

Touchdowns

By Paul Edward Johnson

At age 76 I still find wonderful reasons to attend reunions.

Once upon a time, when I was a happy high school kid, many of my classmates were also happy kids. We were fortunate to live near lakes and be raised in a neighborhood populated by dear hearts and gentle people who seemed to care about each other.

Plus we were privileged to attend a public high school located within our Minneapolis neighborhood: Southwest High School.

Many of our teachers seemed to be dedicated to help us become “the best we could be.”

On my first day at Southwest High School my first class of the day was called “Civics.” I had no notion what Civics was supposed to be about. All I knew was that it was a required course for all of us 14-year-old freshmen.

And it seemed to me our Civics teacher had no clue what to teach us as he stood before us and apologized for his not yet having the textbook we were supposed to read for the class.

He simply said, “The textbook might arrive tomorrow, so in the meantime please just sit in a circle here in our classroom and enjoy conversing with each other.”

Jerry Bender was sitting next to me and whispered, “You know who he is?”

“No Jerry. Do you?”

“He’s Joe Hutton Junior. Who played with George Mikan and the World Champion Minneapolis Lakers. And his father coached a national champion basketball team at Hamline University.”

“Holy moly Jerry! This teacher gonna be our basketball coach?”

“Yep. And I can’t wait until we get to try out for the team.”

“You think we might get to play on the basketball team, Jerry?”

“We’re both about six-feet-two. So why not?”

There were about 30 kids in that Civics classroom. And only two girls: Sue Burroughs and Beth Crary.

Sue attended the same grade school with Jerry and me. Beth? She attended a different grade school. But Jerry knew who she was.

Jerry said, “Beth’s father’s a coach for championship Park Board teams. Her father coaches many of the kids who go on to play for the Southwest High School hockey and football teams.”

“Oh? Like who?”

Jerry pointed at a kid sitting in our circle and he said, “See him? He’s Butch Fischer.”

“So? Who’s he?”

“He’s from St. Thomas. The Catholic elementary school. And he’s already on the high school football team. He’s been practicing with the A-Squad’s starting-team as a halfback.”

“Gee Jerry. Why’s and how’s he do that? Just only a freshman. Only about five six. No more than 140 pounds.”

“You’ll see why and how when we get to see him play.”

And see him play we did! He ran for touchdown the very first time he touched the ball in a Varsity game.

For our four high school years, Al “Butch” Fischer, whenever he ran with the football, was what I called “melody in motion.”

He possessed the speed and quickness and agility of a deer.

Al became both figuratively and factually “King of Our Class.”

And oh what a class it became.

As I sat in that Civics class during my freshman year, and within all other classes I was privileged to attend, it became increasingly apparent to me that many of my talented classmates would go on in life to enjoy “S-U-C-C-E-S-S. Success. Success. Success!”

(A chant the cheerleaders would lead us in during our pep rallies).

During our senior year the football team never lost a game.

On my walks from school to home, I always enjoyed pausing along the football field's chain-link fence to watch them all practice for their next game, and to admire Al Fischer and Larry Hartse, who both went on to play for the University of Minnesota's National Championship football team.

Among my other classmates who were also on the high school's undefeated football team were Mike Daggett, Jim Hutchins, Bob Rishovd, Dave Anderson, George Bestrom, Jack Rice, John Gleason, Mike MacGowen, Wayne Swanson, and Bruce Nicole; along with Lee Goddard, John Durocher, Fred Schmucker, Dave Fike, John Neunsinger, Franz Switzer, Dave Annett, Mike Einan, and Jerry Bender.

On one afternoon, while watching them all practice for their next big game, Norm Johnson, one of the team's assistant coaches, approached me at the fence and asked, "How we doing Paul?"

For him to ask me that? As though my opinion mattered? Wow!

Norm Johnson had graduated from Augsburg College as his football team's all-star lineman.

Norm Johnson was among my favorite teachers. A gentle giant of a man, who upon joining the Southwest High School faculty in the middle of my freshman year, made algebra finally make some sense to me in what had up to then been only confusing nonsense.

During my junior year I would often enter the gym after school, take off my shoes so as to not scuff the gym's polished floor, and shoot basketball hoops with Norm, each of us taking random shots in what we called our game of "h-o-r-s-e."

