



Matchsticks: An Education in Black and White by Fred Engh, with Jann Seal

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“I had never given it much thought when I would see a Black person in a crowd of all-white people. I never wondered what it would be like in reverse.”

Fred Engh graduated from Maryland State College in 1963. What is unique is that he was the first white student to participate in sports at, and to graduate from, a traditionally all-Black college.

Born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania to relative affluence, Engh, three of his four siblings and parents were forced to move in 1941 due to financial difficulties.

The family lived in a cramped, one-room garage apartment in Ocean City, Maryland. Father, “Coolie,” left the children with Mother, “Muzzie,” for weeks at a time, to look for work. Muzzie soon befriended a wealthy, elderly woman, who offered the large family a place to live at the Humane Society house in exchange for helping care for animals.

By 1961, Engh had only two years of college, been in the army, then had a wife and children of his own—but no career. During a weekend visit, Muzzie attempted to bring this to his attention, ordering him to grow up and be more responsible. Perhaps Muzzie wanted better for her son than what her husband, Coolie, provided.

Engh, his wife, Mike (Michaela), and children were living in a trailer park while Engh had just a part-time job.

Engh heard a radio show featuring the head of the Physical Ed department at Maryland State College, speaking about a new P.E. degree program. Adoring

sports, he could complete the degree he had started several years back at U of Maryland.

Mike brought up a common issue in 1961: race. Maryland State was a Black college. However, Engh enrolled. He thought, *“Thank you, Muzzie, for kicking me in the ass. I needed that!”* However, *“My mother may have been subtle about it, but she was a racist.”*

Engh flashed back to a childhood basketball game where the coach shamed him. He vowed to never embarrass his students and that sportsmanship was key.

He soon befriended a six foot six, Hulk-like football player named Bob Taylor, who attended on scholarship. They found a common ground: The love of golf.

Stability at college gave Engh confidence at his part-time job, teaching at a Catholic middle school. He formed a ragtag football team there.

Bob Taylor’s influence landed Engh a position on the college’s golf team, which played against other nearby Black college teams. Engh was worried because of racial tension. Would they accept a white player? This *was* the sixties.

At team practice, a few derogatory epithets by local rednecks at the course forever changed Engh’s concern with racial issues. They were a team—not a Black and white team. *“I have a right to choose whoever I want to be standing next to or be friends with, no matter what color their skin is,”* thought Engh when the newspaper featured a photo of him with his teammates.

Engh graduated after two years, with a Physical Education degree. Forty-nine years later he returned to a fully integrated college, renamed the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, to be inducted into its Hall of Fame. He was honored as the first (white) student to break its color barrier and to join its golf team.

After his induction he attempted to reach out to Bob Taylor, who had a successful NFL career. Unfortunately, after locating him, he found out that Bob had just died. Engh urged everyone to not waste time in getting in touch with those you care about.

From the sixties to the nineties, Maryland State College tripled in enrollment, added thirty programs, and was renamed University of Maryland Eastern Shore. Engh and Mike had seven children.

After teaching P.E. in Delaware, Engh was appointed the National Director of Youth Sports with the Chicago-based Athletic Institute. There he was able to address coach- and parental-behavior in youth sports. He created a training program for coaches to help avoid traumatizing young children, thereby preventing sports dropouts.

Civil rights timelines, strategically interspersed throughout the book, remind the reader of its timeliness and importance. “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

Vibrant descriptions depict highs and lows throughout Engh’s life story. It’s a quick and compassionate read.

Matchsticks is like *The Green Book*, as both works portray the two main characters’ warm bond against all odds of era and color. It should be required reading for all middle- and high-school students.