

The Wall

*Good stickwork is acquired only by hard, earnest,
and sometimes monotonous practice.*

W. Kelso Morrill

Lacrosse

As he'd planned, Lewis visited the family about three weeks after the last meeting. He asked Robbie where the nearest wall might be for them to practice their skills. Robbie informed him that there was a suitable wall about four blocks away at an elementary school. They made the short walk and began throwing on the wall.

"Would you mind if I give you a couple of pointers, Robbie?"

"That would be great."

"I've spent thousands of hours on the wall, Robbie. Mr. Turnbull showed me some drills I could practice. He and his brother Jack used to do these on the side of a barn. Maybe I can show you some of the things he taught me. I think they're still useful today.

"Mr. Turnbull used to tell me that having a system was the key to success. And so he showed me these drills in sets. Sets of tens, twenties, and hundreds, until I started doing

them by time. I knew that it would take five or ten minutes to do a certain number. So I'd recommend that you develop a plan and be systematic and disciplined about your approach to this part of your game. Block off a certain time of day or days during the week to do this.

“Mr. Turnbull also used to tell me that in the course of a year with just one hour a week we would get as much work as we would in about eight seasons of regular practices. Looking back at his assessment, I completely agree. You simply can't get to a high level in this game or any other for that matter, without putting in the time. Mr. Turnbull sometimes called this 'the work in a vacuum' with no other players, coaches, or parents—just you, a ball, and the wall. You work and hone your skills here and then get to perfect them in practice and against excellent competition in games. But this is also where you can spend the time to think of new ways—better ways—to play and succeed in the game. It may be a subtle change or an increase in how quickly and accurately you perform the fundamentals. But, in the aggregate, your total grasp of the skills, your performance and your confidence will improve. He also used to talk

to me about the obligation a player has to his team to work at improvement. He'd say that a team could not reach its full potential unless all players did. I still think he's right."

Lewis went through the array of skills, stopping at each part to observe Robbie's mechanics and to offer small but meaningful corrections.

They started by throwing straight over the top, then around the clock at two-hour intervals on both hands. Lewis talked as he demonstrated and encouraged Robbie to keep throwing as he offered suggestions. Lewis then backed Robbie away from the wall to about twenty-five yards to work on shooting the ball.

"On this, Robbie, work on macroscopic motion, your arms, shoulders, trunk, and legs. Get your hands up and out. Work on your three-quarter shot. After you get the mechanics, work on refining the shot. Aim for targets. You will ultimately want to shoot on the run. You can do that on the wall, too. This drill is also good for catching hard passes. You can work your shooting around the clock as well." Lewis demonstrated the skills a few times and then critiqued Robbie again.

Lewis rolled the ball into the wall underhand so that it would return along the ground. "This is a great way to work on your ground ball skills, Robbie. Get your body low as it returns, scoop the ball, and then get your stick up by your helmet as quickly as possible. You should include a few sets of these every time."

Then Lewis showed Robbie how to work on catching bad passes, a critical skill. "Here, throw to the wrong side of your helmet. You should move a little closer to the wall, maybe six to eight yards. Catch the ball backhanded, and draw it back across your face. You can also throw balls low or wide. When you catch a bad pass, get your stick vertical and to your helmet as quickly as possible, just like on ground balls."

Robbie listened and worked to absorb all he could. Lewis then showed Robbie a series of alternating-hand exercises, changing hands right to left and left to right unconsciously as he talked. The boy marveled at the speed of the changes and the precision of the man's throws, exactly where he intended and with a nice zip on each.

“Oh, yeah, have some fun, too. After you’ve completed some strong sets, reward yourself with some fun stuff, behind the back, one hand, between the legs. You know, break up the monotony a little. I used to end my sets by trying to hit the same spot on the wall, say fifty times. I know there is one mark on my wall back home that I hit at least 10,000 times—with each hand. We’ll look at some other skills next time we get a chance, some dodging, maybe. There is much more you can do. Most of it is just a function of your imagination and desire to improve yourself and your team.

“And one last thing...work on deception. Make some fundamentals look similar up to the last moment of execution and then, as a hunter lures his prey, strike with a different movement—as if you have sprung a trap or pulled away the bait as the hunter strikes. This is how you can improve your dodging and scoring.”

Robbie couldn’t believe the depth of insight that Lewis possessed and the value of his assistance. He could feel his improvement immediately.