

Past Meets Future

The past opens the door to the future.

Class of 1910 Gate

Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium

Annapolis, Maryland

Jim Lewis watched and waited patiently for the game to end as a lifetime of memories swirled around in his head. Rather than subject itself to such unfamiliar anarchy, his brain systematically quelled the maelstrom by organizing the whirl of thoughts into small, short snippets of a blessed life. His experienced fighter-pilot eyes tracked his target, an intrepid young lacrosse player—a ninth-grader, he guessed—finishing his game. Unbeknownst to him or anyone besides Lewis, the boy had been in radar-lock for two weeks now. The boy's life was about to change, for the better Lewis hoped, as his own had nearly a half-century earlier.

Though Lewis knew this moment would come, he didn't completely know what to expect, but in typical fashion he dealt with this watershed event like all others in his life—calmly,

dispassionately, and by-the-book. He was acutely aware of all things happening both within him and without. He felt the emotion.

He felt the years of memories run like a torrent through his mind but somehow was able to absorb them as they flooded by. He felt the significance of what was about to happen as well as a longing to go back and do it all again. He also felt a sense of relief at having met a lifetime of arduous challenges with grace and dignity. Now it was time.

Lewis waited for the post-game cheers and handshakes and then strode slowly, but purposefully, toward the young man and his parents. When it was clear to the parents that the stranger wished to speak with them, they slowed and offered inquisitive looks. They had never met this man. The stranger was nondescript in his appearance, of average height, perhaps five-eight or -nine. He was wearing duck boots, khakis, a blue golf jacket, dark sunglasses, and a plain blue ball cap. The salt-and-pepper hair beneath the cap betrayed some age, but otherwise his thin, strong, athletic

frame could have easily deceived the couple into thinking he was a man twenty years younger. Before he spoke, he presented a remarkably dignified appearance.

“Good afternoon. My name is Jim Lewis,” he said as he extended his hand.

They introduced themselves as Mary and John Jones and then introduced their daughter Catherine. The boy firmly shook the stranger’s hand, “I’m Robbie.”

Lewis asked if the family had a few minutes to chat about lacrosse and, more importantly, about Robbie. He wanted to talk now—timing was important—and, if at all possible, on this field. Though a little confused and skeptical, the parents graciously indulged him.

“When I was about Robbie’s age, I was presented a lacrosse stick—a very special lacrosse stick—by a complete stranger, as I am to you right now. I have had the stick for about forty-two years, and it has meant a great deal to me,” Lewis began. “The man who gave me the stick, Mr. Doug Turnbull, made only two

requests of me. The first was to do my best to respect the game of lacrosse and the second was to pass the stick along to a worthy young man who might also put it to good use. I played lacrosse quite a few years ago and did my best to respect the game and its history. And now it is time to pass it along. I would like

Robbie to have it.”

Lewis failed to mention that he had not just played the game, but had *revolutionized* it in the nineteen-sixties during a string of national championship teams at the United States Naval Academy. And he didn't mention a distinguished career as a naval aviator—twenty-nine years as a fighter- and test-pilot.

Lewis walked the family to the trunk of his car, where he carefully pulled out an old leather bag by its shoulder strap, the contents secured by leather thongs. It was an unusual and unique arrangement, not something you would expect to hold a lacrosse stick. He carefully untied the thongs, slipped the stick out, and handed it to the boy.

“Robbie, this stick is over two-hundred years old, and it has a remarkable history and some special qualities that I would like to share with you.”

When Lewis placed the stick in his hand the boy felt his whole body tingle. It felt perfectly balanced and at home in his hands.

Lewis continued, “The stick has managed to survive as it has been passed down through several generations during those two-hundred years. It is perhaps the oldest lacrosse stick still in use. The men who had it before me took very good care of it, and I’ve tried to do my part.”

As Robbie held the stick Lewis softly touched the leather and gut netting inside the head of the stick, the pocket. “This is the soul of the stick, Robbie,” Lewis said, gazing softly at the net and gently caressing the strings.

