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WKU reunion one of life's precious blessings

By JIM PICKENS Messenger-Inquirer 8 hrs ago

As one grows older, it becomes increasingly clear that life as we know it on earth is fleeting, and reunions, though inevitably awkward to at least some extent, are worth the trouble to go to.

These are two takeaways from the experience of representing my father, Jim Pickens, Sr., at a 50-year-reunion of the 1969 Western Kentucky University baseball team held this past Saturday on a cold, rainy afternoon in Bowling Green.

My Dad (with no assistants) coached that team a half-century ago and, in retrospect, they were a group that bridged the past with the future for the Hilltoppers -- an outfit stuck smack-dab in the middle of the program's 100-year history.

The '69 team was also very good -- winning the regular-season championship of the Ohio Valley Conference with a 10-1 record, upsetting defending NCAA national runner-up Southern Illinois 1-0 in BG, and representing the OVC Western Division in a winner-take-all best-of-three series at Morehead State.

This was also the first WKU team to play at Nick Denes Field, and the stark contrast between the facility then and now is nothing short of shocking.

In 1969 (if you can believe this), the park had no restrooms, no concession stand, no press box, no roofs on the dugouts, no permanent outfield fence, no lights for night games, rickety wooden stands and a pathetic-looking hand-operated scoreboard that would be considered inferior at the T-Ball level by today's standards.

WKU now plays in a showplace by comparison, featuring a playing surface covered entirely by artificial turf, state-of-the-art dugouts, lights and scoreboard, an imposing outfield wall, the Paul C. Orberson Baseball Clubhouse, the Jack and Janice Glasser Press Box, chairback seating throughout, and wooden party decks down the left and right field lines.

Those who had been part of the team in 1969 marveled at the differences, of course, but nonetheless carried themselves with a pride and dignity associated with being the first team -- and a championship-caliber one at that -- to play at what has long been referred to as simply "The Nick."

Eleven players from the '69 team were in attendance on Saturday, including Johnny Vance, Stan Markham, Don Durham (who pitched for the Cardinals and Rangers in the big leagues), Chip Miles, Phil Van Meter, Alan Hapney, George Lynch, Phil Allen, Jay Hickman and Harry Jones.

Two others -- Butch Gray and manager Buford Williams -- had been part of a Friday afternoon gathering downtown at 6-4-3 Sports Bar & Grill, adjacent to Bowling Green Ballpark.

Also on hand Saturday were former WKU sports information directors Ed Given, now 85, and his successor, Paul Just, who did an extraordinary job organizing the reunion.

And, what a classy group of 2019 Hilltopper players and coaches this is. Once we moved into the WKU dugout prior to being recognized along the third base line, they greeted us with open arms, handshakes and backslaps -- the present embracing past, and vice-versa. Indeed, Western's motto still rings true: 'Life, More Life, The Spirit Makes The Master.'

Most of the guys from the '69 team I had seen or stayed in touch with through the years, but one I had not -- Harry Jones.

Harry, an African American, hailed from Media, Pennsylvania, had decided to attend Western after visiting the campus and getting a good, long look at E. A. Diddle Arena, when the facility seated 12,500.

"It was like a palace at the time," Harry recalled on Saturday. "I figured a school that had something that nice on its campus was probably a pretty good place to be."

He showed up in the baseball camp as an unknown walk-on, but it didn't take my Dad long to figure out how gifted he was as a player -- a terrific contact hitter to all fields who could steal bases and chase down fly balls with the best of them.

A year after his arrival, my Dad made sure Harry became the first African American to receive a baseball scholarship at WKU. The occasion was celebrated when Harry's wonderful parents stayed the weekend at our suburban Bowling Green home in 1968. Trailblazing breakthroughs all around in a year of extreme racial tension and division in our nation.

I've always fondly remembered and greatly appreciated the irony of that beautiful, graced-by-God visit -- and so has Harry.



