

String Your Own Stick



"The soul of the stick is in its pocket."

Jim Lewis

Captain Lewis met Robbie and his parents at Hobart College in Geneva, New York.

Lewis began, "Robbie, John, Mary, this is Rick Gilbert, Hobart College, class of 1974 and Turnbull Award recipient that year."

"It is an honor and pleasure to meet you all. Captain Lewis, thank you for arranging this meeting," Gilbert began.

Lewis added, "I thought you all might want to meet Rick. Rick played at West Genesee High School, about an hour from here in Camillus, New York, right outside Syracuse. They had a pretty darn good team back then—and ever since. They have won a number of New York state championships and produced an incredible amount of college stars. Same with Hobart—they are considered one of the great programs in history. Rick is still the all-time points leader in NCAA Division II lacrosse with 444 points, with 157 goals and 287 assists."

Gilbert tried to defray his biography, "I got to play with some great players, Jim. My teammates were very good at getting open."

"Well," Lewis continued, "Rick has lived in Florida for quite some time, now, but was planning a trip up here, so I thought it would be good for you all to meet him."

"Rick, I asked Robbie to bring his special stick with him today so that you can take a look at it."

Robbie extended the stick to Rick, "Would you like to look at it, Mr. Gilbert?"

"Love to, Robbie. Please call me Rick, by the way."

Rick accepted the stick and immediately connected with it. Just as Lewis had a year before when he showed Robbie the stick, Rick gently touched the strings and the wood. He spoke to Robbie while almost in a trance.

"Wow, Robbie. This is some stick."

Rick touched every part of every string, the leathers, the twine, and the carvings and writings on the shaft, his eyes never leaving the stick.

Still in his trance, Gilbert continued, "Robbie, did you know that the Native American sticks most likely evolved out of war clubs? If you look particularly at the 'Great Lakes'-type sticks, mostly from tribes like the Ojibwe, you'll see that their small, round pockets look a lot like an old war club. It seems like other tribes evolved off of this model into bigger nets but I have always found it interesting that they seem to have originated in a war club."

After several minutes of studying the stick, Gilbert handed it back to Robbie. "That is the greatest stick I have ever held, Robbie. I grew up

playing with the old wooden ones, but transitioned to the plastic during college. I can feel the magic in this one!"

Robbie looked inquisitively as Gilbert had brought two unstrung lacrosse sticks with him. He also laid out four pocket kits, two mesh and two traditional, a small bag with scissors, screwdrivers, knives, and string, and a couple of balls on the table at which they were sitting.

"Robbie, if I could offer you one piece of advice, it would be that you string your own stick. Do you string yours?" Gilbert asked.

"No, sir, I just get them at the store and use them the way they are," Robbie confessed.

Lewis smiled as he knew what Rick was about to share. "Well, Robbie, I think it is pretty important that each player learn to take care of their equipment but particularly their stick. I think it does a lot of good for a player to be that connected with their stick. It says, most of all, that you care. Come on, think about it. Most helmets, shoulder pads, and gloves are pretty much the same. You obviously need to make sure they are in good order, but the fundamental piece of equipment that has its own personality is your stick, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your stick is the most critical part of the game. It has to work as well as it possibly can so that you know exactly what it is going to do every time you scoop, dodge, throw, feed, catch, or shoot.

"I remember playing in an important game

during my junior year at Hobart, and one of my sidewalls ripped during warm-ups right before the game. I couldn't believe that I had let my stick get to that point. I just hadn't checked it very well. Sidewalls rarely, if ever, 'just rip.' They wear out and fray for several days before they rip. So you can almost always prevent that from happening. In my case, I didn't do it properly. It could have cost my team a lot. Luckily, my backup stick was in pretty good shape. But I got lucky. It should not have gotten to that point.

"So I encourage all young players to take good care of their sticks. Don't rely on other people to take care of your gear. Just about every college team has one or two guys who string and fix most of the sticks. I would discourage that. I think each player should string and maintain their own sticks. The best way to learn is probably to take your backup sticks, tear them down, and then restring them on bus rides and in hotels on the road. It isn't really that difficult to teach yourself.