The boy and the parents could see that Lewis’s fingers had traveled these strings countless times before. He continued, “The true essence of a stick is its pocket. The person who crafted this stick did so with the care, wisdom, passion, and

precision of an Indian warrior. Look at the strings, the knots, the alignment of them in relation to each other, and all the care that was put into the stringing. The warrior spirit has been passed down through these strings. You see, the bent branch is what gives this stick its shape, but the true character of the stick is embedded in these strings. Here, touch them. You can feel the oil and imagine the sweat from the hands of the warriors who used it.”

Robbie began to trace the strings with his fingers.

“The wood has been oiled and plied meticulously over the years. Take a look at the engravings on the shaft. Those were carved by each of the previous custodians.”

Robbie immediately began to wonder what those unusual carvings meant but was too overwhelmed to ask. He wrapped his left hand around the butt end of the shaft, holding it in its normal grip. Just above his hand was the first of a series of horizontal rings, each pair flanking a carving. As Robbie studied the hieroglyphics

from bottom to top, his mind raced. The bottom figure looked like an Indian woman with arms outstretched. The next looked like a bird of prey, its beak and talons clearly defined. Above the next ring was a magnificently carved flower, a sunflower, Robbie thought. The boy was struck by the detail and care of the carving. The next figure on the shaft looked to be a place of worship, a church or chapel. Above the chapel was inscribed a flattened-out cross. Moving up, Robbie's fingers traced the outline of what looked like the Olympic Rings. They, too, were carved with particular care. Perhaps one of the previous custodians had been an Olympian, Robbie thought. Next on the shaft was a carving of a book, with a barely visible title inscribed upon its cover. The final picture was clearly the block letter "N" with a small group of stars clustered above its upper right corner. Interestingly, on each shank of the "N" there seemed to be the outline of maps. One had the rough appearance of the letter "J" or a fishhook, the other a long slender figure that forked toward its end.

Robbie then traced out letters arranged along the shaft and wrapping around the head of the stick itself. The boy was mystified that they were not from his language, or at least he didn't think they were. The letters, he guessed, were some sort of sentence or phrase. What did it say? What did it mean? Who had written it?

Lewis brought Robbie back to the discussion, "The stick is in great shape. It is from an ancient Iroquois chief who probably crafted it around the year 1780. The sticks of the Iroquois are the forerunners of the modern stick we use today. I won't go through the entire history of the stick now, for that history will become clearer over time. My only requests are the same ones passed to me: Please respect the game and pass this stick along to another when the time comes."

The parents were completely stunned and confused. The mother was only able to question, "Why Robbie? Why now?"

"I'm an avid fan of the game with a special interest in unique talent. Robbie plays lacrosse as it should be played. I've been looking for a young player who displays the ancient essence

of the game. Why? That will become clear as I explain a few things.”

Robbie and his parents looked at one another, wondering where this stranger was going with this rather peculiar start. “This stick was crafted in a time when Indian warriors played the game. It was part of a culture, and their tradition required that the stick be passed down among warriors, players who learned how, when, and where to be hunters, players who could rely on their patience and then strike at the right time. I’ve seen your son display those traits. I also feel that true lacrosse players should play with enthusiasm, class, physical and mental toughness, and team spirit. The game, after all, was and is a team game. I’ve been looking for a young warrior with character, spirit, and leadership but, mainly, for a player who puts his team ahead of himself. When Mr. Turnbull presented the stick to me that was one of the things he talked about. He always said that no matter how talented someone might be, he was always obliged to contribute his efforts to the higher good—the team. Mr. Turnbull said he

learned that lesson through lacrosse, and it applied to everything he did in his life. 'With talent and ability,' he would say, 'come responsibility.' My high school coach used to tell me much the same thing: 'Those to whom much is given, much is expected.'"

The lives of the Joneses—and Lewis—had changed quite a bit in the last fifteen minutes.

"This is a bit overwhelming for us. I hope you understand," the father conceded.

"I do."