Get Started



On Saturday, we met up for the first time since he graduated in 1970, after being a three-time All-OVC outfielder. Forty-nine years. We embraced, we laughed, we cried, we shared one story after another about my father, who died at 73 of ALS ("Lou Gehrig's Disease") on June 13, 2000.

"Coach Pickens told me only one thing when I stepped into the starting lineup," Harry recalled. "He looked me square in the eyes and said, 'Harry, always lay it on the line.' And, for the next three years, that's what I tried to do for that man and this university."

Harry met members of my immediate family and their guests. We smiled and laughed and cried until we could smile and laugh and cry no more.

In the late innings of the first game of WKU's Conference USA doubleheader against Florida Atlantic, WKU play-by-play broadcaster Randy Lee and athletic director Todd Stewart, serving as color analyst, were gracious enough to have Harry and me on the air, to share some of those 50-year-old stories. It was a delightful journey down memory lane.

By the time we walked out of the press box, it became apparent that the nasty weather had driven all others from the reunion out of the park. It was just Harry and I now, ambling toward the left field exit, he needing to catch a flight back to Pennsylvania, I needing to return to Owensboro for my youngest daughter Elizabeth's 28th birthday celebration.

We lingered. We talked some more. We started to leave. We lingered. We talked some more. Finally, we hugged one last time. We told each other, "I love you," knowing, unspokenly, that the odds of us ever again (in this world) spending such a celebratory time together were marginal, at best.

With the campus bookstore closed on Easter weekend, Harry asked where he could pick up some Western gear before heading out of town. I mentioned a place in Greenwood Mall. "Got it," Harry said, writing down the name of the store. "We'll be representing the Hilltoppers up in Pennsylvania -- you can count on it, Little Pick."

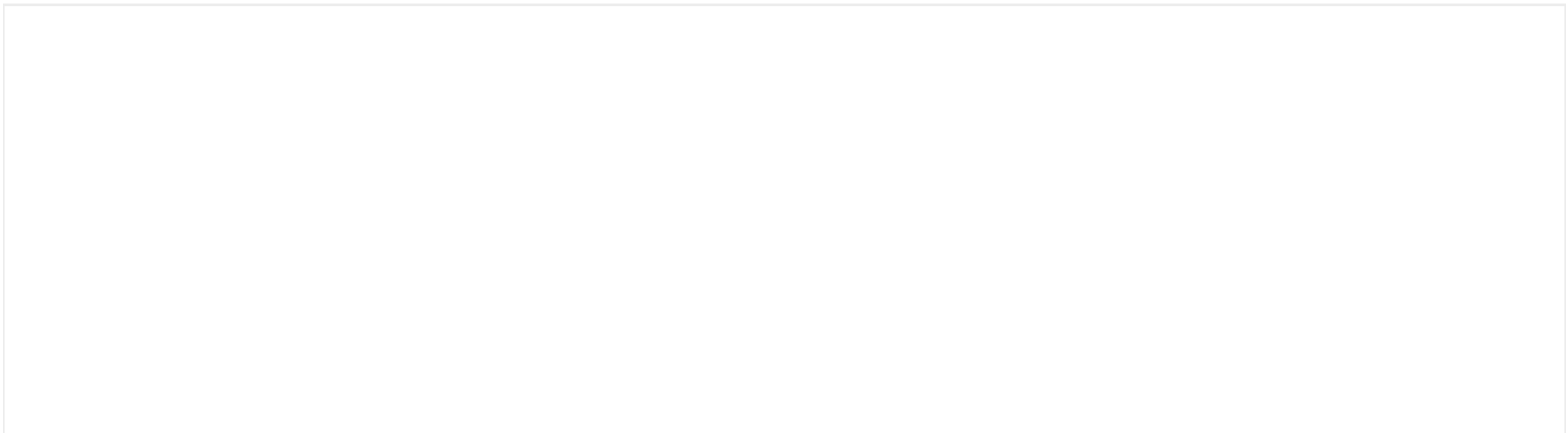
Of course. I could always count on Harry, and the rest of that '69 bunch -- big-brother figures who went out of their respective ways to always have the back of a good-hearted, if sometimes annoying, 9-year-old. I would hope they know I've always had their backs, too.

