

STOCKTONSpeaks!

JOHN NISBY

Imagine the sun shining high overhead. There is nothing but you, the bright blue sky, and the musky smell of hay. You focus on the task at hand—bucking hay. The cut hay lies in bundles on the ground before you, ready to be moved and loaded onto trucks. Your physical exertion, combined with the knowledge of hard work, meld into a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. For young John Nisby, this was no imagined scene; it was reality, and it was a daily occurrence.

When John was very young, he would awake to the sound of his neighbor's truck as its engine struggled to start. John's curiosity centered on his neighbor's disappearance so early in the morning. Occasionally, his neighbor would ask John to help fix the tires on that old truck. In helping the older man, young John developed a relationship with his neighbor that eventually led to an invitation to accompany the man on what the boy thought was a mysterious journey. John eagerly said yes, and off they went—to buck hay. From that point on, John would arise early every morning to move around heavy loads of hay in south Stockton. His task was to load and unload the bundled haystacks from the truck.

John enjoyed working hard and was also able to see the countryside as he worked. This heavy labor developed both his muscular strength as well as a strong work ethic that followed John the rest of his life. As John worked, he increasingly felt stronger and with each passing day, was growing into the man he would become.

John Nisby was born in San Francisco in 1936 and moved to Stockton as young boy. His father was a longshoreman and his mother, a housewife. As John and his two siblings grew up, his family instilled within him the idea that a person must work hard for success in life. John took this advice to heart and

devoted himself to achieving scholastically, in his employment, and in athletics. He joined both the track and football teams at Edison High School and made good grades. John recalls his mother and grandmother being proud of him for excelling in school while maintaining a job at the same time.

John's coach in high school, Frank Boyle, was instrumental in getting him to try out for track and encouraging him to join the football program. Frank Boyle served not only as John's coach but also as his mentor. Since John held part-time job, he never before had had the time or opportunity to play in neighborhood sports. Although being involved in organized sports was an entirely new experience for John, his strength and the work ethic that had become ingrained in him from his hay-bucking experience made him a successful athlete and student. John remembers that sports introduced him to a new world, and it was forces in his decision to attend college.

After high school, John spent a semester of community college before transferring to the College of the Pacific, where he continued playing football. In the college newspaper of October, 1956, John was named outstanding player of the week. In his interview, John said he hoped to continue to play football professionally. A year later, John became a member of the Green Bay Packers.

Joining the National Football League was a time of transition for John. No longer in California, John felt the full impact of the Jim Crow laws. The Jim Crow laws were first enacted in the late 19th century shortly after the Civil War Reconstruction. These laws strictly segregated African Americans from Caucasian Americans. According to these laws, African Americans were restricted in their use of commercial establishments, accommodations, transportation facilities, schools, and most public facilities. Prevalent primarily in the south, the Jim Crow laws, named for a character in a popular minstrel show, in effect relegated black Americans to second hand status.

John remembers the full effects of these laws while he traveled with the Packers. The first game for Green Bay Packers after he joined the team took

place in a southern state. In determining their accommodations, the "white" team members were escorted to one hotel, while the "black" team members were taken to their "separate, but equal" hotel. Far from home and family, experiencing this strong act of racism marked a moment of progression towards John's adulthood.

All of his life, John believed that hard work would bring success, just as his father had told him. However, after finally reaching the ranks of professional football, he was disillusioned by the racism and segregation he encountered. Determined to change his circumstances, John called a meeting with a black reporter to state that he would not accept that kind of treatment again. John told the reporter that if he could not stay with the rest of the team, he would not play. The reporter spread the word, and soon segregation in accommodations for players was stopped league-wide.

In addition, the practice of not letting African Americans buy a seat at the fifty-yard line was discontinued. From then on anyone, regardless of race, could buy any ticket he or she could afford. Although John's words and actions were quite risky at the time, he never regretted speaking out against the injustice.

During his football career, John played for the Packers, the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Washington Redskins. John was one of the first African Americans to play under Redskins owner George Preston Marshall, a man who openly opposed racial equality in football. Being part of one of the last teams in the NFL to do away with segregation was difficult for John. When asked about his view on George Preston Marshall, John stated, "I never appreciated the man at all because of the stand that he took on blacks prior to my arrival here. My relationship with the front office wasn't really that great."

John recalls an incident in a Virginia nightclub where he and his black teammates were refused admittance. When the African American team members were turned away, the white team members left the club as well.

Despite the views of George Marshall, John felt a unified team spirit that, in combination with his athletic abilities, allowed him to succeed while playing

for the Redskins. After three seasons with the Washington team, John left football and headed back to California to complete his bachelor's degree. He returned to University of the Pacific, attained his degree in Art, and went on to earn a Master's Degree at the University of Oregon.

All of these experiences have helped shape John into the man he is today. John's success in football and education came with developing physical and inner strength and determination early in life. His family always taught him to "give it his all", whether it was in bucking hay, playing sports or being a member of the community. But, he also realizes that hard work is sometimes not enough. He feels that in America, a person even today continues to be defined by his or her skin color. Thus, a person should be aware of the surrounding culture and how much impact we can have on one another.

Today, responding to this awareness, John works in a multi-cultural organization at San Joaquin Delta College. Drawing from his experiences in helping change injustices in the NFL, he educates to promote diversity and acceptance.

However, no matter what color a person's skin, hard work never hurts. He says, "If you are going to do something, you have to do it 100 percent. What is 100 percent? It is giving every ounce of energy that you have in your body and using that to achieve the ultimate in every aspect that you compete in. It may be in the classroom, in sports, in family related activities. But, whatever it is, you have to give 100 percent. In the arena of work you have to give 100 percent also. As a result, there is a high probability that you will be successful."

From bucking hay to changing the face of the National Football League, John Nisby's life exemplifies these words.

Interviewer: Marilyn Gallup
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Ethnic Group: African American
Generation: Middle