

## • Legends

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John's father, an immigrant from Czechoslovakia and Croatia, had a small general store in neighboring Lansing, Ohio, and the family lived in the apartment above. Despite his son's incredible athletic talent, he strongly discouraged him from "shooting a silly ball through a hoop" and wanted him to help in the family store instead. And my father, a first-generation Lebanese merchant who owned a bowling alley, warned me not to "waste time" playing football or baseball. He actually tried to bribe me with a pony when I was in grade school on the condition that I would give up sports — because he needed a pinsetter for his bowling lanes!

Surprisingly, Phil's father was the only one who really encouraged his son to commit to sports. A Polish coal miner, Mr. Niekro lived Merle Travis' song lyrics, "Sixteen tons and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt." Yet he learned how to throw a knuckle ball from a fellow miner and managed to pitch semi-pro baseball.

He then spent hundreds of hours in their backyard teaching Phil and his brother Joe the secret of pitching knuckle balls, all with the hope that through baseball they might escape his lot in the mines. And he succeeded, as both became professional baseball stars.

Sadly, on April 25, 2019, at the age of 79, John Havlicek passed away. He had been one of the

most agile, indefatigable, and athletic people on the planet, a man who legendary Bill Russell called "the best all-around player I ever saw." But Havlicek was afflicted with a neurodegenerative disease that slowly robbed him of that remarkable coordination and agility. Then, on December 26, 2020, at the age of 81, Phil Niekro succumbed to cancer. Rounds of chemotherapy had robbed him of his ability to use his hands, which were one of the most talented pairs in the history of baseball. When I spoke to him shortly before he passed, he said one of his greatest regrets was that he could no longer sign his Hall of Fame baseballs for his loyal fans. Fighters till the finish, to paraphrase the words of the famous Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, both knew at their end dark was right. But neither went gentle into that good night. Both raged and raged against the dying of the light.

Now, at the age of 80 — just between John and Phil — I am fortunate enough to be able to reflect on the remarkable lives we lived.

And I can still look back with the deepest of gratitude for coaches like John Byrnes and John Blatnik, who unselfishly without pay gave so much of themselves to mold character in their young charges. General MacArthur accurately summarized the value of sports through words he had engraved on a plaque for the athletes

at West Point: "Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that on other days, on other fields, will bear the fruits of victory".

Victory not only militarily, but also personally. From the playing fields of friendly strife in the Ohio Valley, thousands of young men and women have been recruited to colleges and universities across the country.

Some have attained national and international recognition, but all have learned resilience, teamwork, and loyalty. And all have cultivated lifelong relationships through the wonderful world of athletic competition.

The idiom "mighty oaks from small acorns grow" is also applicable here. When that unkempt group of teenagers showed up for their first practice at Bridgeport High's field — now appropriately renamed Niekro Diamond — no one could have ever predicted the success and leadership roles these "three kids from Bridgeport" and their colleagues would attain. Just as acorns must weather storms, these young men confronted mediocre expectations and even parental resistance to overcome adversity and become strong resilient champions.

Ultimately, a few unselfish men provided the necessary soil for these acorns — through their coaching and mentoring — that led to our fruits of victory, whether at the Boston Garden, in the Atlanta Diamond, or in the lava

fields of Kona during an Ironman race. With the rise of social media, the increasing cost of youth sports, the obesity epidemic, and parental concern over possible injury, I fear that more and more youths are being deprived of this soil and of this chance to develop essential character traits like self-discipline, resilience, teamwork and accountability that sports can provide. Because we never know what our limits are until we try to exceed them, it is imperative that all youth have a chance to pursue their limits and attain their full potential. Resilience can only develop when there is stress and hardship, and sports are uniquely poised to simulate the adversity of which General MacArthur spoke.

The lessons I learned growing up in the rough and tumble Ohio Valley also remind me of the "common law of life" so eloquently captured by Douglas Malloch in his poem, "Good Timber":

*The tree that never had to fight  
For sun and sky and air and light,  
But stood out in the open plain  
And always got its share of rain,  
Never became a forest king  
But lived and died a scrubby thing.  
The man who never had to toil  
To gain and farm his patch of soil,  
Who never had to win his share  
Of sun and sky and light and*

*air,*

*Never became a manly man*

*But lived and died as he began.*

*Good timber does not grow with ease,*

*The stronger wind, the stronger trees,*

*The further sky, the greater length,*

*The more the storm, the more the strength.*

*By sun and cold, by rain and snow,*

*In trees and men good timbers grow.*

*Where thickest lies the forest growth*

*We find the patriarchs of both.*

*And they hold counsel with the stars*

*Whose broken branches show the scars*

*Of many winds and much of strife.*

*This is the common law of life.*

I am but one of the thirteen grateful team members of Post 227 who were taught how "to fight for sun and sky and air and light." And that experience has made all the difference in my life.

*Editor's Note: Dr. Joseph Maroon, a native of the Bridgeport area, is clinical professor and vice chairman of the Department of Neurological Surgery and Heindl Scholar in Neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and team neurosurgeon for the Pittsburgh Steelers.*