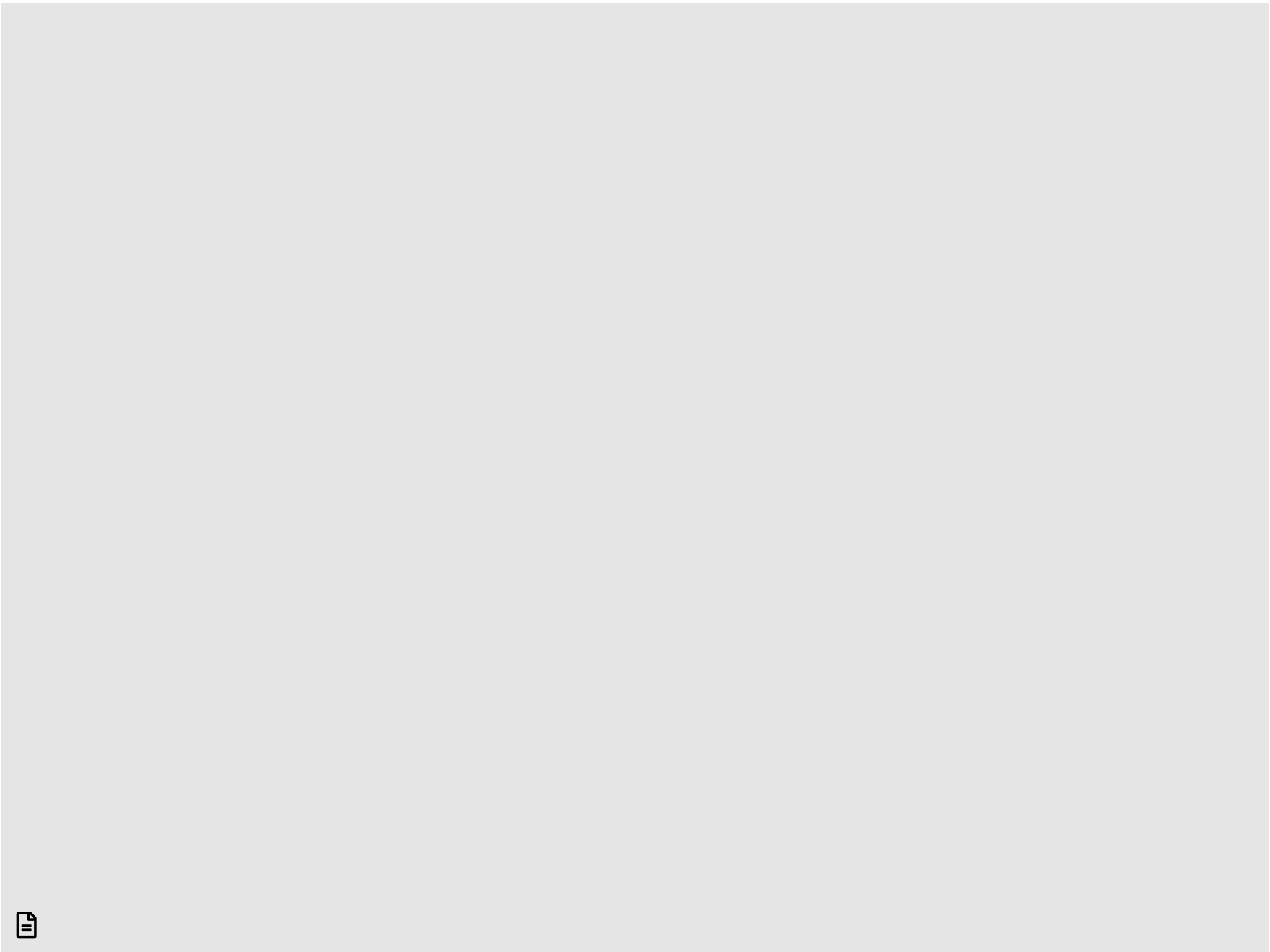
Being reunited with them 50 years later proved to be one of life's precious, priceless blessings.

