

The thing I remember most about Hoffy is his ability to pretend that he didn't understand and to somehow make it important for his students to help him. Many times I'd have just learned some new feature of calculus and Hoffy would tell me that he didn't understand some piece of it. I'd patiently explain, and finally, after going through all the details, he'd finally "get" it.

I also knew that he didn't entirely rely on me. Most of my friends in the class also talked about how difficult it was to get certain ideas through his thick skull.

But finally, thanks to us, by the end of the year, he had totally mastered the subject, and it appeared that we had, too. Of the 14 kids in the calculus class, 11 of us got perfect scores of 5 on the Mathematics Advanced Placement Test.

It was a little discouraging to go back to visit the school during Christmas break of my first year in college when I talked to a good friend who was a year behind me and was taking Hoffy's calculus course. It turned out that over the summer Hoffy had forgotten nearly everything we taught him and my friend and his classmates were busy teaching him the subject again.

Then many, many years later I was talking to a guy in a coffee shop in California and by some wild coincidence he had also attended my high school as a kid but had graduated a year or two before I started there. He had never taken any academic classes from Hoffy, but had been on the school's tennis team of which Hoffy was the coach. I joked with him about how Hoffy never seemed to "understand" anything in the calculus class, and he told me that the same thing occurred in tennis: Hoffy didn't understand a thing about it and the team members had to work constantly to teach Hoffy to play tennis.

I don't know how the tennis team fared when the coffee shop guy was a member, but for all three years when I was a student (and Hoffy was still the coach) the team won the Colorado state high school tennis championship.

I graduated from GW in 1966 and attended Caltech as an undergraduate and then Stanford as a graduate student, majoring in mathematics and eventually obtaining a PhD in math from Stanford.

I taught college math full-time for a few years, while I was working on my PhD, but when I finally graduated, I got a post-doc in electrical engineering at Stanford and worked on a project to put a complete 3D "graphics engine" on a set of computer chips. We eventually spun that project off as a Silicon Valley start-up called Silicon Graphics (SGI) and I worked there full-time for about 16 years, until I retired.

During my last few years at SGI, I started to spend more and more of my free time coaching bright middle-school and high-school kids in mathematics in a program we modeled after the so-called "math circles" that were employed in the Soviet-bloc countries and were probably the reason that the Soviets did so well in that area.

Now that I'm retired, I'm still leading math circles (there are 4 local ones now in the San Francisco Bay Area and hundreds scattered across the country, mostly due to the efforts of the gal who recruited me into the program in the first place). The oldest local circle just started its 15th year.

For about 5 years, we've also been working with a similar project, called "Teachers' Circles," where similar material is presented, but to middle-school teachers (and anyone else who is interested), where there's not only a discussion of math, as in the kids' circles, but also discussions of pedagogy related to the members' own classes. We also run a couple of week-long workshops over the summer, where we work with teams of people who are interested in forming their own teachers' circles in other parts of the country. As a result, there are now a few dozen such circles in operation all over the country.

I'm still learning math, but mostly for the purpose of using it in the circles for teachers or students.

— *Tom Davis*
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