

“For Tim Higgins, Refereeing Is an Itinerant, Fraternal Lifestyle”

*(Excerpted from an article by Barker Davis,
The Washington Times)*

He kneels behind the scorer’s table at Providence’s Dunkin’ Donuts Center, every eye in the building tracing him in a mixture of impatience and anticipation. He watches the video replay on the tiny courtside monitor for the 10th time. Again he sees Texas guard P.J. Tucker leap from the foul line, the scoreboard clock hit 0, the leather leave Tucker’s hand and, finally, the pulse of red light above the backboard.

Last Second Shot in Game

The shot beats the light by a fraction each time, and that is all that matters. Texas coach Rick Barnes hangs over one shoulder, volunteering advice. But the ultimate distraction is the din of the 12,993 experts in the stands. Few, if any, of the Friars faithful now expecting a second overtime know the light, not the horn or the clock, marks a game’s official conclusion. Nor are they likely aware that the light comes on exactly .9 seconds after the clock reaches 0.

But this is not the time for explanation; it’s the time for decision. The smallish man in the striped shirt rises from his stoop and strides to the center of the court. A Solomon by nature, his job often requires Caesar. He indicates Tucker’s hoop is good, awarding a 79–77 overtime victory to Texas. He does not relish the pronouncement, only its rectitude. The cacophony of protest begins well before his first step toward the dressing room. Boos, curses and even a few plastic bottles rain on him as all manner of hatred accompanies his quick jog off the court.

The Drive Home

Awaiting him is a complimentary cold-cut sandwich, followed by a police escort to his car and a 2-hour drive to his home in Ramsey, NJ, where his wife and daughters will long have been asleep. Tomorrow will greet him with much the same: airport, hotel, rental car, arena, sweat, stress and, of course, ire. If he is fortunate, the day will end in the thankless anonymity of an unnoticed exit. If he is not, however, if this shadow is required to step momentarily into the light reserved for stars, the day might resound with mock cheers and undeserved infamy. Welcome to the world of Tim Higgins . . .

Typical Week of Work

Five days later, you meet Higgins in the parking lot of Miami Convocation Center. He has agreed to let you tag along for a typical weekend of work? Pittsburgh at Miami on Saturday (January 10) followed on Sunday by a late afternoon tip between Indiana and Michigan in Ann Arbor. Two qualities that will turn out to be Higgins hallmarks, a gregarious personality and staggering efficiency, immediately present themselves as he warmly shakes your hand while at the same time flipping your travel bag into the trunk of his rental car. Despite nearly 30 years of experience as an NCAA official, Higgins

proves to be one of the least officious people on the planet. He represents the antithesis of the angry fan’s stereotypical ref, the know-it-all, preening-for-the-cameras, take-the-game-over, humorless striped satan. In short, he is officialdom’s mellow Yin to Ted Valentine’s Yang.

Higgins is one of those rare people who genuinely seems to like, and be liked by, nearly everyone he encounters. Accordingly, everyone in his path, from the airport shuttle driver in Miami to Michigan coach Tommy Amaker, receives the same liberal dose of Higgins’ Jersey-Irish charm.

Big Time Attitude

“I can’t stand the big-time attitude guys who do that don’t get it,” says Higgins, who works primarily Big East, Big Ten and Conference USA games. “I remember going to this golf tournament when I was just a kid. I was like 5 feet from Ben Hogan and the only one around, and he never acknowledged me. It broke my heart. Now, I’m not saying he big-timed me, because I was just this little punk who was too scared to speak to him. But it left an impression. I think that’s the first order: Be decent to people. Maybe I feel that way because so many people have been so good to me.” At first blush, that would seem an odd sentiment for a man who absorbs several hours of near-incessant verbal abuse roughly 60 times a year. Even the most jaded fan would be surprised at the barbs hurled at Higgins if he went to a game with his ears



trained on little else.

Double Overtime Thriller

Midway through the second-half of the Miami-Pitt game, a double-overtime thriller the Panthers win 84–80, Higgins awards Pitt’s Jaron Brown a timeout as the senior guard flies out of bounds with tenuous control of a loose ball. As the teams head toward their respective benches, an irate Miami fan less than 10 feet from Higgins bellows: “Higgins, you’re a [expletive] moron. The guy didn’t even have the ball you blind, old elf. What a joke. You know why you’re wearing stripes don’t you, Higgins? Because you’re a [expletive] criminal.”