Lewis asked Robbie if he could borrow his game stick and then asked him to go about twenty yards away so they could throw and catch. The boy sprinted to the appointed spot to make his first throw with the stick. He saw the target that Lewis held up. He was focused on a spot in the pocket of Lewis's stick about the size of a quarter. He could clearly see the intersection of the center raw-hide string in the pocket with the center of the supporting gut

cross webbing. At the same time he could see his parents moving to his right and other members of his team with their parents leaving the field on the left. What was going on? He made his first pass. Lewis didn't move the target an inch. The sound of the ball in the netting, on target, straight and true as an arrow. Robbie thought, WOW! This stick is two-hundred years old! He had never held an "old time" stick like this or thrown such a perfect pass. Robbie studied the stick. He could feel its natural and inherent balance. Visually, the stick seemed to lack the symmetry of his high-tech, latest model year attack stick. But when his eyes focused on his new playing partner, he felt something special in his hands. He had never experienced this feeling before, a feeling that old-timers considered a bond with their sticks. Today's mass-produced "cookie cutter" sticks were all manufactured in exactly the same way, bought off the shelf with little thought or care and discarded just as easily. Robbie and his peers would never have guessed that the hand-crafted wooden sticks had a feel, a balance, a weight, and a character—a personality—of their own. A

player in Lewis's era and earlier might lift hundreds of sticks, one at a time, off warehouse racks, twirl and fiddle with each one until he found the stick that felt just right. His stick became part of him. Sometimes, if a player were truly fortunate, he would find a special stick that provided instant feedback and acceptance.

As Robbie threw and caught with the stranger, he could still feel his body, particularly his hands, tingling. He had felt this way for almost thirty minutes, since he first touched the stick. Maybe it was the fact that a stranger thought so highly of his play. Maybe it was the fact that he was holding a 200-yearold lacrosse stick. Never mind, he thought. This is really cool. Enjoy it for now.

After throwing for a few more minutes, Lewis asked the boy to stand fast. He reached further into the leather bag and withdrew an old lacrosse ball. It was a sphere about the same size as today's rubber ball — perhaps a little bigger — but it was clearly made of some sort of hide and sewn tight with sinew. Lewis first showed it to the boy.

“This is a lot more delicate than that stick, so we’ll just take a few throws with it, O.K.?” The boy’s eyes got even bigger.

“You’d be amazed at what is inside this skin,” Lewis teased. “All sorts of things like rocks, feathers, worms, and pieces of bat wings.”

The parents’ eyes began to light up as well. “You’re kidding?” said Robbie’s father, while his daughter looked on in equal amazement.

“Not at all. The Native Americans would sew certain things into the ball to make it more lively and to increase their chances of winning.”

They took a dozen or so throws, being a little more gentle with this gem. Robbie could not believe how the deerskin ball flew out of his stick. It had such a natural feel to it. His hands still tingled. Lewis took the ball from his stick and placed it back in the leather bag.

“Whenever you’re not using this stick, you should place this hide ball in the stick— exactly where the pocket is. Be attentive to where you place this ball. Remember that the pocket is the soul of the stick,” Lewis instructed as he put the

rubber ball back in his stick and began to throw again.

Lewis continued to throw with the boy, pausing a few seconds here and there to crystallize a thought or make a point, but hardly skipping a beat. Lewis delivered perfect right-handed and left-handed passes each time, right to the boy's "ear," just where Robbie's coaches preached they should be. The boy did not reciprocate the changing of hands with Lewis, fearful that his comparative lack of skill on his left side might cause him to miss or drop an incoming strike or throw an errant pass. Lewis hoped the boy would change hands as he did but was not surprised that he didn't. When the boy continued with his right hand, Lewis gently chided, "Try it with your left hand." Robbie immediately obliged. He felt the stick throw slightly differently from the left side, and it took him several throws to acclimate to the change.

The boy was already beginning to feel the power of the stick. The fact that it was made from a tree branch, Robbie thought, may have contributed to the way it felt. He had always

used an aluminum- or titanium-shafted stick, with its cold, factory-produced, inert feeling. This wooden stick almost felt *alive*! But it couldn't be alive, he convinced himself.

