

SPORTS

## **Building team spirit: Seven Hills foundation coach wins for his team with 'an experience that nobody else has ever given us'**

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WORCESTER — As the team manager for Leicester High football, Anthony Ellis joined the Wolverines for pregame meals, was on the sideline every Friday night helping out with water and equipment, and he cheered every touchdown and tackle.

“The only thing I wasn’t able to do,” said Ellis, who has cerebral palsy, “was play in the actual game. It felt better when we won, but it would hurt more when we lost because I wasn’t on the field and able to do something. It’s hard when you’re part of the team, but not actually able to participate in certain things that a team does.”

The last few years, though, as a middle linebacker and sometimes quarterback for volunteer coach Tyrone Hicks and the Seven Hills Foundation Shamrocks Unified Flag Football team, Ellis has been able to bring his competitive spirit to the field.

“Coach Hicks gives us the experience we missed out on because we have a disability or a challenge,” said Ellis, a 21-year-old senior at Nichols College in Dudley.

Hicks, a Worcester resident, played basketball at Clark and was a Cougars assistant for 29 years. Through his 23-year-old son, Ty Jr., a Special Olympics athlete since he was a kid, Hicks has had a long and strong relationship with Seven Hills Foundation, which provides exceptional integrated clinical, educational and community-based supports to children and adults with disabilities and significant life challenges.

When Seven Hills was establishing its first flag football team, organizers asked Hicks if he would be interested in coaching it.

“Not only did he become the coach,” said Robin Foley, Seven Hills Family Services assistant vice president, “he just embraced it in such an amazing way. The team has just grown and bonded in such a beautiful way.”

At Clark, Hicks was a standout player and helped his teams advance to the NCAA Tournament four straight years. As an assistant coach, Hicks was part of five NCAA tourney teams. He never played or coached football, so he read books and watched YouTube videos to learn how to do it.

Over the last five years, Hicks, who works full time for Verizon, has completely immersed himself in his players, brought them together, built them up, and infused positivity, purpose and fun through his gregarious personality. Being a member of the Shamrocks is a big deal.

“The first couple years was me learning them and learning the game,” Hicks said, “and I learned these kids needed more than just football. I said, ‘I’ve got to do more. I’ve got to give more.’”

“I talked to the parents and said, ‘These kids need more and I’m going to build something bigger for them.’”

The Shamrocks proudly wear their team-color, bright-blue, logoed game jerseys, practice jerseys, hats and other gear – all purchased by Hicks. The team looked great walking into Gillette Stadium for the Special Olympics state tournament two years ago.

“When we first started,” Hicks said, “we looked like the Bad News Bears. I said I can’t have this. We have to look like a team. I understand what being part of a team means.”

Hicks tapes practice, breaks down the video and has a playbook.

“He prepares like we’re an NFL or a college team,” Ellis said. “He’s told stories about people asking him, ‘Why do you put so much effort into this and why do you go so deep in this?’ The one thing he tells me is it’s because he’s trying to give us an experience that nobody else has ever given us.”

The format for Unified flag football is 5-on-5 with three athletes (those with a disability) and two partners (those without a disability) on each side. The Shamrocks have 15 members, 11 athletes, including Ty Jr., and four partners.

The athletes, who range in age from 18-35, have a wide range of abilities and challenges.

“He coaches every one of them without leaving anyone out, and it is just amazing to watch,” said Worcester resident Lisa Stokes, whose 21-year-old son, Kyle, is a Shamrocks athlete, and whose other three children – Courtney, Mitchell, Molly – have all been partners. “He’s a

competitor and the kids are competitors, but he balances that with the encouragement of, ‘You’ll get it next time, you’ll get it next time.’”

Added Stokes: “Kyle has grown up seeing his brother and sisters involved in your typical sports teams and seen them have success. Tyrone gives him that feeling of belonging to a team, having success, having people come see his games, and just being part of the team like a typical young adult would be.”

Hicks introduced Ty Jr. to sports at a young age – he was an infant the first time he visited Kneller Athletic Center, Clark’s home court – and always emboldened and encouraged him.

“I didn’t shortcut anything,” Hicks said. “The way I raised him was, ‘You may not be able to do what everybody does their way, but you will be able to do it your way.’ The word ‘can’t’ is not allowed in this house.”

Hicks, along with assistant coaches Von Ayers and Mike Tolman, similarly empowers his Shamrocks players.

“Everyone is involved and celebrated,” Ellis said.

Hicks has really connected with his players.

“I figured out ways to reach them,” Hicks said. “Some kids like fruits. We have a play called ‘banana,’ so when we call ‘banana,’ this kid knows that means it’s his turn to run with the ball. They can learn it; you just have to teach it.”

Hicks has maintained year-round friendships with and among the Shamrocks players through Christmas parties, tailgating, movies and other activities.

“By keeping everybody together,” Mike Ellis, Anthony’s dad, said, “he stimulates that social interaction. The friends they make on the team are more than friends now; they’re like family.”

Because of the pandemic, the Shamrocks weren’t able to play their games this past fall, but Hicks has kept the team spirit going by hosting twice-a-week Zoom calls.

They chat and play games like “Jeopardy!” and “Know It or Blow It,” and just check in on one another.

“It amazes me that he had this much room in his life and his heart to support the team in this way,” Foley said. “The parents of the participants are so happy with him and so grateful for his

energy.”

Anthony Ellis nominated Hicks for recognition by Special Olympics. On National Coaches Day, in October, Hicks was one of three outstanding Special Olympics Massachusetts coaches honored for the impact he has had on his athletes and community.

“I looked at it as Coach Hicks is actually changing the way that I perceive Special Olympics coaching and where it can go in the future,” Ellis said. “Coach Hicks is a very humble man. He doesn’t want publicity and I’m like, ‘People need to hear this story and what you’re doing and how deep you go into your strategy and the opportunities that you give us.’ I wanted to nominate him to let people know not only does he coach, he’s like a second father to me. I wanted to show him what he meant to me.”

The Shamrocks athletes have had a profound impact on Hicks as well.

“(The most rewarding thing) is the smiles on their faces,” Hicks said, “watching them become friends and bond. They’re so happy.”

“I couldn’t have done this without Seven Hills,” Hicks said. “I’m thankful they allowed me to do this and shape it the way I like to do it. Without them, I would never be where I am now. As far as Tyrone (Jr.), all the things I know are all because of Seven Hills Family Support Center. When you have a child with a disability, there is no playbook – step one, step two, step three. If you don’t have a place, you’re lost.”

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