A gift, indeed, from God.

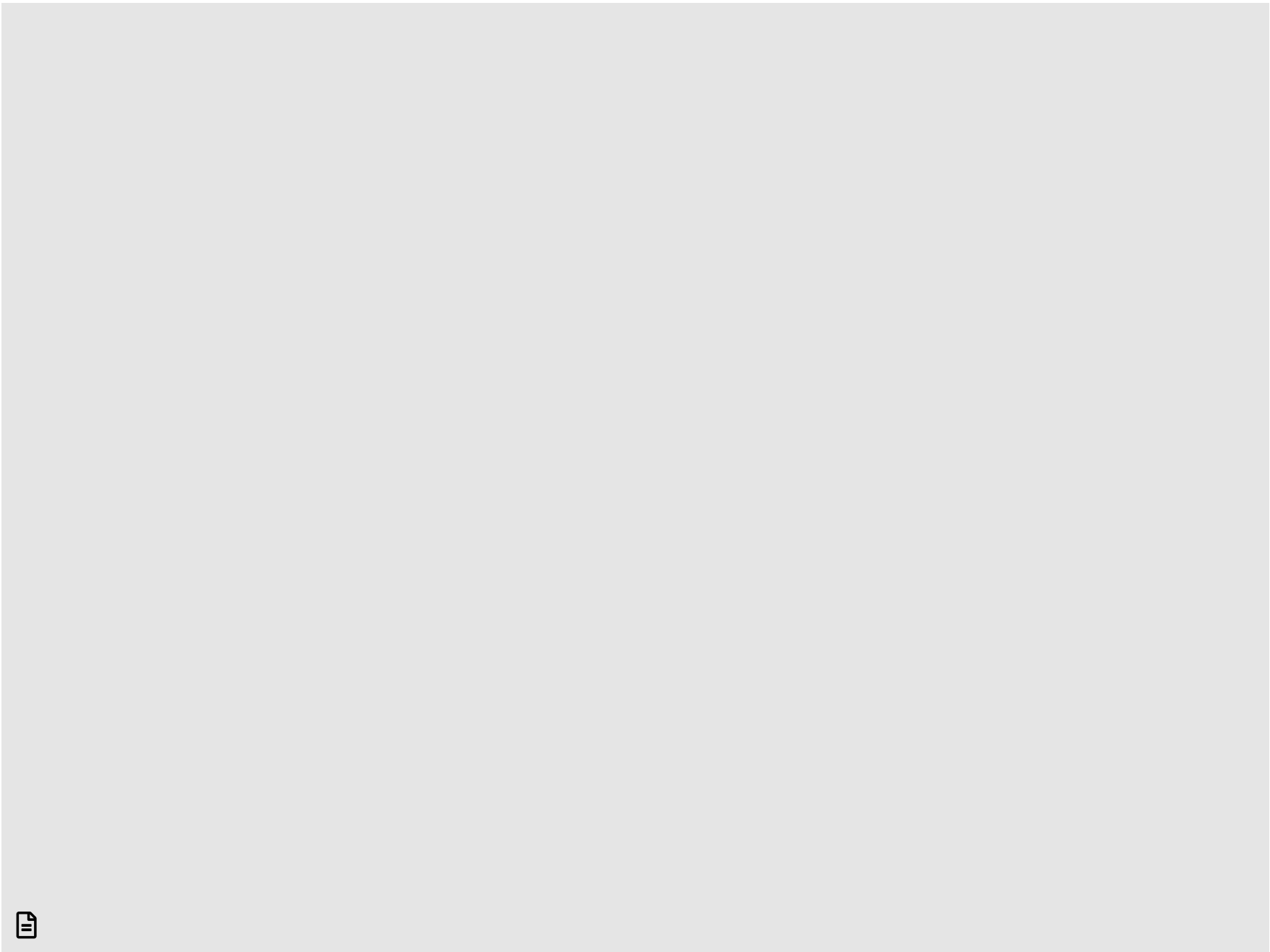