Norm would complement me on how my arched shots at the hoop had "a soft touch." And he would also laugh and say, "It's too bad you don't know how to make a jump shot. If you could do that you could maybe be on the basketball team."

Sometimes I'd stand at mid-court during our "horse games" and from that distance now and then score a shot that was "pure net." That always impressed him.

During my senior year, the football coach, Art Fredrickson, called me out of a math class one morning.

He pressed me up against a hallway locker, and asked me how come I never tried out for the football team, maybe because he noticed how I was always pausing at the fence to watch the team practice after school.

I tried to explain to him how my dedication to the high school choir and to my dance band was my passion, and how, even as much as I admired what he and his football team were accomplishing, I just wasn't into hitting and being hit.

"I prefer singing and playing love songs. So may I return to class?"

Then he said, "Are you yellow?"

Angered, I shook my head and walked on back to the math class.

But to this very day, I have wished I would have said, "How about you suit me up with pads and a helmet and let Larry Hartse and Mike Daggett go two-on-one with me. And then after they show me what they know about how to block and tackle, then how about *they* tell you what I'm made of?"

But that's only what my dreams are now made of. So be it.

I suppose to enhance my self-image I should add this:

During our sophomore year, during gym class, we were all led down to the football field, where we were all positioned on the field's oval cinder track, and placed into groups of eight guys.

Each group of eight guys then sprinted the 100-yard dash.

The winner of each dash was then placed into a group of eight.

In that dash the only guy who beat me was Al Fischer.

But the track coach, Al Halley, he never asked me to run for him.

Perhaps he was told that all I really cared about was music.

Or perhaps it was because I was a dunce in his advanced algebra class, his solid geometry class, and his trigonometry class.

So why am I sitting here writing about all of this?

It's because of what happened today: September 16, 2017.

When I woke at four this morning, I could not go back to sleep. Could not continue dreaming on and on about all of this.

Today was the day I had been looking forward to for more than several months. Today was the day that the Southwest High School Football Team of 1958 was going to be inducted into the school's Athletic Hall of Fame.

Jack Rice had previously phoned me and suggested I show up early so that we and our former classmates could converse before the football team's Hall of Fame induction ceremony commenced.

Tracey and I arrived at nine in the morning. She was excited by the prospect that she would meet many of the fellows who during the 30 years we've been married were the subject of the many stories I've told her about Southwest High School's 1958 football team.

Upon arriving at the school at nine, I was astonished to see how more than 200 people were already there and wearing nametags.

Was also astonished to see how many were wearing purple and white football jerseys, each jersey with the same number: 58.

Standing at the nametag table was Jim Barry, wearing a white shirt and a purple tie. Jim Barry and my brother Larry were in the class of 1961. And Jim and Larry were also in Boy Scout Troop 73, the troop my father led as their scout master.

Upon greeting Jim, he instantly praised my father, and went on to say, "Your dad changed my life. And to this day I still tell people how he challenged his scouts to memorize the names of what were then the 48 states. Honest to God. He gave each of us a five-dollar bill when we could each recite the names of all the 48 states!"

Why was Jim Barry there at the nametag table? After he graduated and then went on to graduate from college, Jim returned to teach at Southwest High School, a school that *Newsweek Magazine* reported as being among the Top 25 High Schools in America.

While Tracey was fixing my nametag to my shirt, I looked over her shoulder and looked into the eyes of a man who was wearing a purple and white football jersey. And he, in turn, continued to look into my eyes.

He looked to me to be the reincarnation of Jerry Bender, who only months ago passed away. He was Jerry's younger brother, Mike.

We of course then talked about Jerry and his passing. And about his sister Sandi, and about his brother Morrie, and his father Sam and mother Ruth. I felt as though I were talking with Jerry himself.

Mike was there to posthumously accept for Jerry his induction into Southwest High School's Athletic Hall of Fame. Spiritually.

And that is precisely what the rest of this day then became for me: a spiritual communion among beloved people who once upon a time played and interacted with each other when as kids we enjoyed the benefits and the blessings of being in both a great high school and in the Boy Scout troops within our neighborhood.

