

The Qualifying Run

Most people thought of my uncle as an educator. After all he was the principal at several schools and the superintendent of a couple of county school systems. The last dozen or so years of his career were spent as the statewide director of educational television. However, if you scratched the surface, beneath all that education he was a farmer at heart. Many of the summers of my youth were spent on my grandfather's farm where you could usually find my uncle in the fields. And this is where I learned that if you scratch the surface of this farmer you'd find a true educator – one who realized that all the "book learning" in the world doesn't matter if you don't believe in yourself.

One particularly hot August afternoon my uncle and a few hired men were collecting up bales of recently cut hay. As usual I was making a pest of myself in the guise of insisting that I could help. My uncle could have merely dismissed me -- sending me to the next pasture to find a four leaf clover, knowing full well that the pasture had been sown with alfalfa. Instead he studied the situation looking for a way to apply my limited abilities to a difficult task. At nine years of age the bed of the wagon was about chin high on my small frame. Each of the bales of hay probably weighed twice what I did. There was absolutely no possibility that I could toss the bales of hay onto the wagon, much less line them up in neat rows like so many bricks. The most probable outcome of an attempt to do so would be to find myself face down in the dirt with a wagon tread running down my back. However, with the seat pulled all the way forward my legs were just long enough to reach the two brake pedals on the tractor. So my uncle took the time to teach me how to turn the tractor in place using first the left and then the right brake pedal at the end of each row. He taught me to steer straight lines parallel to the previous row and he taught me to set throttle so the tractor stayed just in front of the day laborers tossing the bales.

At the end of the day my uncle's small investment in my training had freed up an extra pair of hands for the heavy lifting. And I was on top of the world. I was just nine years old but I had been entrusted with the task of driving – even if it was just a farm tractor. Having pushed that big old tractor at the breakneck speed of 2 miles an hour along arrow straight lines interspersed with all those hairpin turns, I was now ready for the Indy 500.

-- Larry Stiles