

Kindred: A father-son bond forged by baseball



Father's Day is when the calendar suggests you think about your dad and, if you are among the fortunate ones, reflect on his positive influence on your life.

Hal Graff will do that Sunday.

Yet, Graff is like a lot of us. He doesn't need a calendar to prompt him.

"Every day I get up and try to be like he was," Graff said. "He was my earthly hero and quite a guy ... quite a guy."

Dean Graff was a husband, father, grandfather, coach, mentor and successful businessman. There were many layers to him. At his core, he was a baseball guy.

His oldest son became a baseball guy, eating up his father's every word on the subject. And what a baseball story it was.

As a teen, Dean Graff was a talented catcher from Minier recruited to Illinois Wesleyan largely by then-Pantagraph sports editor Fred Young. Graff worked part-time in The Pantagraph sports department while at IWU, taking games by phone, and drove Young to many of his Big Ten Conference football officiating assignments.

Graff also continued to impress as a catcher and in 1938, while a sophomore at IWU, was nominated by Young to try out for an All-American team that would travel to England for the first World Cup series between the U.S. and British Empire.

Not only was Graff selected, he was elected captain.

Thus began a journey that took a 20-year-old from Minier across the Atlantic on an ocean liner to England, where the British had loaded up with some talented players from Canada in their mid to late 20s. They beat the college kids from the U.S. four out of five games.

It did little to detract from the experience for Graff, who at Young's request wired articles to him throughout the trip.

“When my dad was getting ready to board the ocean liner (in New York), Mr. Young had sent him a cable saying, ‘Now don’t let me down Dean. Be sure you cable me these articles,’” Hal Graff said.

Dean Graff came through, taking Pantagraph readers along for the ride. He talked of how he and his teammates took advantage of 12-cent haircuts in England. He wrote of visiting London's historic sights. In one of his final reports he wrote, “We’ll soon be hitting the high seas again. Then we’ll be back to the books.”

The only downside was a knee injury suffered by Graff toward the end of the trip. It dogged him the rest of his IWU career and during a two-year stint in the St. Louis Cardinals organization.

It also may have saved his life.

When World War II broke out, Graff joined the U.S. Navy and became an officer. Trained in diesel mechanics, he was assigned to drive the “ducks” that would land on beaches for infantry to storm the beach.

Graff was discharged for fear the bum knee would fail him in battle. Most in his battalion later were killed in action, some in the Normandy invasion.

“God was looking after him,” Hal said.

The knee never healed. He came to call it his “trick knee” because it could go out at any time, once while simply turning over in bed.

It didn't stop him from building a life in Gibson City with his wife, Imogene, and sons Hal and Dennis, a basketball star who went on to play at the University of Illinois.

In Little League, Hal Graff was learning catching fundamentals from his father that others learned in college. He became a standout in his own right, followed his father's path to Wesleyan and played baseball for Jack Horenberger from 1965-69.

Drafted by the Washington Senators in 1968, he did not sign because of a foot injury. He signed a year later with the San Francisco Giants organization, but after two seasons was released.

Like his father, dreams of a big-league career were dashed by injury.

“I realized, ‘Oh my goodness, I’m going to have to work,’” Hal Graff said.

He was in the insurance business for 25-plus years, then after age 45 got his master’s degree and doctorate. He has taught online and in college classrooms ever since, now splitting time between Bloomington and his beloved Gibson City.

“Once a Greyhound, always a Greyhound,” he said.

Dean Graff had a place in his heart for Gibson City as well. He made a good living as a salesman for Kewanee Manufacturing during a 35-year career and remained in Gibson City until 1990, when at 72 he died of lung cancer.

Still, he lives on in the fictional Harold Gatewood Mysteries Series. Hal Graff, 70, has written and published 17 books in the past 22 months, with the character Harold Gatewood modeled after his father, Harold "Dean" Graff.

“My dad is one of the very few people I’ve known in my life who thoroughly enjoyed everything about his life,” Hal Graff said. “Whether he was fishing or playing golf or at work ... he loved who he worked for. He was always a real pleasant, fun-loving guy.”

The world could use more like him.

“The ones who are, we sure remember,” Hal Graff said.

And not just on Father’s Day.

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