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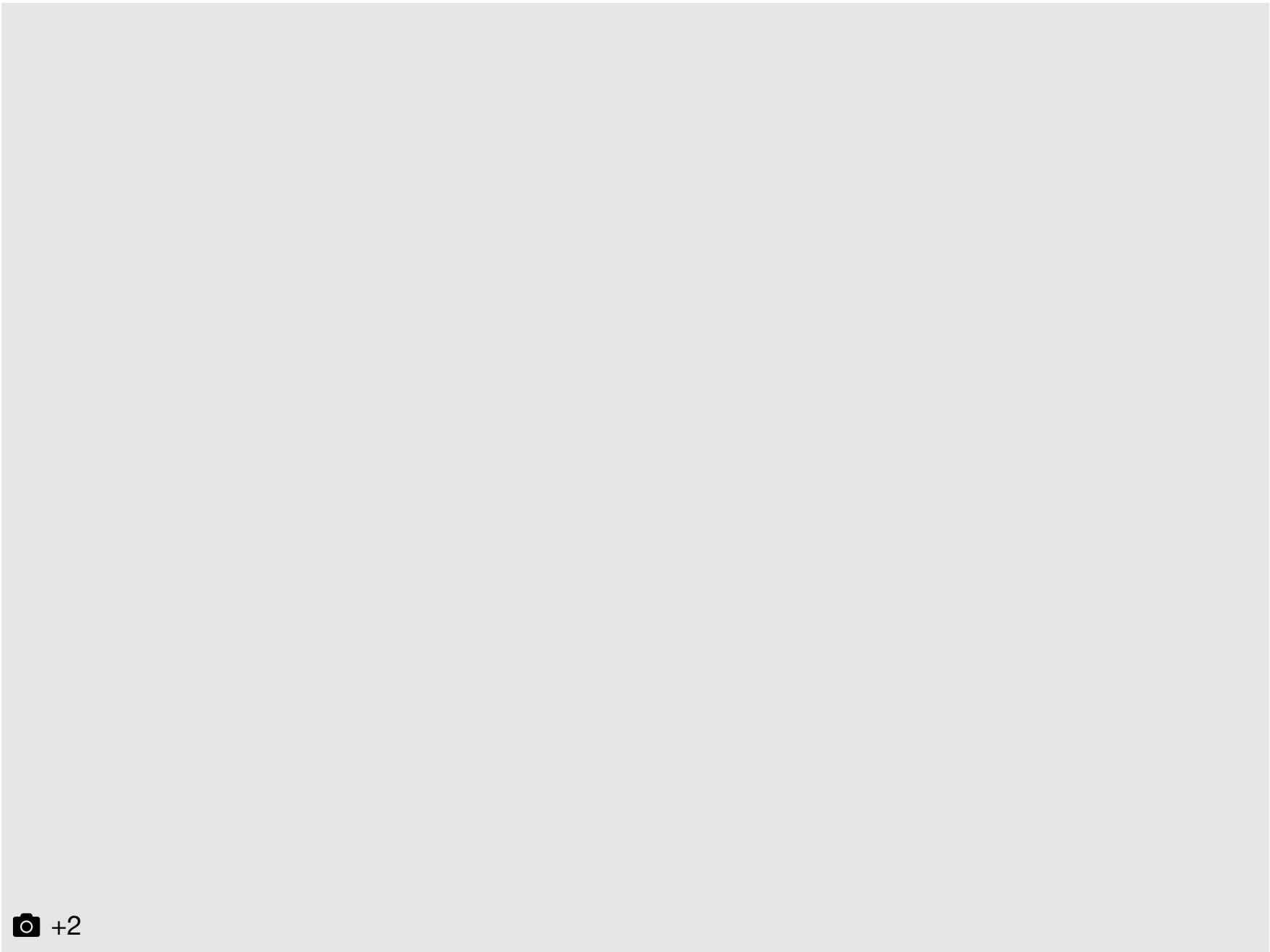




