

Respect the Game

*That the young men who use this stadium
May better learn the rules of sportsmanship,
The value of teamwork, and the worth of competition.
Given in memory of our classmates who have died
In our nation's service.*

Class of 1951 Gate

Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium

Lewis visited Robbie again on the third Sunday of the month, and they walked together to the wall.

“What would you like to talk about today, Robbie?”

“I’ve been wondering about what you mean by ‘Respect the Game.’ Can you tell me about that?”

Lewis began his answer as they walked, “Well, that’s a rather difficult question. I must say that my philosophy of the game reflects the many great players and coaches with whom I had an opportunity to work during my career. Most notable among those people were Terry McDonald, my high school coach, who had a tremendous impact on me and countless other high school players, and Willis P. ‘Bildy’ Bilderback, my coach at the Naval Academy,

who also taught me a great deal about the game and myself. I was also extremely fortunate to have played with tremendous athletes who were dedicated to improving themselves and their teams. They were always an inspiration to me. And, of course, all of my discussions with Mr. Turnbull and Red Hawk. What I have to say about 'Respect the Game' is really the sum of the interaction with all of those wonderful men. I should also say at this point that most of what I will say probably applies to all of your athletic endeavors, most of your schooling, and regular work. So let me give it a try.

"'Respect the Game' is a concept that takes some time to understand. I think that its full appreciation is gained over a period of time and usually corresponds to the amount of effort and work you've invested in the game. I think at its core, 'Respect the Game' means to play the game as it was meant to be played in antiquity, but within the current rules."

Robbie listened intently as they continued to walk.

"Above all else, the essence of lacrosse was and is its test of endurance and physical strength. So in order to play the game well today, a player must be strong, physical, and in

top shape. Only after achieving a sound physical base can a player's physical courage and skill become useful. Lacrosse of today requires fidelity to the age-old and inherent physical rigors of the game. To play lacrosse at its highest level a player must be strong of mind, body, and spirit and must not yield to fatigue."

Lewis lobbed a ball off the wall to Robbie as they arrived, and they both began to work the skills Lewis had demonstrated on his last visit.

"Also, to respect the game, a player needs to develop the skills required by the game, to be able to handle his stick as though it were an extension of his arm. Players today need to be adept at throwing, catching, scooping, dodging, and shooting with either hand. This requires a great deal of concentrated and systematic effort. In order for a team to play at its highest level, each player must contribute his best efforts. This means to exercise the proper skill at the right time, which quite often means using the 'proper' hand. Like this, Robbie.

"Say you're running along the left sideline against pressure and need to make a pass to a teammate thirty yards away and upfield. You *must* throw the ball left handed. If

you don't, your mechanics will suffer and you'll either throw a poor pass or be checked. So being able to use both hands is important. Back in the old days, most players were restricted to one hand. Mr. Turnbull pointed this out to me when I first met him. He encouraged me to learn to play with both hands, so I worked hard at it. He talked of balance, of equal skill left or right, as balanced as the stick he gave me. I once spoke to Tom Mitchell, a Turnbull Award recipient from the Naval Academy Class of 1961, who told me that he played every fall season at USNA with his left hand exclusively in order to become more comfortable and adept with that hand. Mike Buzzell, another recipient from Navy, told me the same thing. I think there is a lot to be learned from Tom's and Buzz's approach. Young players today can exercise that tactic in fall ball, summer league, and camp.

"I think that sportsmanship and team spirit also come into respecting the game. This is perhaps more reflective of the game and the role of athletics in society today. One of the roles of lacrosse in Native American life was to prepare young men to become warriors for combat. As a result, games were often extremely rough and physical. Preparing for war was, and still is, serious business. The elders in the tribes

who had engaged in battle with other tribes or with European settlers knew the horrors of such engagements. War is not for the faint of heart or body. A tribe's entire safety and way of life were frequently determined by the outcome of a particular battle.

"The ancient Greeks knew this as well. You can see from the modern Olympic events that physical strength, speed, endurance, and close hand-to-hand combat skills were highly prized. Again, all of these physical attributes aided the clan's safety. Warfare has evolved, some might say devolved, quite a bit over the centuries. Today, direct physical 'mano-a-mano' engagements don't play *as* crucial a role in warfare—though physical rigor is still a critical and necessary element of training and on the battlefield. And there's no doubt in my mind that long-term physical, mental, and emotional endurance are critical to success in war. When I was a fighter pilot we all knew that there were no points for second place."

They continued to throw against the wall.

"So sports have evolved from being ancillary training for war to an end in themselves. Our society today continues to

place a high value on physical prowess and, I believe, correctly so. It has been the key to the survival of the race. But it seems to me now that knowledge is the real key to power in our world, not necessarily individual physical strength. We now live in a society that generally rewards education more than brawn. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to accept the inherent value of physical strength, speed, and endurance as these can contribute to and be representative of good health.

