

Yeager Scholars idea sprung from basketball

By Sandy Wells

STAFF WRITER

A basketball player scored one for the books.

The father of the prestigious Yeager Society of Scholars at Marshall University borrowed the idea from his experiences as a player under Herd coaching legend Cam Henderson.

Considering all the flak over spending for college sports, Joe Hunnicutt finds it somewhat amusing that the concept for the high-powered scholarship program sprang from college athletics.

"It is a point of pride with me that what is probably going to become the single greatest academic program in the history of our university came really from a basketball scholarship."

Hunnicutt was president of the Big Green Scholarship Foundation, working to raise money for athletics, when the idea took root. "People would say, 'No, I won't give you money for athletics. Now, if you had a program that was academically strong, I'd be interested in that.'"

So "Hooks" Hunnicutt, as he was known in his playing days, got to thinking. What would it take to pull off a really strong academic program?

"I kept coupling it with athletics," says Hunnicutt, a Princeton native who has spent the bulk of his working life in Charleston. "When I played basketball at Marshall, I got a full athletic scholarship and I had to practice my fanny off. But if you got an academic scholarship, they left you alone. They'd just say, 'Live right, work hard and we'll see you in four years.' That's not right. Shouldn't scholars have to practice too? Shouldn't they be working on the social graces, business etiquette, business ethics, things that create polish and poise?"

It started to come together. A team,



Gazette photo by OWEN STAYNER

In his green Herd blazer, Yeager scholars founder Joe Hunnicutt reflects on the growth of his academic brain-child at Marshall University.

like a basketball team, only made up of scholars, the best in the nation. And practice, like basketball practice, only devoted to social and business skills. And coaches, like basketball coaches, only professors assigned to guide and train and inspire.

"When I played basketball, I always had a coach. Rhodes scholars always have a lot of tutorial type teaching. Why couldn't we take our top professors and let them spend some one-on-one tutorial time with these bright students? They'd be their coaches.

"And if these scholars are going to be great, shouldn't they rub elbows with great people? We could bring in the

Fortune 500 leaders, the Tom Wolfes, the James Micheners, let them spend some time with these kids. Say we'd bring Lee Iacocca in. We could assign one of our scholars to him. The scholar would call Iacocca and interview him, read his book, make a presentation to the other scholars so they'd know who he is. Iacocca would speak to the scholars, then to the other students."

Now all he had to do was sell the idea to the school. First he approached Robert Hayes, president of Marshall at the time. "He said he'd take a look at

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it," Hunnicutt says, "but nothing happened."

Successor Dale Nitzschke was the shining knight, the prime-mover who embraced the project and charged ahead, nursing Hunnicutt's brainchild to national recognition as one of the premier undergraduate programs in the country.

Nitzschke's involvement began with a chance encounter Hunnicutt isn't likely to forget.

Marshall's new president had been in office only three days when he and Hunnicutt crossed paths at the Southern Conference basketball tournament in Asheville, N.C. "I took a bus trip to the tournament with a lot of people from Huntington," Hunnicutt recalls all too clearly, "and I had partaken of a little too much of the grape. I decided to go out and clear my head in the North Carolina air. I was walking down a lonely street in Asheville when a car pulled up and a fella asked me directions to the Inn on the Plaza.

"I said, 'Mister, I'm stayin' there myself but I haven't the foggiest notion where it is. I've lost my sense of direction.' When I eventually found my way to the inn and went into the restaurant, the man from the car was sitting at a table with my wife and some other Marshall supporters. He looked up at me and said, 'There he is. That's the guy I was telling you about who was wandering around and didn't know where he was staying.' When I sat down, I found out the man was Dale Nitzschke.

"That same evening, I told him about my idea for the scholars. He said he liked it, to give him some time to settle in and we'd get going on it."

Soon Hunnicutt was explaining his idea to campus leaders. A committee was chosen to work out the details. The ball was rolling.

It was Hunnicutt who came up with the title. "We kept calling it the A-team. We couldn't seem to come up with a proper name, a symbol of excellence, something that would sound classy, like the Rhodes scholars."

The idea dawned when he was driving down Interstate 81, heading home from a visit to Chesapeake Bay. For his

50th birthday, his wife had given him the book, "Yeager," about Gen. Chuck Yeager, the Hamlin-bred flying ace who first broke the sound barrier. "I was driving along, thinking about this name thing, when it hit me. I couldn't wait to get to a phone booth. I pulled off at the next rest area and called Dale Nitzschke. I told him, 'It's got to be Yeager.'

"When Nitzschke called Yeager, he said he liked the idea but wanted to get together and talk about it." Yeager approved the plan a few weeks later during a meeting with the Marshall group at his sister's home in Hurricane.

The first Yeager Scholars enter Marshall this fall under full scholarships, including \$100 a month for incidental expenses. The ambitious program, believed to be the only one of its kind, combines a rigorous, individualized curriculum, independent study guided by mentor-professors and various personal enrichment opportunities, including a summer of study at Oxford University in England and a semester in a country where the student's chosen foreign language is spoken.

Hunnicutt gets huffy when his baby is passed off as just another scholarship program. "A lot of schools, including West Virginia University, offer full scholarships to good students. Anybody can do that. When you talk about our program versus anything else, you're talking apples and oranges."

Tooting Marshall's horn is old hat for Hunnicutt, known far and wide as one of the Big Green's staunchest supporters. In Charleston, in blue-gold Mountaineer territory, Hunnicutt's green blazer hardly goes unnoticed.

Joining forces with fellow Marshall grad David Haden, a Charleston insurance agent, Hunnicutt has pulled Marshallites out of the Charleston woodwork with rally meetings and impressive booster banquets, earning a reputation as Marshall's resident Pied Piper.

In his Joe College days, the founder of Marshall's blue chip scholarship program wasn't known as a hot-shot student. Hunnicutt concedes he settled for the gentleman's C, "but I wasn't exactly dog meat down there either."

A Sig Ep and class president in the student senate, among other things, "I had a little hand in about everything that went on," he says.

Since emerging from Marshall in 1957, the Yeager originator has known both boom and doom in the business world. As a self-employed coal broker and entrepreneur, Hunnicutt enjoyed the role of high-living, free-spending wheeler-dealer before the demise of King Coal plunged him into debt. He recalls with profound regret a multimillion-dollar package he engineered to sell West Virginia coal in Holland. The coal company went bankrupt. So did Hunnicutt. "When the coal market went down, Hunnicutt went with it. That's a nice way of saying I went broke."

A position as head of a house manufacturing and development firm in Lexington had him commuting to Charleston on weekends. His wife, Sue, stayed in Charleston so their daughters could finish school here. One daughter is a student at Marshall now and the other will enroll there this fall.

Last July some Huntington businessmen approached Hunnicutt with an offer he couldn't refuse - a year at Marshall working on recruitment and funding for the Yeager Society of Scholars. "I don't have a title. I didn't want one. We have a director. My job is to raise the money and get the program organized and promoted. In June, I have to go look for a job."

No job is likely to hold more satisfaction than the one he is doing today. "I'm excited about this," says the proud Yeager Scholars inventor. "I look at what we have tried to do with welfare in this state and it hasn't gotten us anywhere. Academic excellence will get you somewhere."

He believes the program will pay off for Huntington as well as Marshall. "The revitalization of Huntington has got to be through this university. When I reflect on my days at IBM, every plant they put in was close to a good educational institution. We have the making of that here. People are going to start seeing Huntington and West Virginia as a place of excellence, as a nice place to move a business or a plant."