

The Seventy-Two Yard Line

by Jason D. Johnson

The smell of fresh cut grass swelled in his nostrils. Sweat rippled down his forehead and curved around his eyebrow. Voices swooned up and down in the autumn air making their way across a sea of jerseys to his waiting ears. He lay on his back in the middle of the field, limp as a dish rag and stared into the heavens. He waited. Finally, the feeling reemerged in his legs and he sat up, smiling shyly at the teammates standing around him.

There is no 72 yard line in football, but there should be.

From 1958 to 1973, the Cleveland Browns never had to worry about their running game. At first glance, one would say, "Sure they didn't. They had Jim Brown, Bobby Mitchell and Leroy Kelly running the football!" But when one looks closer at the statistics and the roster of those teams, one name sticks out year after year.

Gene Hickerson.

As pulling guard for those three tremendous backs, Hickerson plowed holes in opposing defensive lines and smashed defensive backs to the ground allowing Brown, Mitchell and Kelly to chew up yards. Named to the All NFL Team five straight seasons and selected for six consecutive Pro Bowls, Hickerson's speed at guard allowed Cleveland to have a 1,000 yard rusher in 9 of his first 10 seasons. To appreciate that accomplishment, you have to realize before that period there had only been 7 total 1,000 yard rushers in league history.

As a boy, Hickerson no doubt dreamed of playing football professionally. Every boy dreams of greatness at some point and I am sure the lure of the pigskin sparked the same in him. The sad thing is you can't dream backwards.

Now Hickerson may not be able to dream at all.

On August 4th of this year, Gene Hickerson at 72 years of age was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. And just like ole times, Gene Hickerson led the way down the aisle to his induction with Jim Brown, Bobby Mitchell and Leroy Kelly in tow once again. Only this time, instead of Hickerson *giving* pushes to would-be tacklers, he was in a wheelchair *receiving* pushes from the three burley backs. The face on Hickerson said it all: He didn't know where he was.

Diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease for

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several years now, Hickerson's ability to charter the waters of daily activities has all but dried up. Receiving an ovation that he could hear, but couldn't formulate into any kind of meaning at his induction ceremony, he simply stared out and up towards the gathered crowd. His achievements, still appreciated by so many in the sports community, now rest far beyond the reaches of his memory. The famous yellow jacket placed on his shoulders that day could have been a mink, a sweater or a t-shirt for all he knew or cared.

You know the statistics. The Alzheimer's victims are growing in mass every year. Memories are being raked over. The activities of daily living are disappearing. The "nothing" is sitting in for hundreds of thousands of people. We as a people are



getting discouraged and broken because of the melancholy, the fear and the disappointment we see erupting everyday. Perhaps, since it has been so long, we are losing sight of the truth and the truth is this:

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WE CAN CURE ALZHEIMER'S.

Humans have prayed and evolved their way into the supreme beings in this concrete and megawatt jungle. We have squelched small pox. We have cured polio. Millions have been saved from the wrath of influenza each year because of vaccines. Science. Medicine. People. We can do wondrous things with our brain and our hands, but the belief and the effort must match. Are we believing?

Gene Hickerson reached the 72 yard line, but can't grasp the concept of it. All the rich smells of fresh chalk, cut grass, sweat, and breath cannot bring it back to him. But in his typical fashion, he is out front with his story and clearing the way, making headlines and pointing us as a people to the end zone once again. Only this time, the end zone is not about six points scored off a touchdown. It is about the victory of staring down one of the most cruel diseases we know and telling it that the game is over.

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