It was as though we had all been "helicoptered on down" to our old high school, to once more again enjoy one more "touchdown," and, perhaps, for our last time, to touch each other's hearts.

While talking with Mike Bender, I asked him if he had yet to meet anyone in the room he remembers as being his big brother Jerry's friends and classmates.

He said, "Oh yes. They're here with us today."

"Oh? Like who?"

"Mike Daggett. Jim Hutchins. Look. They're standing next to us."

"Next to us?"

Looking straight at me with white-as-ice hair and beards, they were laughing and pointing at me, both making me again feel silly.

How silly? In sixth grade they both took me aside upon the Fulton Elementary School playground, and there, for an hour, they tried to pound some sense into me, because of how I often misbehaved in our classroom. And to stop it and "shape up and fly right."

I pointed to the number 58 on their football jerseys, and then said, “Oh now I get it. The reason you’re all wearing a football jersey with that number 58 on it. You were both on the 1958 football team.”

And then Jim said to Mike Daggett, “Paul never was all that quick to figure out what’s going on. But eventually he gets it.”

Jim sat with Tracey and me, while Bob Rishovd also sat next to us before their Athletic Hall of Fame induction ceremony commenced.

During 2016, Tracey and I had attended the Southwest High School Foundation’s Distinguished Alumni induction ceremony, when Bob was inducted as a Distinguished Alumnus for having created a company that provided paramedic helicopters to perform rescue operations in Minneapolis. Bob’s helicopter paramedic service became “the model” many other major cities later adopted.

During 2015 Bob had been inducted into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame. Here is what they have to say about Bob on their website:

He earned many flight ratings and specialized in helicopter operations.

He served his country as a helicopter pilot in Viet Nam, earning many commendations and medals.

Rishovd started the Vertec Technology Corporation which performed heavy-lift operations.

He joined Imperial Helicopters in 1969 and was instrumental in opening an agricultural division.

Rishovd also contracted with WCCO Television to provide their first aerial news-gathering platforms.

In 1981, Rishovd purchased the company.

He implemented an emergency medical service program contracted to North Memorial Medical Center in Robbinsdale, MN and later sold the service to them.

He had expanded the medical services with bases throughout the Midwest. Rishovd was a local helicopter operations pioneer.

When Bob and I attended Fulton Elementary, we were rascals, always intent upon finding ways to make some kind of trouble.

One night, when my parents finally let me babysit for my younger brothers and sisters, I phoned Bob, who only lived two alleys away from me, to come on over, because I now had full access to my father's bottle of gin and Chesterfield cigarettes.

We got sick swigging that bottle of gin and smoking those cigs.

And Bob then showed me how I could pour water into the gin bottle to make it look like it still contained gin. But oh did I get punished when later Dad discovered the bottle's water content.

While we were in ninth grade, Bob and I were fortunate to become members of a group called "Boys Brigade." We met at a Baptist church located only one block between our homes. The church was on the corner of Upton Avenue and 50th Street.

Along with Wayne Swanson, Lee Goddard, John Lind, Steve Connors and several other boys, our church-league basketball team went undefeated in our conference. And our church-league softball team also went undefeated in our conference. We felt we were like "king of the hill."

And as I best recall, in eleventh grade, a new basketball coach, Walt Williams, then took Bob "under his wing."

Walt Williams showed Bob how to really "play ball."

Then in twelfth grade Bob became the basketball team's captain. I'm guessing Walt became like a father figure to Bob.

While Walt Williams' son provided his deceased father's acceptance speech into the Southwest High School Athletic Hall of Fame, Bob reverently bowed his head and folded his hands.

When called upon to join his football teammates for their induction into the Athletic Hall of Fame (the only Southwest High School football team in the school's 75-year history to ever be undefeated) Bob, who had excelled as both an offensive and defensive end, could not bring himself to join them upon the stage.

I'm guessing perhaps it was because Bob's aging knees would not allow him to ascend the staircase to the stage.

But he smiled proudly upon seeing them all standing before him.

Perhaps as proud as I felt when in eighth grade Wayne Swanson, Jim Hutchins and Jerry Bender and I played for the only team I had ever played football with, when we played for our Pershing Park Team that went undefeated in our Park Board conference.

