

THANK YOU, JACKIE HALL

Those of us who never caught a touchdown pass, hit a home run with the bases loaded, or sank a three-pointer in overtime must take our triumphs where we find them.

I had just turned nineteen and was trying desperately to fit into undergraduate life. I wanted a shortcut to acceptance. My solution: pledge Bengal Lancers. In 1964 their members included a Wimbledon champion, most of the school's nationally ranked tennis team, the student body president, and others I considered godlike.



I was not a perfect match for the Lancer membership profile. My face had broken out during my freshman year and resisted all dermatological intervention. I weighed 115 pounds after a steak dinner. I could not cuss without blushing, drink without throwing up or lie convincingly about my nonexistent sex life. However, I was spaniel-like in my eagerness for approval.

I went through rush hoping that the Lancers would choose me to showcase their tolerance for diversity. They already had athletic, tall, and brilliant. Surely they could use some short and quirky to balance things. Amazingly, I got in. I kept expecting them to reconsider and take one more vote. Long before hanging chads, I worried about a recount.

In the sixties, pledging was a serious business. Sleep and studies were put on hold for four weeks. We went through twenty-eight days of hell: much like rehab without recovery. Members treated you like dirt in public. On Saturday nights they blindfolded the pledges and dumped us fifty

miles in the country stark naked. We were forced to suck on bouillon cubes, retch a lot, and have molasses poured where it was never meant to go.

The pledge period traditionally began with a race from campus to Earl Abel's on Sunday evening after the coeds had been locked away in North, South, and Murchison. The actives made us warm up by doing fifty push-ups in front of the bookstore. I reached twenty-two and gave out. My failure did not go unnoticed and the air was soon filled with derisive insults proclaiming me unfit to wear the Lancer pin.

I saw my worst fear coming true; they were going to

throw me out. Suddenly I realized that I could not afford to be last in this race. In a burst of creative terror, I came up with a strategy to avoid the loser label.

During the run, I would do whatever the pledge to my right did. The worst that could happen is that I would tie for last. I didn't even look at his face. As we took our places at the starting line, I stared at his sneakers and told myself that wherever his feet went, mine would go. I uttered a silent prayer for speed. God must have smiled.

"Get ready! Get set! Go!"

My unsuspecting partner took off like a missile. So did I. He bounded down Stadium Drive and up the hill toward Hildebrand. I bounded along with him. We got to the light at the top of the hill and adrenalin flooded every artery. I was in my first altered state.

We rounded the corner and I was not even winded. Fear fueled me. I was moving like a cheetah with dinner on his mind. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, my running buddy should have felt great. He took longer strides. I took longer slides. He slowed down, I slowed down. Incarnate Word went by in a blur.

I could see the lights of Broadway ahead. Only half a mile to go. Maybe I could keep up the charade a little longer. After all, the others hadn't passed us yet. I looked back to see how close they were and found that we were all alone. The rest of the pledge class had disappeared. Then I saw a tiny clump of figures two hills back. It was the lumbering jock squad.

I turned to share this news with my companion but he sprinted ahead. He was not going to leave me now. Only then did I realize whom I had chosen to emulate—Jackie Hall, halfback of the varsity football team, the fastest man in the school.

I caught up with him at Brackenridge Park as the Earl Abel's neon sign blinked in the distance. Together we loped down the straightaway. I have no memory of time or space, only elegant motion. As we entered the parking lot to cheers, Jackie showed real brotherhood. He let me touch the door first.

They made me wear a laurel wreath for a week. I felt like a hero. I would have given interviews if anyone had asked. I got no commercial endorsements, but I did become a Lancer. And, for one magical night, I ran like a halfback.

Thank you, Jackie, for my Olympic moment.

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