As they threw Lewis watched Robbie carefully. He could see the boy glancing at the stick, and then at his hands, in disbelief. The retired captain also knew what the boy was feeling. His hands had tingled in the same way since 1959. Lewis allowed himself a hint of a smile as he continued to watch the boy.

Lewis then paused and again reaching into the bag, pulled out an old wooden jewelry box. He opened it and withdrew three books, a very old copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Het Achterhuis* (*The Diary of Anne Frank*), and *The Story of Mankind*. Lewis offered, "The first two were passed along to me with the stick. The third one I am adding to the stick's legacy. The *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an original edition, signed by the author. You'll learn of the significance of these books as you go along." Lewis placed the books gently back in the box, closed the cover, and handed it to Robbie.

Lewis handed the parents his business card. "I live and work in California, but I'm in town on business this week."

Robbie's parents, still overwhelmed and confused, politely said, "How can we thank you? Will we meet again?"

"That's entirely up to you. I'd be glad to further the relationship, but I won't impose anything on you or Robbie. The stick will take care of itself. If you never see me again, I'm certain that Robbie will benefit from being its custodian. I've done what I was asked to do."

They all began to walk toward the family's car, along an asphalt path adorned by a two-foot-high brick wall that followed the tree line of the adjacent woods. As always, Lewis's keen senses made him acutely aware of the sights, sounds, and smells of his surroundings. As they approached a section of the wall nearest the overhanging trees, Lewis suddenly asked the boy to hand him the stick and a ball. He gestured toward the wall and, in a whisper, asked them if they could see a small bird on the

edge of the path trying to fly. It had probably just fallen out of a nest in the tree above but they hadn't noticed until Lewis brought it to their attention. Lewis then pointed out a long black snake about twelve feet away from the bird, making its way through a crack in the brickwork toward the helpless bird. They immediately calculated the imminent peril of the young bird.

Lewis positioned himself and drew the stick much like an archer would hold a bow prior to raising it up and arming the arrow. In something of a trance he said softly to them, but really to himself, "Every creature should be given the opportunity to succeed, the chance to spread its wings and reach its potential."

The ball left the stick like a laser toward the snake and hit the wall twelve inches in front of its head, exactly where Lewis intended. There was no reason to hit the snake. The serpent recoiled but quickly pressed on. Lewis fired three more shots, each one progressively closer to the snake, until it turned back.

Realizing that the bird would fall prey to the same or some other predator as soon as they left, the family scooped up the bird, and Robbie placed it back in its nest. They all stared at Lewis, who paused for some time and then said matter-of-factly, “You see, this stick has helped me acquire that same focus and keen awareness of the warriors before me. It has helped me channel that focus into just about everything I’ve done. It is not just the senses required for success on the playing field but also in meeting the challenges of my chosen path through life—warfare in the ancient sense. It has made me sensitive to so many things in my daily life, my family, and my job. I simply don’t take anything for granted—not a single life, a single person, or a single heartbeat. This stick has been very special to me. Of the many lessons I’ve learned from the stick, one is that the gift of life is both precious and precarious.”

Arriving at the Jones’s car, the new friends shook hands, and Lewis handed the bag, stick, and ball back to the boy. He thanked the parents for allowing him to present the stick and books

to Robbie and then began to walk back down the path.

As Lewis found himself below the nest of the bird, he lingered, thinking that the entire transaction had not been nearly as difficult as he thought it would be. What an incredible coincidence that he was able to use the stick to spare the life of the bird. Well, it wasn't really a coincidence, he suspected. Just then, a warm, swift current of air swept by him and rustled the leaves above. Lewis was familiar with the signal. He looked up toward the nest and whispered, "Good-bye, my good friend. I've done what has been asked. I hope that I have rendered sufficient honor to you, your people, and your game. I hope that Robbie will be as blessed as I have been."

Lewis continued along the path, blinking back a tear or two. Then he began to glow a little inside. The joy in the boy's eyes and the stunned looks of the parents spoke volumes of the impact he had had on the boy. Lewis wondered how Robbie would do and how long it would take for the stick to reveal its true character to

him. His eye caught the leading edge of the full moon as it rose above the trees in the distance. He smiled and whispered to himself, "Not long, not long."