

DOC KUSEL

I finished John Grisham's *The Bleachers* a while ago. It took me less than five hours reading time. Besides being a short novel, with large type and lots of dialog, I skimmed much of it. I have read 16 of Grisham's previous novels, and enjoyed all of them, although none of the characters and plot lines have stayed with me.

But I thought *The Bleachers* was weak, about as poor an effort as Nelson DeMille's *Spensorsville*.

The novel is about Eddie Rake, legendary high school football coach of the invincible Messina Spartans. Rake is dying of cancer as the story opens, and we never meet him. But we learn all about him in the reminiscing of his players as they gather for his final days. In their words Coach Rake is one of the finest men who ever lived, a man whose verbal abuse and extreme physical conditioning they tolerated in hopes of a few words of praise from him, and the opportunity for a brief moment of fame.

My biggest problem with *The Bleachers* is that it did not ring true. I knew a real Eddie Rake. His name was Norman "Doc" Kusel. He was the football coach at Mariemont High School while I was a student there from 1941 to 1946. He also was physical education teacher, woodshop teacher, and the leader of Boy Scout Troop 49. He was a big, burly, gruff man, with a smile a mile wide, a booming laugh, and a deep love of boys. I would do anything for Doc Kusel, in hopes of winning his praise and a big smile. Doc's football teams, like the fictional Messina Spartans, won football games, division games, and state championships. His scout troop won sectional honors. Like me, Doc's boys lived for his smile. Doc Kusel could make you feel foolish, or ashamed that you did not give something your best effort. But unlike Coach Rake, none of his players ever feared him, nor hated him even temporarily. Grissom says he played football in High School. My hunch is he did not experience anyone like either Coach Rake, a character I do not believe has a real life counterpart, nor Doc Kusel, who was real.

I was not an athlete. I did not play any varsity sport in high school, nor did I excel in any of the physical education drills Doc Kusel assigned. I could not run a mile, nor even an 880 (in the days before track went metric), and could not climb hand-over-hand to the top of a pole hanging from the gym ceiling to the floor, much less on the rope that hung beside the pole. But somehow Doc saw something in me that I did not know I had, and wanted to make sure that I knew it was there. He made me manager of the football team. I kept the time clock at football games and fired the gun at the end of the quarters. He appointed me a patrol leader in the scout troop and gave me leadership roles at paper drives, camping trips, and scout Jamborees. He encouraged me to enter a basketball foul shooting contest where I won the first round by hitting 24 out of 25. And he taught me to be a pretty good tumbler. But most of all, Doc Kusel was a friend, which was immensely important to me at that time in my life. He was one of the three men who were substitutes for my father, whom I was never able to please nor engage with in any activity at all.

Because Doc Kusel saw me as a friend, so did many of my classmates, including some of our star athletes who might otherwise have ignored me.

When I went back to visit Mariemont High School during college vacations, Doc Kusel was one of the men I always stopped in to see and talk with. His smile in greeting never failed to lift my spirit. Even after he retired, and worked part time at the community pool, I would stop in to visit whenever I could during summer trips back to Mariemont. Later, after I married and moved to California, Doc Kusel visited us in Walnut Creek in his mobile home while he toured the country.

I learned of his death in 1965 through my mother. I did not go back for his funeral. It was over by the time I learned of it. After reading *The Bleachers* I wonder what it might have been like to sit around with old classmates and tell stories about that great man. I am quite sure it would not have been even remotely like *The Bleachers*. I also wonder about the reviewers who all said how real the novel seemed. For sure, those reviewers did not know a Doc Kusel.