KSP jail incident

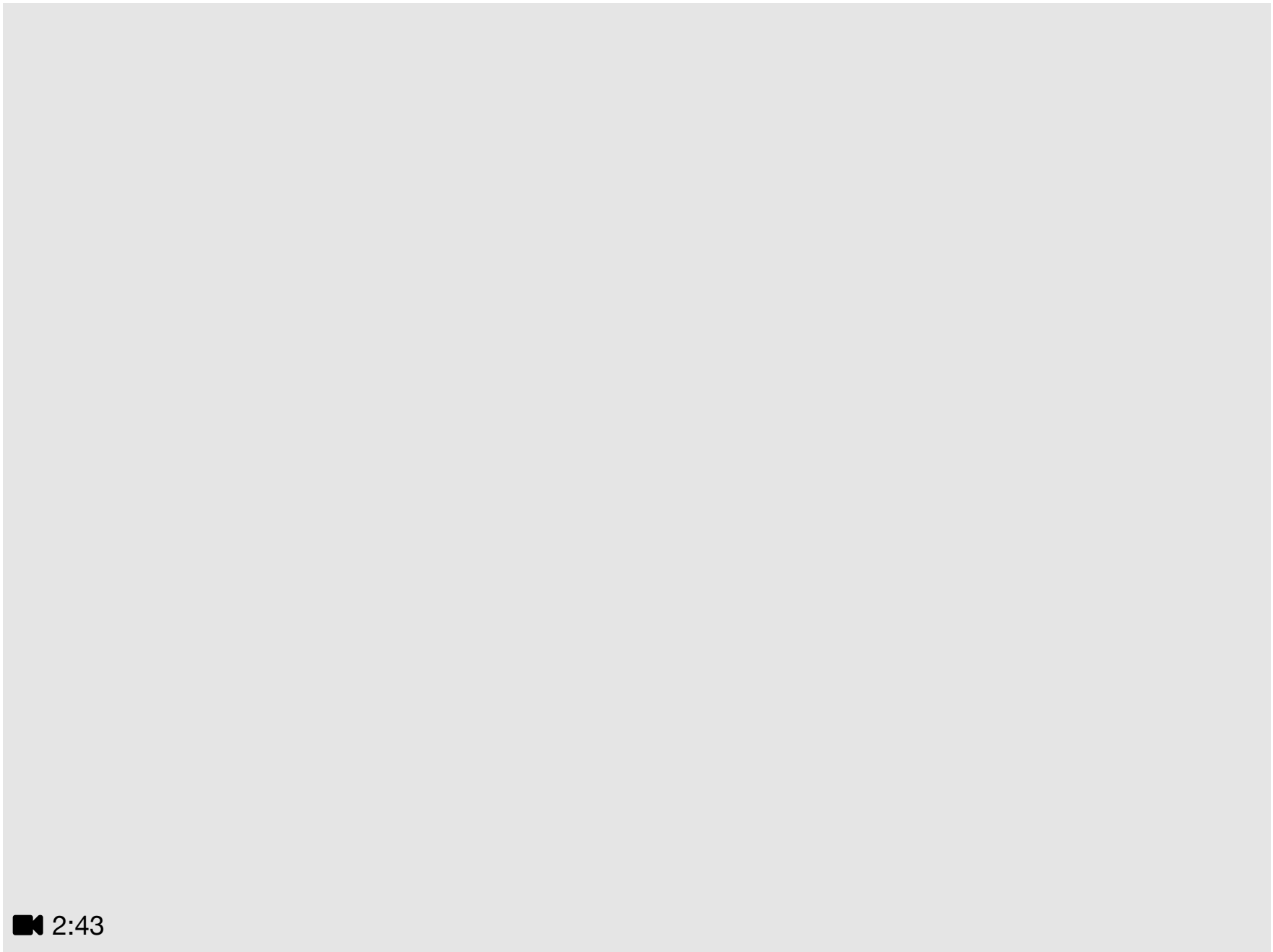


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