

*Irv
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Jimmy Mitchell

There was hardly anything to him. I mean, he was a shade over five feet and he long since had quit growing. When he bent over, his mother could lose him in a cabbage patch.

But he was an athlete and a scholar and a popular kid in every way. It all came out of him – the ability, the desire, the great striving – every minute of his waking life like glue from a punctured tube.

Jimmy Mitchell is dead now, killed last week in Viet Nam. His mourners are many.

You may not remember the name but you may remember the face. He was blonde and blue-eyed with a kewpi-like face. Always he was quick and alert, moving like a little puppy that is attracted to a bone. He was so fast that a rumor would have trouble keeping up with him.

He came out of Encinitas and played for San Dieguito High School. He was a halfback who caught the winning touchdown pass when San Dieguito defeated Oceanside in 1959. He was the guard in basketball who dribbled past the Oceanside press and the dash man in track who ran away with the league meet.

Jimmy Mitchell was a little man who played sports like a giant.

Suffering Each Defeat

Don Huffman, Oceanside basketball coach, believes Mitchell was the best defensive high school basketball player this area ever has produced.

“Defensively, no one was his equal,” Huffman said. “And he was an expert dribbler. He could break a full court press by himself.

“But I’ll always remember Mitchell most for his competitive spirit. There has never been a high school athlete who wanted to win a badly as he did.”

There was a game in 1959 between Oceanside and San Dieguito and the result meant little. Neither school claimed a championship basketball team and neither would improve its position in the standings with a victory. Oceanside won and Mitchell cried.

“He suffered with the defeat,” Huffman recalled. You know how little guys are in sports. They get the razz. All the audiences were hostile towards Mitchell but the kid handled such abuse with dignity and courage.

And when the game was over, his tormentors most often then wished that Mitchell had been playing for their side.

“I know the Oceanside players detested Mitchell when they played against him,” Huffman said. “But they sure would like it if he were playing for them.”

Basketball was his great love and he went on to captain the Palomar College team in 1960-61.

“He was the club’s rally man” recalled Palomar coach Joe Brennan. “When the team needed the spectacular play to get it going, Mitchell would come up with it.”

He arrived at Palomar armed with all the necessary defensive technique and ball handling ability but he lacked a consistent scoring touch.

“Mitchell was the first one on the court and the last off it,” Brennan said. “He realized what he had to learn and he worked as hard as he could to improve himself.”

Wanted To Be A Coach

He realized that his size often turned against him. But instead of brooding because he wasn’t the beneficiary of an anthropologist’s blessing. Mitchell accepted his lack of height as a challenge.

“It was his way never to stop learning,” Brennan said. “No matter whether we won or lost, he wanted to know what he had done wrong.”

Possibly, it was such an attitude that allowed him to be an honor student, and officer of his class and one of the most popular persons ever to attend San Dieguito.

“He won the respect of all classes of people”, said Sam McCracken of the high school. “The bad kids as well as the good kids liked him. So did the adults. And it all came naturally to him.”

He had hoped to return to this area after Viet Nam. He had qualified for his teacher’s credential and wanted to be a coach.

“Jimmy would have made a terrific coach,” McCracken said. “He loved kids as much as he loved athletics.”

You hear about the high cost of the war in Viet Nam and every day another set of causality figures is released. The digits mean something and then they don’t --- unless one of them has a face.

So they will bring the body of Jimmy Mitchell home and there will be military graveside services at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery. We grieve for his wife and little child and his parents. And we want them to know that Jimmy Mitchell will reside in the memories of many people in this area for many years to come.