

Simply Phenomenal

And all of them, regardless of what role they played in Army-Navy—big or small, heroic or insignificant—will know for the rest of their lives that they were part of something that is like nothing else in sports. They were part of the best rivalry there has ever been, the best rivalry there is.

John Feinstein

A Civil War

Robbie stared at the stick as it sat against his bedroom wall with the leather-covered ball placed in the pocket as Lewis had instructed. Much to Robbie's disappointment, for twenty-eight days Red Hawk had not appeared to him. The boy had not calculated the actual interval, noting only that it seemed interminably long. He drifted off to sleep, despairing that he might not see Red Hawk again and that the first visit, as his parents suggested, had just been a creation of his mind. But as the clouds rose in the sky, unveiling a full moon, Red Hawk finally came to Robbie.

"Hi, Robbie!" Red Hawk offered enthusiastically.

"Hi! I was wondering if you were ever coming back. The last few days I wasn't sure if we had really met."

"We met, that's for sure. Do you want to take another trip?"

"Sure! Where are we going?"

"Would you like to learn a little bit about Captain Lewis?"

"Yes!" Robbie gushed.

Red Hawk took Robbie to Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium in Annapolis, Maryland, May 1, 1982, for the lacrosse game between Johns Hopkins University and Navy.

"This is a very special stadium, Robbie."

Robbie nodded as he scanned the facades of the stadium containing names of battles and campaigns in which USNA graduates had fought. He recognized at least two, IWO JIMA and PEARL HARBOR, and surmised that the other thirty or forty names carried similar significance.

Red Hawk brought Robbie near the Navy sideline. Shortly after their arrival, both teams departed the field for half-time. Red Hawk pointed out the ceremony about to begin. A group of people, led by a very tall man, strode several yards onto the field to a microphone that had just been placed there by a maintenance worker. The group included the tall man, retired navy captain J.O. Coopedge, the current athletic director at the Naval Academy; a

much shorter man, Willis P. Bilderback, former coach of the midshipmen lacrosse team; a young midshipman escorting the official party; and a commander with his wife and two small children.

Captain Coopedge took the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the induction ceremony for our own Commander Jimmy Lewis '66 into the National Lacrosse Hall-of-Fame. Tradition has it that the presenter of an inductee has the privilege of offering remarks to the assemblage. Because of his failing voice Coach Bilderback has asked me to offer comments, and I have gladly accepted such a high honor. We thank you for being here to share this special moment with Jim, his family, and, of course, his great coach, Willis Bilderback.

“I was extremely fortunate to have seen nearly every game that Jim played for three national championship teams here at the Naval Academy—1964, '65, and '66. It would be impossible to share all of Jim's countless accomplishments with you. We'll have time to mention only a few.

“Jim's play and leadership were simply phenomenal. He was quick, tough, smart, and an unbelievable competitor. He had a self-confidence—I don't mind saying that some of our opponents

might call it cockiness—about himself that made his team better. He simply felt and played as though he and his team could beat anybody.

“He single-handedly redefined the way attackmen played the game. Prior to Jim, attackmen were content to run around behind the goal and feed to teammates. Jim became the first attackman to really attack the cage, mostly by carrying the stick in one hand and tucking it behind his shoulder. All offensive players do it today in large part because the sticks are much smaller and lighter. Most young players today would never know how that stick position evolved. For three consecutive years Jim received the Turnbull Award as the country’s top attackman, the only player who has ever accomplished such a feat. I’m one of the many people who believe that Jim would have received that Award his freshman year as well, but he was required to play on our plebe team because NCAA regulations prohibited freshmen from playing on the varsity.

“Jim was also a standout soccer player here even though he never played the game in high school. He scored the game-winning goal in the 1964 NCAA championship game when he was a junior. It is hard to imagine many athletes who have won national championships in two different sports and who played such keys roles for each!

“At graduation Jim was presented with the Naval Academy Athletic Sword. Some of you may remember that Roger Staubach had received the Award the year before. As a lacrosse player, Jim enjoyed the highest accolades from players, coaches, fans, journalists, and everyone else involved in the game. Many believe him to be the greatest player ever.

“Let me conclude by saying that Jim has forever changed the game of lacrosse and will be remembered by all Navy players and fans as the greatest ever. But beyond all of his phenomenal exploits on the field, he has achieved equal status as a navy pilot, a naval officer, and the leader of young men.

“Now please allow me to introduce Coach Willis Bilderback to present Jim for formal induction into the Hall- of-Fame.”

Coach Bilderback moved slowly to the microphone, the midshipman escort accompanying him with a large plaque.

“Jim, words cannot sum up what you have meant to your teammates, your coaches, your school, your family, and the great game of lacrosse. Thank you for letting us be a part of your life.”

As his coach spoke Lewis stood with his head canted down, as if observing an invocation, then stood bolt upright and proceeded to the microphone.