Hecklers

And this is Miami, traditional home of the Big East’s smallest and most docile crowds. Asked about the heckler afterward, Higgins replies: “Really? I honestly didn’t hear it. After awhile, you learn to tune out basically everything but the game itself.” “There was this one UConn fan who got me pretty good a few years ago, though. I had just done a Connecticut loss to UNC in one of the first ACC-Big East Challenges, and it was the following weekend in Hartford or Storrs. We’re standing around during warmups, and this young kid says very politely, ‘Mr. Higgins. Excuse me, Mr Higgins.’ He seemed so harmless and polite. So, I turned around to address him, and he says, ‘Yeah, Mr. Higgins, I just wondered if you could take your pants

down so I could see Dean Smith's autograph?' Wham, then he's gone."

Meaningful Dialogue With Players and Coaches

What about coaches and players, do most officials listen to them? "Sure, you listen," Higgins says. "With coaches, you let them make their point, and then you expect them to move on. There are certain words and phrases? You can use your imagination here? which everybody knows will result in an automatic technical. And then there are technicals that result from ABS? that's accumulated BS."

"As for the players, I'm always talking to the kids. They're terrific, almost without exception. Dealing with the kids is the best part of what we do. Now if a player tells me another kid is holding his jersey, for instance, certainly I'll watch for it. But mostly, we just tease each other. They always know just what they can and can't get away with. But honestly, if it's just me and a kid standing there talking, they can say just about anything. I give them a much longer leash than the coaches to express themselves."

A day later, while waiting for your bag at the Detroit airport (he hasn't checked one in 20 years), Higgins ticks through the Michigan game-day essentials: "Let's see, Romulus (Michigan) Marriott. Room 325, slightly larger than standard corner room, very quiet. Great home-made chicken noodle soup downstairs. Shuttle driver's name is Tony. Ann Arbor ? just under a 40-minute drive from the Detroit airport on a Sunday. Great college town, lamentable lodging. Crisler Arena ? smallest dressing room in the nation."

30 Straight Winters on the Road

He winks at you like a favorite uncle who has just delivered a perfect punchline. His mind has become a catalogue of such logistical information after 30 straight winters on the road. "It gets to the point where you almost don't need to contact the guys you're working a game with," Higgins says. "It's almost understood that you'll meet at the Marriott nearest the airport on game day, and the referee is responsible for getting the rental car and driving."

The referee is the lead official (randomly selected by the leagues) for each three-man group that works a game. Aside from the unofficial duty of arranging game transportation for his colleagues, referees are responsible for any final-word game calls and handling things like the jump-ball toss. "I'm an awful tosser, so when I'm the referee I always designate one of the other guys to handle the jump," Higgins says. "Bobby Donato, one of the original Big East officials like me and Jim Burr, is known as an excellent tosser."

Fox 40 Pealess Whistle

Over the course of the weekend, Higgins reveals dozens of such officiating nuggets. All officials, for instance, use a special pealess whistle known as a Fox 40 (after its Canadian inventor and longtime official Ron Foxcroft). Unlike traditional whistles, the Fox 40 never flutters and fails and is both louder and more penetrating.

All college officials start out small time, working their way up from peewee and rec league games to high school and then college. "I wanted to be a professional golfer," says Higgins, who grew up caddying at White Beaches Golf Club in Haworth, NJ, forging a scratch handicap when he wasn't looping. "The head pro there, Ben Parola, told me I wasn't good enough. But I was stubborn. So he brought in some guys you never heard of who couldn't make it on tour to play me. I shot 71 and lost like \$260, which was a lot of money back in the late-'60s. Ben looks at me afterward and says, 'All right, smart guy, what do you want to do with your life now?'"

"I'd never had much use for school. But once it was clear I was going to need a college education, I needed something to help pay my way through Fairleigh Dickinson. So, the FDU baseball coach, former Orioles catcher John Orsino, put me to work officiating. I started doing kids games for a couple of bucks."