Al Fischer and Mike Daggett, the co-captains of the Southwest High School Football Team of 1958, gave acceptance speeches for the team, Mike being his naturally conversational self after he was introduced by the always naturally modest and humble Al.

Following the ceremony, I was proud to give a book to Mike Bender that I had written years ago and self-published: *Homecomings*.

The first chapter is titled "Tribute to Jerry." It's about how Mike's brother Jerry contributed to my well-being during the years we attended Fulton Elementary School and Southwest High School.

And later, when Tracey and I were on the sidewalk out in front of the school, I gave Jim Hutchins a copy of *Homecomings*, pointing out to Jim the title of the book's last chapter: "Gentleman Jim."

I said to Jim, "It's a story about how many of the guys here today loved and respected your generous nature."

As Tracey and I were walking to our Subaru to head on over to Jack Rice's home, where Jack had invited us all to attend an "after-the-ceremony reunion," Jim Barry halted me on the walk and said more kind words about my father, expressing how he not only changed his life for the better, but also for the lives of many.

Fact is, Jerry Bender and Wayne Swanson and many other former high school buddies often told me at class reunions how they have more memories of my father than they have of me.

Today was unlike any reunion I have ever attended. Unlike our previous reunions, there was not a lot of talk about what we had accomplished since high school and during marriages and careers. We instead focused upon our favorite memories of each other.

And while sitting in a circle in Jack's back yard with the football team members, it was such a pleasure to hear them each recall their favorite memories of the games they played during that sweet autumn football season in 1958.

It was though they were each giving "instant replays" of moments within each game during their high school glory days.

They all seemed to be "touching down" upon what made them come together today at age 76. For them, and for me, a most heartfelt moment in time.

After trying to describe all of this in a phone call to my brother Larry tonight, Larry said, "They all scored touchdowns today."

And I'm now feeling I have more to say about how what happened on this day that shall remain forever in my memory.

But the sun shall soon come up and I'm going to have to somehow take a nap before the Vikings come on at noon to play the Steelers.

The past 24 hours have all seemed like a heavenly dream.

Yet I still have to make at least some mention of the tributes made to Larry Hartse and Reb Anderson during and after the ceremony. Reb Anderson was in my brother Larry's class of 1961, was also on the 1958 football team, and also in my dad's Boy Scout Troop 73.

Larry Hartse was individually inducted into the Athletic Hall of Fame today. But he was unable to attend. So Jack Rice mentioned to the audience how as much as Larry excelled on the football field, how Larry also excelled on ice rinks as the hockey team's captain, and how Larry also pole vaulted in track and field competitions.

And Reb Anderson? Well Phil Renslow, also individually inducted into the Athletic Hall of Fame today, praised Reb in his acceptance speech, acknowledging how Reb, also unable to attend today, had performed with the football team and in track & field team events.

Then afterward, at Jack's house, Jack commented on how he had experienced much difficulty when trying to invite Reb to attend the

induction ceremony, all because Reb had telephone gate keepers who always safeguarded Reb from anyone who tried to phone him.

I tried to resist telling Jack why Reb is not easy to reach by phone.

As magnificent as Reb indeed was as a high school athlete in the Golden Gloves boxing rings and on the football field and as a shot putter and discus thrower in track and field events, Reb became even more magnificent as a Buddhist monk.

How do I know this?

My brother Larry, who attended the University of Minnesota with Reb, was Reb's roommate in a dilapidated shack located near the campus, and they have sustained their friendship ever since then.

That's a whole "nother story." But if I still have your attention, here's a condensation:

It's a story that this summer became more and more fascinating.

Tracey and I sat down with several people while we were attending Southwest High School's 75th Anniversary celebration in June.

One gentleman at the table was Dan Edelman, who graduated from Southwest High School in 1963.

While sitting and conversing together, Dan sentimentally burst into singing a song the Southwest High School Choir had recorded for Columbia Records back in 1958.

I responded to Dan's energetic singing by saying, "How in the hell do you still remember the words to that song?"

Dan said, "Don't you remember how that song made our little Southwest High School nationally famous during the 1958 Christmas Season? When the nation's radio DJs played it?"

"Well yes. I do indeed remember that Dan. But I'm astonished how you remember the song's lyrics. That was more than 50 years ago."

