

When my husband and I walked into the Hamburg High School gym a few months ago to see my nephew’s junior varsity basketball game, the volunteer at the door smiled, “Date night?” she asked with a warm greeting. We had spent so many years at the Hamburg High School gym watching our son’s basketball games and so many things were still the same. The cheerleaders still had their huge purple bows, the Hamburg Varsity H Club was selling slices of pizza near the entrance, and the fee for the game was still one dollar. My sister, Theresa, was waiting for us in the bleachers on the left side of the court, as we entered the gym. This was unfamiliar territory for us.

From the left side of the court, I had the perfect view, but it was not the basketball game that initially held my attention. I was now sitting directly across from where I once sat for so many years. So many things seemed the same, but there was one painful difference: My father’s chair was missing. My dad rarely missed any of my son’s games. He was the No. 1 fan of the Hamburg basketball team. He knew who could shoot well with their left, rebound, the team stats and who had good court vision.

During my son’s first couple of years, my father navigated the bleacher stairs gingerly to find a bench. By the time my son was in his junior year, we would arrive at the games early and hope there was a spot for Dad on the bottom corner of the bleacher, near the railing. He did not want to miss a game, but he also did not trust his 85-year-old legs to climb the stairs for a good seat. I’m still not sure how it started, but as Dad’s legs grew weary, we began to find a chair from the team bench pulled to the side near the corner of the bleachers. It was almost always waiting for my dad when he arrived. If the chair wasn’t there, one of the assistant coaches, players, or one of the other parents would

place one in my dad's "spot" as he entered the gym. He sat in his "borrowed" comfortable chair for two seasons, calling out encouragement to my son and his teammates, sometimes disagreeing "quietly" with the referees and enjoying life on the right side of the court, behind the Hamburg bench.

When the games were over, we would drive Dad home and he would discuss the game, often weaving it into real life. He spoke of unselfish players, kids who were consistent and solid players who often did not get the glory they deserved. He spoke of dedication, respect, trust and loyalty to the team. My father knew the truth about basketball and sports in general. It's not just about the game, it's about life, how you treat people, and how you face adversity. He earned the right to give advice after serving as a Buffalo police officer for almost 40 years, being a faithful devoted father of 10 children, and a grandfather of 29.

Fortunately, my son and many of his teammates have utilized many of these sports lessons and qualities to enhance their lives as young adults. They saw the dedication of a grandfather and helped provide him with tremendous enjoyment during his last years. So as I sat, watching basketball from the left side of the court, I know that my father was watching from a very comfortable chair above. He is now encouraging his latest "Hamburg hoops" grandson, Patrick, to play tough defense, to use his left, be confident enough to take the three point shot, and always be a team player, for that is how the game of life is won.