Whistling While You Work

Three decades later, Higgins' part-time gig pays considerably better. Big East officials make \$800 a game, plus coach airfare, a \$150 per diem and \$60 for car rental. That means Higgins, who estimates he works approximately 60 games a season, grosses approximately \$50,000 a year whistling while he works.

While that's a solid income, virtually every college official also holds down a full-time job. Higgins is vice president of sales for Kamco, a Brooklyn company that sells contractor's supplies and heavy machinery. Thankfully, his hours are flexible, his cell phone is always handy and his boss is considerably more compromising than most of the suits he spars with on the sidelines.

One of those suits, former Notre Dame and North Carolina coach Matt Doherty, airs the most common grievance filed against college officialdom in the Miami media room. "Why are 60-year-old guys, many of whom have other full-time jobs, doing six games a week?" asks Doherty, who is working as a TV analyst while waiting for another coaching opportunity. "That shouldn't be allowed."

When you redirect the question to Higgins, he handles it without a hint of rancor.

Why Do Old Men Do Six Games a Week?

"First, I'm 56. Second, I exercise every day, and I'm in pretty good shape, all appearances to the contrary," laughs Higgins, who runs 4.32 miles (according to your pedometer) during the Miami-Pitt game without a single sign of weariness. "Third, I do around 60 games in what is basically a 20-week season ? even I can do that math. Fourth, we're very closely monitored by the leagues. I can promise you that the major conferences get the best of the best."

Actually, Higgins need look no further for a defense than his own resume, which includes 10 performance-based trips to the Final Four and four appearances in the title game (1988, '90, '97 and '99).

"Timmy is one of the best, if not the best, in the land," says Art Hyland, the Big East's coordinator of officials. "He's solid gold."

Enlightenment is a 40-minute ride to Ann Arbor.

Why Would Anyone Do What Higgins Does?

All weekend, you've been wanting to ask Higgins, "Why?" Why would a financially comfortable middle-aged man with a wife and three kids be willing to spend 5 months of the year bouncing among the nation's college campuses? Is it the chance to interact with players and coaches? Is it the electricity of the arena? The thrill of the contest? After the ride to Ann Arbor, you no longer need to ask.

The pair joining Higgins to complete the crew for the Michigan-IU game are Steve Welmer and Ted Hillary. Between Welmer's one-liners and Hillary's needling, there might be 5 seconds of dead air between Detroit and Ann Arbor. Hillary starts before the trip, screeching to a halt in mock terror in the Marriott parking lot when he learns Higgins has worked two straight overtime games: "Get out, Timmy. I mean it. You're poison. The snoring, your sexual orientation, those things we can handle. But we want nothing to do with your overtime karma. . . . Hey, kid, you ever done any officiating?"

Welmer, a 6-foot-10 quipster with a particularly colorful vocabulary, takes the mike seconds later as a sedan bearing a Michigan bumper sticker drifts blinker-less across our front bumper.

"What's wrong with these people," Welmer says. "Don't they know they're not supposed to try and kill us until after the game?" Talk turns to a recent holiday tournament that concluded when the runner-up trophy was delivered to the officials' dressing room in pieces. Higgins recounts the tale to a chorus of hysteria, swearing you to an oath of silence concerning the offending coach.

Good Natured Banter Worthy of An Admission Charge

On and on it goes all the way to Crisler Arena ? most of it worthy of an admission charge, much of it unprintable, all of it good-natured. This is your answer. The games, of course, have their alluring cache. But for every official, games are primarily work. And the games are merely the buoys in the ocean that is the lifestyle. These moments are the ebb and swell ? the hours spent together in cars, on planes, at restaurants and behind dressing room doors. This is the fraternity that keeps loneliness and age at bay.

"It was harder when the girls were younger," Higgins says when asked about the road blues. "But I was lucky to marry the right woman, and I think my wife would tell you it's been a great thing. After all, it's put two of our three girls through college so far."

"The Big East officials' wives have a saying that every April when the season's over, everybody has to go through reentry. I think what the girls miss the most is their space and what the guys miss most is each other. Over the years, this job has allowed me to work with some amazing people. And you spend so much time together that you get to be like family. . . . What can I say? It's the greatest part-time job in America."