

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2012

Farragut's Theorem

Written by me, and originally published as "This Lesson Wasn't Learned Behind a Desk" in the Lawrence Eagle Tribune.

Graphics added courtesy of Google images....

Farragut's Theorem

Eighteen boys sat in six rows fiddling with their new Geometry texts. One of the kids in the back row was not just nervous, he was away at school for the first time. So far that day, he'd gotten a new set of houseparents, a stack of textbooks, and four stern instructors. And the fifth one was already five minutes late.

The door swung open into the classroom and, for a space of time, no one entered. As the door started to close again, a metal crutch thrust against the door, staking it open. A gnome of a man struggled in, slowly, step by step.

He was compressed onto thick braces, his feet and knees twisted in directions altogether wrong for walking. His hands were horribly gnarled, the fingers stiffened away from a strong if not uncertain grip on the crutches.

Grasping a stick of chalk between his first and second fingers, he scraped his name on the blackboard, FA RR A G UT, holding himself upright on his crutches, repositioning himself every few letters. He told us he'd been injured in an accident ... that they tore his racing car away from around him. When class broke, we ran out the door, from fear of the

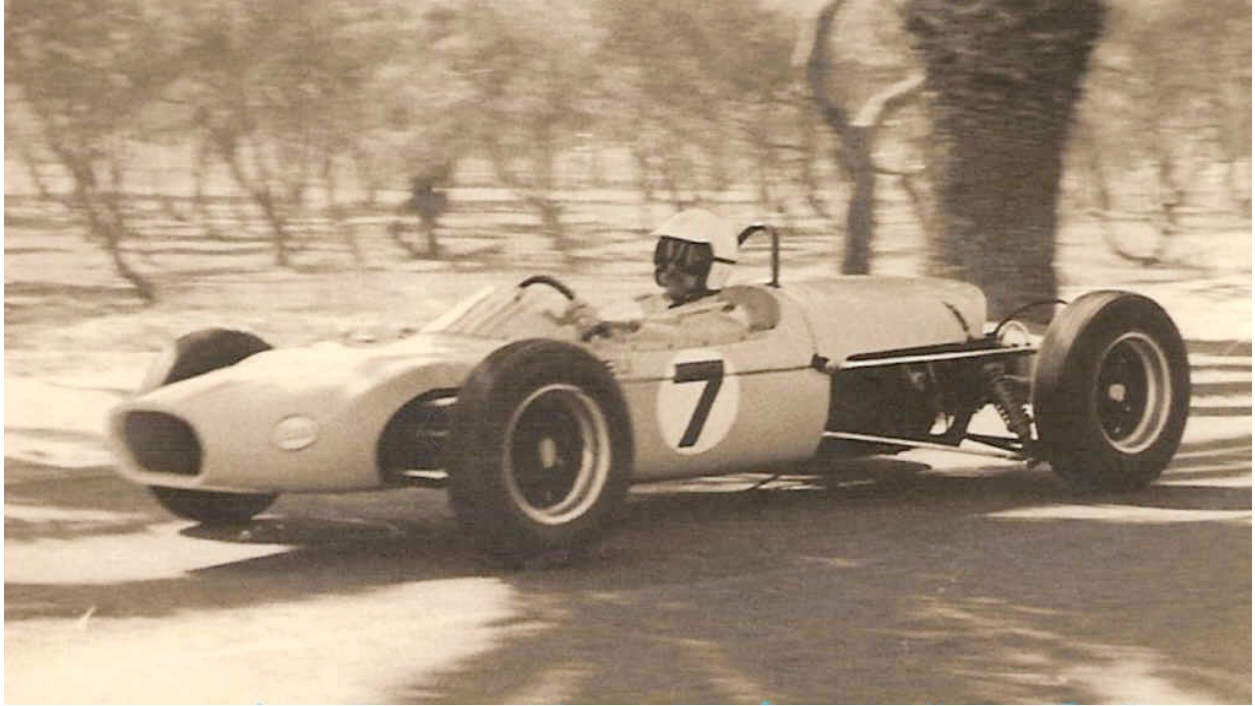
hunchback, from fear of his embarrassment, from fear of our own.

The next day, we gathered again. Perhaps he'd been a substitute; today, they'd send us the real teacher. But three minutes after the bell, the door opened, and this little man slowly trisected the floor again.

Day after day, Mr. Farragut struggled to teach us something about measuring and managing space. What struck me about him was that he wasn't easy on himself. He always stood behind the desk; he rarely sat at it. And he refused all offers of assistance.

During Wednesday's free time, I'd often grab some fresh apples and wander around the barns. I discovered an old racing car inside one of the stalls. It was a sleek, white cigar, clearly the real thing, an old Formula 3 Cooper. I'd slip into the narrow cockpit and squeeze my feet down the tunnel to the plain pedals, shift the shifter, and look in the rear view mirror to see all the cars I'd passed, and sometimes, to make sure that no one saw me in my fantasy. And I'd think about Mr. Farragut and his awful injuries, how he'd been trapped in a car just like this one, and I'd go off to dinner hall.

http://jbbassibey.free.fr/circuit%20de%20la%20corniche%201968_Michel%20Meli_Racer%20Meli.jpg



I'd stayed after class one day, after Mr. Farragut helped me with a problem. He'd begun to climb the stairs outside the classroom when his crutch slipped on a wet stair and fell out from underneath him. He collapsed backwards like a dropped marionette, his head striking the railing. Though there was blood on his scalp, he was more helpless than hurt. I got him a cold compress and helped him on his feet, and he let me know with a twinkle in his eye that he was glad I'd been there. More determination helped him up the stairs; he let me help with the doors.

About the time of the spring Pie Race, when a future Olympian and then the rest of us scampered across the campus hills and ridges, we heard rumors that Mr. Kellogg, the math teacher who owned the Cooper stalled in the barn, was going to drive his car a few laps around campus that weekend. Later Saturday afternoon, after the cross-country runners had exhausted themselves, we heard the Cooper's throaty engine tones murmur through the trees faster than the news of the event. I ran up the hill in time to see its low

shark's mouth slicing over the crest. The driver was thoroughly enjoying his half-speed romp over this unlikely autumnal racing circuit and, just when I was thinking that it was me behind the wheel, I realized that it was Mr. Farragut.

I now vaguely remember that $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$, but sines and cosines have long since lost their utility. I had learned just enough to pass the tests. But this awkward and scarred man also gave me short lessons in courage, acceptance, humility and grace. He left me with Farragut's Theorem, never diagrammed on the board, never explained in the text, yet presented for observation like no other daily lesson plan.