

The Jimmy Miller Story
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One of the highest energy men I ever knew was Erie J. (“Jimmy”) Miller, Jr. Cornell University wrestling coach for 26 years, Jimmy was also a champion wrestler, an outstanding representative in local politics, and a lay, and later fully ordained, minister. The upstate New York community of Ithaca knew him as a leading citizen there from the late 30’s into the first years of the new century. He was never my coach, as I attended Ohio State University, but he was a long time family friend and mentor in my early years.

“All I ever wanted to be was a farmer,” Jimmy once told his son John. Like so many in his generation, Jimmy took a different track in life because of World War II. It took him off his family farm in 1944, into the Navy, and after the war to his long career as Cornell University wrestling coach.

I remember Jimmy as a spark plug individual, always smiling, always on the go, always ready to lead a game, or recruit a new wrestler for Cornell. This was the signature of his zest for life, attested by his daring swan dives off high cliffs into Ithaca’s gorges, his solo transcontinental run to California at 600 miles a day on a Harley Davidson motorcycle in 1946, his uncanny talent of quickly breaking horses for saddle riding. Even his happy, brief ownership of a tiny Italian 3-wheel auto in the late 50’s, when his father and younger brother were selling luxurious and powerful Chryslers in Ithaca, marked him as a man who danced to a different drum, and loved it. Jimmy delighted in trying new and challenging tasks whenever the opportunity emerged.

Born in Ithaca in 1921, Jimmy went to Ithaca High, then Wyoming (Pennsylvania) Seminary, then Cornell. At Wyoming Seminary Jimmy was surrounded by two influences that later shaped his careers—wrestling and Bible studies. In the 1939-1940 school year at Wyoming Seminary Jimmy wrestled under coach Ray Sparks and earned grades good enough to gain admission to Cornell. “French and English Composition were my downfall in the high school Regents exams for entrance to Cornell, but a year at Wyoming pulled me up and I started Cornell in the fall of 1940,” Jimmy said. When the United States entered World War II Jimmy, as oldest son working an active farm was exempt from wartime service. He soon grew restless as the majority of his peers went off to war. In the spring of 1944 he helped his father auction off all the cattle and much of the equipment on the family farm and joined the Navy as a pilot trainee. The war ended before his long training process was complete and he and his younger brother Bob, a B-29 pilot, returned to Ithaca. “We were the happiest guys on earth. We were in a world finally at peace and

everything seemed possible and achievable,” Jimmy related in the interview with his son John.

In July 1948, when he succeeded Walt O’Connell, who had been the Cornell wrestling coach for 40 years, Jimmy has already achieved great success as a wrestler. As a sophomore at Cornell under Coach O’Connell, Jimmy finished in 2nd place in the Easterns in 1942. In 1943, as a junior, he finished second in the National AAU championship. As a Cornell senior in 1946 he finished first in the Easterns and later that same spring won the National AAU title in the New York City tournament. The great Billy Sheridan refereed Jimmy’s final match in that tournament. In the spring of 1947, Jimmy and his long-time coach and Ithaca wrestling mentor Bill Layton decided at the last possible minute to get into a vintage Packard and drive from Ithaca to San Francisco for the national AAU tournament. They did the drive non-stop, arriving at the tournament weigh-in already in progress at the San Francisco Athletic Club. No one had expected Jimmy to be able to make the trip, but he did, and once again won the championship. “What a drive that was! I don’t think I slept for four days and it was amazing that I won, as tired as I was,” Jimmy said. The following spring, in the 1948 AAU competition at Hempstead Long Island, Jimmy placed third.

Not content to be just the busy Cornell wrestling coach, Jimmy was active for many years as Danby (Ithaca area) Town Supervisor and Tompkins County Representative for Ithaca as an elected Republican. He led 1967 Pan American wrestling team, coaching a team where every man won the Gold medal. He was also an active and much-loved lay minister for a Brooktondale, New York church, starting there in 1958. In 1973 he left the Brooktondale church to become the lay, and later fully ordained, minister for the Danby Federated Church, a position he held until 1994.

After his retirement from Cornell in 1974 Jimmy devoted his time and energy to his church in Danby, directing the full restoration of the 150-year-old structure and rededicating it in July 1976. In the 1979 interview with his son he recounted his long career at Cornell. “We had a bunch of great years. The most difficult were in the period 1968 to 1972. We had campus turmoil from the Vietnam War protests, a student takeover of the Administration in 1969, and a ‘hippie influence’ that did not produce or favor disciplined athletes. It was a tough time but we emerged in ’73 and ’74 to have a couple fine teams again.” Jimmy finished his final season leading Cornell to an Ivy League title in 1974.

In 1975, Jimmy lost his wife and best friend of 26 years. Mary died suddenly at 51 of a brain aneurysm. Like that tragedy, he later battled heart disease with a faith-filled approach to life and a positive outlook. When Jimmy died in April 2002 over 300 people came to his memorial service and packed the small church he had renovated 26 years before. He had been its minister for the same length of time he had been the Cornell wrestling coach.

I will never forget my last meeting with Jimmy, at Easter, 1983. Nearly finished with my 20-year career as a Marine pilot and long absent from Ithaca, I had hoped to surprise Jimmy and appear incognito in the Sunday school class he led. When he recognized me he winked and made a quick move for a single leg takedown, in front of his astonished class. Long ago I had learned to expect Jimmy's first move on a fellow wrestler: "The Ithaca Wrestler Greeting," as he once called it. I countered with a hard Whizzer and Pancake and threw the young 62-year old man on his back to the floor. He got up laughing, brushed himself off, and said to his class, "Buck's a wrestler if you didn't notice, but so am I. I taught him everything he knows!" He had that beaming smile on his face that none of us who knew him will ever forget.