“Yet despite all of the cruel and barbaric aspects of armed conflict, there has also been a significant human element implicit in war. That remarkable aspect has been reflected in the victor’s treatment of the defeated and prisoners captured in battle. In only the most barbaric instances would entire groups of innocent non-combatants—the elderly, women, and children—be slaughtered after the outcome of a battle had been decided. After hostilities have ended prisoners are likewise treated humanely and repatriated to their homelands. Though there are surely countless historical examples of violations of these general precepts—the treatment of American prisoners-of-war in Vietnam comes immediately to mind—fair treatment of the defeated or captured has long

been a part of the human endeavor. And so it is today.

“So as athletics have developed over the centuries from a more direct role in the preparation for combat to what they are today—a means to physical fitness, physical prowess, physical courage, teamwork, and many other laudable traits—sportsmanship has taken on more importance. I think it is important to prepare and play the games as if ‘for battle,’ but to win and lose graciously because it is, after all, a game and not war. It is also important not to attempt to deliberately injure an opposing player. The game should be played within the established rules as *hard* as it can be played, but at all times fairly. I’ve seen war, and I’ve seen peace. Sports are not war—nor should they be. They should be a physical and emotional test, yes, but they are not war.”

Facing Lewis Robbie listened intently as he worked his skills.

“Robbie, don’t underestimate the significance of the Johns Hopkins University Turnbull-Reynolds Award for Outstanding Sportsmanship and Leadership which is sponsored by the Class of 1932. The men of that class were members of the undefeated Hopkins

team that represented the United States in the Los Angeles Olympics and won the Gold Medal. They obviously feel pretty strongly about sportsmanship as it was clearly one of the shining traits of each of those heroic men. You know about Jack Turnbull. Pete Reynolds was an All-America cover point—defenseman—who died on the Bataan Death March, also in World War II.

“Team spirit is another aspect worth mentioning at this point. One of the things that I’ve found over the years, particularly as a naval officer, is that leadership is extremely difficult—much more difficult than I’d ever have imagined when I was your age. It’s far too easy for people to be negative. My high school coach did us a great service by stressing the phrase, ‘Don’t expect anything to be easy. You’re not going to accomplish anything *just because!*’ He taught us to stay positive and to support each other, regardless of the situation. He always stressed the importance of the team and the value of hard work. He was a big believer in the thought that when talent is roughly equal, the player or team that works harder will always come out on top. We had a lot of average players, but we practiced harder than most teams.

“Vice Admiral Edward C. Waller has established an award for the Navy Lacrosse program which is presented each year to the midshipman who ‘has contributed most to the spirit, morale, and well-being of the lacrosse team.’ I believe that Admiral Waller, who was a multi-sport letterman during his midshipman days as well as the Superintendent later on, has shown great wisdom in establishing this award, very much like the Class of ’32 from Hopkins. As an athlete and naval officer, he knew firsthand how critical individual and group spirit and morale are to the mission of a unit.

“It is quite remarkable to me that in one of the letters Mr. Turnbull showed me from his brother, Jack mentioned that beyond his regular duties he was always concerned about the ‘welfare and spirit of the team.’ I was struck by how he used the term ‘team’ to describe his military unit. There is something to be learned from this individual and collective insight of two great military leaders.”

Robbie was absorbing every word as he pounded the wall with his ball.

“Let’s see, what else? I guess discipline is another aspect of the game that falls into this category. When we talk about discipline, we

usually think of parents punishing their children. But in terms of team athletics, discipline means to play the way you practice and practice the way you play. I think that this is one of the most critical aspects of playing a team sport. Each player is obligated to conform to the guidelines set by the coach. There can really only be one vision for the team, and each player must accept that vision. It's not unlike doing battle in the military. In order for the team to 'win,' each person must do what he or she is trained and expected to do. Anything less can spell disaster. In Naval Aviation we had the phrase, 'train like you fight; fight like you train.'

"Discipline involves things like making good decisions under pressure, sticking to fundamentals when you get tired, not allowing yourself to let down when things get tough. I think that all of the other things I have mentioned before play into the concept of discipline. It is easy to say and difficult to execute. You often hear; 'Move your feet' or 'Get down' on ground balls and things of that nature. Well, they're all true and even more so when you get tired or things aren't going well for you or your team.

"I've also found that talking doesn't make your team better. *Doing* does. The only

groundball that matters is the next one. The only face-off that matters is the next one. We could say that about every aspect of the game.

“The key to being able to exercise discipline in games is to execute fundamentals repeatedly, correctly, and at full throttle in practice. So everything you do is either a good habit or a bad habit. How well and how hard you do things in practice will dictate how well you do them in games. So when your coaches bark about fundamentals and ‘little things,’ don’t underestimate their significance. They almost always determine the outcome of a contest, and I have also seen the same in my experience as a naval officer.

“I think Mr. Turnbull would have said the same things about the game fifty years ago.

“So ‘Respect the Game’ takes many forms. Appreciating the history of the game, conditioning yourself physically and mentally, developing the skills of the game, sportsmanship, teamwork and team spirit, and discipline. That pretty much covers it. What do you think?”

“I think I understand it a little better now.”