I asked Dan for his email address and gave him our email address.

Then that night I phoned Larry, who lives in Seattle.

I asked Larry if he had ever known a Dan Edelman while Larry and Reb attended Southwest High School.

And I told Larry that Dan Edelman now lives in Washington D.C.

Larry, who practices law in Seattle, said, “What does Dan do there? I don’t recall him. But his name seems to be somehow familiar to me. You say he graduated from Southwest in 1963?”

“Yeah. I think so. His nametag was hard to read. And I didn’t ask him anything about what he does or has done.”

Larry was sitting in front of his personal computer and I could hear his keyboard clicking.

“Oh my god Paul. He’s a respected attorney who has successfully argued major cases before the Supreme Court. And you and Tracey sat and talked with him and you didn’t ask him what he does?”

“I don’t like to talk with people about their occupation until they volunteer to tell me. We just talked about the teachers we both hated and admired. And we enjoyed a lot of laughs doing it. And guess what? He seemed to have mentioned something about Reb.”

“Why Reb?”

“Dan said tomorrow he’s gonna be walking around Lake Harriet. With someone I gathered was perhaps close to Reb. But I didn’t catch her name.”

“So you gonna email Dan?”

“Only if Dan sends me an email. We had such a good time talking with him. So I’m guessing he may email us. Who knows?”

A week later Tracey and I received an email from Dan, expressing how much he enjoyed meeting and conversing with Tracey and me at Southwest High School’s 75th Anniversary celebration.

So of course I told Larry. And of course Larry then emailed Dan.

And soon Dan and Larry were exchanging a flurry of expansive emails about their law careers and their mutual friends who had attended Southwest High School. I swear they both must be able to type more than 100 words per minute without a single typo.

Their email exchanges were copied to Tracey and me.

And Dan, through more emails, introduced Larry to the lady with whom Dan had walked around Lake Harriet the day after Tracey and I had conversed with him.

The lady expressed to Larry that she and her daughter Deborah would soon be visiting together in Seattle. So Larry invited her and her daughter Deborah to meet with him for lunch during their time in Seattle.

Weeks later, while enjoying their lunch with Larry at a restaurant overlooking a view of the Puget Sound, a cell phone rang.

It was Deborah's cell phone ringing.

And after Deborah ended her brief conversation with her caller, Larry asked who phoned her.

She said, "That was my father."

"Who's your father," Larry asked.

"Reb," she said.

I'm guessing I would have to have been there to completely see and apprehend and enjoy the look of astonishment on Larry's face. Larry never knew Reb had a daughter.

I have now become more and more curious about Reb. Here's some info I can copy and paste from internet websites:

In his youth, he was a Golden Gloves boxer. Anderson developed an interest in Buddhism while still in his teens.

In 1967, he abandoned his graduate studies in psychology and mathematics to study Soto Zen under Shunryu Suzuki at the San Francisco Zen Center.

Anderson was then ordained as a priest in 1970 by Suzuki, who gave Anderson the Buddhist name Tenshin Zenki (Translated: *Naturally Real, the Whole Works*).

He received dharma transmission in 1983 and served as abbot of San Francisco Zen Center's three training centers (City Center, Green Gulch Farm and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center) from 1986 to 1995.

Tenshin Roshi continues to teach at Zen Center, living with his friends and family at Green Gulch Farm.

He is author of "Warm Smiles from Cold Mountains: Dharma Talks on Zen Meditation" and "Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts" and "The Third Turning of the Wheel: Wisdom of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra".

Anderson is married to Rusa Chiu, a Jungian analyst in private practice. He has two daughters, Deborah Savran and Thea Anderson, and four grandchildren.

Now that Reb has been inducted into Southwest High School's Athletic Hall of Fame as a member of its 1958 football team, it seems to me that Reb should also be inducted as a member of the Southwest Foundation's Distinguished Alumni, in the same reverential manner Bob Rishovd was inducted in 2016.

For more information about Reb, please enjoy visiting his website:

<http://www.rebanderson.org/noabode.html>

Watching the Vikings play the Steelers today does not matter. The pleasure of writing this far exceeds watching a pro football game.

Pro football players are mostly about money. School kids, however, play football for memorable moments they shall forever treasure.