“Captain Coopedge, thank you for your kind remarks. Coach, thank you for all that you’ve done for Navy Lacrosse, for our teams, and for me. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your kind attention and warm welcome.

“Since lacrosse is, above all, a team game, it makes me uncomfortable to be recognized for individual play. I never played the game of lacrosse for awards. I played it because it is simply a great and fun game to play. The game represents so much, mostly the physical, mental, and emotional challenges that it imposes on players and teams to do their best. It’s a game with great history whose roots are grounded in the ancient Native American culture and whose fundamental use, in addition to its recreational value, was to prepare young warriors for battle. The game has been a true gift to me as it has allowed me to be a part of that culture.

“I could never have enjoyed any success in this game without the support and care of my teammates and coaches, particularly Coach Bilderback and Coach McDonald of Uniondale High School, my family, and a very special guest,

*Mr. Doug Turnbull, Johns Hopkins, Class of 1924.
Thank you."*

Robbie followed Lewis's eyes into the first row of the stands, where Turnbull offered a modest wave to Lewis. The boy gazed at Turnbull in amazement, connecting the name Lewis had shared with the actual person.

Red Hawk and Robbie stayed for the second half of the game, watching Hopkins dampen Lewis's ceremony with a 12-7 victory. It was the first time Robbie had seen a college game.

"How would you like to see one of Captain Lewis's games, Robbie?" Red Hawk asked.

"Sure—is it possible?"

Red Hawk took Robbie to Michie Stadium, West Point, New York for the 1964 Army-Navy game. Red Hawk explained that both teams came into the game undefeated and that the National Championship was now on the line. He pointed out the huge crowd of over 7,000—the largest ever at Michie Stadium for a lacrosse game. He told Robbie that the game was about half-way through the third quarter and pointed to the scoreboard which indicated that Navy was ahead 4-3.

"That's Captain Lewis, number 22," Red Hawk said, allowing Robbie to follow his eyes to the

sophomore attackman. "This is his first Army-Navy game. He scored a goal in the first half when Navy had a two-man advantage to put them up 4-1. Army scored late in the first half to make it 4-2 and again a couple of minutes ago to make it 4-3. That has given them some much-needed confidence. Army's All-American goalkeeper, Norm Webb, has been fantastic the entire season. They are an excellent team and have held some very good teams like Maryland, Johns Hopkins, and Syracuse to under four goals per game. So let's see what happens."

Red Hawk allowed the scene to unfold with no further comment.

A few seconds later Lewis slipped behind his defender and caught a feed about six yards from the goal from his teammate, Pete Taylor, the Navy captain. Lewis released the shot left handed from among three Army defenders and was immediately drilled to the turf by the Army defenseman stationed behind his right shoulder. Lewis did not see the ball go in the goal but heard the referee's whistle indicating the score. He sprang back to his feet, stared down the Army defender, almost inviting him to do it again next time, and then broke off the gaze, motioning his stick toward the scoreboard, as if to say, You got the hit—but we got the goal.

It didn't take Robbie long to become engrossed in the game. He had never conceived of the game being played with wooden sticks. He marveled at the precision of the stickwork. He couldn't help but notice the extremely physical play.

A few minutes later, Lewis chased down a loose ball on the sideline in front of the Army bench. Somehow he came out with the ball from between two Army players, eluded another, and fired a thirty-yard pass to his streaking attack- and classmate Owen McFadden for a 6-3 lead.

Shortly after Army scored to make it a 6-4 game, Lewis drew his defender to the corner of the field, then raced past him, attacked the goal, gave Army's goalie a dip of the shoulder to draw him down, rose back erect, and neatly rifled the ball over the goalie's right shoulder. 7-4. Again, he was knocked to the turf but chose not to acknowledge that affront.

Then, with seven minutes remaining in the game, Lewis danced past three Army defenders before feeding teammate Tom Morris for a lay-up to make the score 8-4, effectively ending the game. Lewis tallied three goals and two assists in the game and he ended the season with 27 goals and 19 assists.

As the game ended, the players lined up to shake hands. The looks of dejection on the faces of the Army players struck Robbie. Many were wiping tears from their eyes. They had simultaneously suffered two unimaginable fates, a loss to Navy and the loss of their chance at a National Championship. Robbie noted the unspeakable joy of the Navy players and he saw the fine line, a single game, separating total euphoria and total dejection.

"I hope that you've learned something about Captain Lewis, Robbie."

Robbie nodded yes.

"Well, I guess I'd better be going now. I'll see you soon," Red Hawk closed with a smile.

When Robbie woke, he shared the vision with his parents. They were stunned to hear his account of Lewis's career and of the Hall-of-Fame ceremony. John and Mary Jones stared at each other, indicating that they knew there was no way Robbie could have made up—or even dreamed—those facts.

In a much more tolerant tone than the discussion of the first visit, the father proposed, "Robbie, I have an idea. Why don't you start keeping a journal of what you've seen with this Indian boy? We can ask Captain Lewis about it. Deal?"

“Deal.”