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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ BIOGRAPHY

A Coach's Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians

Dan Kellams
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Woody Hayes flashed across the sports pages and is gone, in disgrace. Joe Paterno is exiting college football under a cloud. Lester Hipple, an extraordinarily successful high school coach in a small rural Iowa town died in 1999, yet he remains a legendary and controversial figure in Iowa high school athletic lore.

As described by Dan Kellams in *A Coach's Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians,* Coach Hipple's control over his athletes was nearly immutable. The games and the students he taught changed, but Hipple never did.

Kellams has written a clear, compelling, and yet careful encomium to his former coach. In an Author's Note, Kellams writes: "When I began this project, I made three promises: to try not to open old wounds, to refuse to use reporters' tricks and threats to wheedle information from people who didn't want to talk to me, and to respect the memories of those who did."

After so many years, recollections of Les Hipple, what he meant to Marion, Iowa, and what he did for its student-athletes are still fresh for those who knew or played for him.

Clearly well trained as a journalist, Kellams writes in a direct, no-frills style. His research is thorough and the narrative is replete with stories from those who knew Coach Hipple, along with references to newspaper accounts of the coach's exploits.

Kellams describes small-town life in rural Iowa and the hard existence of Midwestern tenant farmers in the early twentieth century. A product of that place and time, Hipple grew up in a farm community there and knew hard work from his early days.

In later years, parents criticized Hipple for imposing harsh rules on his players. The coach once wrote: "We will keep our dates to a minimum (school parties after home games, Saturday night or Sunday afternoon) and not let them interfere with our football. If we date often, go steady, or must see a particular girlfriend between classes or at noon, we will drop athletics."

In his defense, his sister noted: "What rules? …That was the way we grew up." To the end, the coach attempted to enforce his stringent expectations in the face of growing dissatisfaction in the community. Despite the fact that he had brought fame and championships to Marion, the community could no longer support his drill-sergeant approach to coaching.

A Coach's Life is an empathetic recollection of a man and a time that no longer exist. Dan Kellams has written a story both to enjoy and contemplate.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (January 13, 2012)

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