after he crossed half court. The only other time I saw Pistol Pete in person was when he, a sensation at LSU was helping at one of Lefty Driesell's summer camps at Davidson and I happened to be up there for some reason. He came down court leading a 3 on 2 fast break and, from the dribble, made a one hand bounce pass to the guy on his left with so much English on it that it bounced right into the hands of the guy trailing on his right, who made a layup. Never seen such a pass before or since! We also played Winston Salem Reynolds in WS, whose star was 6'4or5" George (all of a sudden, I can't think of his name, but it will come to me), who was probably all state. He became my classmate at Davidson where he was a scholarship player. He played his freshman year and maybe another, but quit to concentrate on his premed studies and be the Phi Delt's stud in intramurals.

Baker Hood moved up to Lake Norman when he retired to a life of golf. He and Haywood Hamilton played at a golf outing held in conjunction with our 50th reunion and he told several stories. He coached the girls' team at East after retiring as the boys'. Two stories I remember. He said that at practice one day he noticed when a girl went for a layup that she didn't have any underpants on. He was afraid to say anything to her so he called her mother and told her. She said "Coach, I hope you can do something with her. I sure can't". Then, there was the time someone asked him if some of his players weren't Lesbians. He said, "Well, I'm not sure what they are. I haven't asked. You know, my wife and I are Presbyterians". I went by to see coach a year or so later and we had a nice visit. My last with him, a year or so after that, he had no idea who I or, I don't think, his wife was when she came in to take him to an adult day care group. He said he was going to choir practice

I saw Coach Hamilton in Costco in Matthews 5-6 years ago. He recognized me right off and we had a nice chat. It wasn't six months later that I saw an obituary for his wife, Shirley, also a math teacher at East until some kind of anti-nepotism rule forced her to go to another school. I know he's still living, in Spartanburg, because I got a FB friend request from him the other day. He must have a child down there. I sent him a message that he needed to look up Danny Epps, who lives on a golf course in Greenville near one of his sons and told him I said to tell Danny to treat him to a round of golf and that if

Epps wouldn't pay, to send the bill to Lagana, Corne, Cox and/or Kiker. Can't send to Chris Proctor. He died years ago.

Probably over 30 years ago a realtor asked me to close a house and land purchase in Union Co for a Ken Kiker. Sure enough, it was Kenny. We didn't have time for much of a reunion at the closing and, for reasons or no reasons, either of which I can and should kick myself for, we never saw each other again. When I told Janet I was writing this story, she looked him up on the internet and it appears that he's still living on the property he bought on Sikes Mill Rd. I'm going to try to get up with him and send him this story to see if he remembers things the way I did, and to see if he can still hit the hook!