"I've brought a couple here with me today, Robbie. Here why don't you take this one and follow what I do with mine?"

Robbie's mind flashed back to his first meeting with Captain Lewis when he described the care that went into their special stick—the Native American warriors whose sweat was on the stings themselves. Though Robbie had heard and understood the importance Lewis conveyed, he had never strung his own stick.

Rick opened the two traditional pocket kits and gave one and an empty head to Robbie.

"If you can follow along with mine, I think you'll see it is pretty easy to do this, Robbie. Wanna try?"

"Sure!"

"O.K., Robbie, let's start by working from the back side of the stick," Rick said as he flipped the stick.

"Just lace the leathers through like this and gently tie them off at the bottom," Gilbert began as he slowly threaded the leather strips through their holes and secured them loosely at the bottom of the head. Robbie did his best to copy Rick as precisely as he could.

Gilbert watched Robbie carefully as his fingers worked almost unconsciously. Lewis sat by quietly, enjoying the lesson, as well.

"Let's get the sidewalls in next, Robbie," Rick demonstrated. Robbie followed, craning his neck here and there to get the proper angle to see Rick's work.

Gilbert talked Robbie through the entire process and shared some stories with him as his fingers worked and massaged the pocket into form.

"It takes a few minutes to weave the stringing in, Robbie. Here just follow what I am doing and I'll help you." Gilbert took the long strand of nylon string and executed perfect loops in and out of the sidewalls and leather strips. Robbie did his best to keep up. When Robbie lagged behind, Gilbert slowed and allowed the boy to catch up.

"You are doing great, Robbie. Looks good!" Gilbert offered.

"Thanks. It's kinda fun."

After they had both woven in all of the nylon stringing, Gilbert told Robbie about the importance of the "shooting strings."

"Every player has their own preference on how to place their shooting strings, Robbie. I liked mine the way I will show you, but you should develop your own preference by experimenting a little," Gilbert offered.

"So let's run the string across the back of your pocket like this," Gilbert demonstrated. "And then just follow mine as I go back across and weave them in."

Robbie continued to keep pace and was beginning to see that he could actually string his own stick!

Gilbert took a ball and squeezed and rolled it into various parts of the pocket and encouraged Robbie to do the same.

"Let's leave the strings just a little loose and throw for a minute," Gilbert suggested.

Robbie and Rick threw for a couple of minutes. Robbie realized that he had just produced the best pocket he had ever used. A nice combination of hold and release.

"O.K., Robbie, let's cut the long pieces off of the strings but leave a little on there in case you need to adjust them. I would cut them only after you use the stick for a few days and are happy with everything.

"That was the hard one, Robbie. Let's try a mesh—it is much easier," Gilbert continued as he opened a mesh kit for each of them. "Go ahead and unstring that one."

Robbie's face conveyed his disappointment in being asked to unravel all of his beautiful work.

It's O.K., Robbie, you know how to do it now," Gilbert consoled as he pulled all of the strings in his stick back out, as well. "O.K., here we go again."

Gilbert talked Robbie through the sequence for the mesh and he was right—it was much easier and faster. As an added bonus, Gilbert showed Robbie how to replace a single sidewall as well as how to extend the life of any part with the convenient use of athletic tape.

"I think after a while your fingers just work those strings naturally. You'll get a pocket and a stick that will work extremely well for you."

Lewis thanked Gilbert for inviting them and providing such a meaningful lesson for Robbie. "That might be the best use of forty-five minutes I have seen in a while, Rick. Thank you."

"Thanks so much for coming, Jim. Robbie—what a great pleasure to meet you! I hope we can stay in touch. I can't or won't presume to tell you what to do or how to play, but I will say that learning how to string your own stick will probably have as much impact on your play as anything else. I hope you keep working on it," Gilbert closed.

"Wow! Thanks, Rick," Robbie gushed.

Twenty-five Big Brothers



"A life is about its events; it's about challenges met and overcome—or not; it's about successes and failures. But more than all of those put together, it's about how we touch and are touched by the people we meet. It's all about the people."

General Colin Powell

It Worked for Me

Red Hawk came to Robbie on the next full moon.

"Hi Robbie," Red Hawk greeted his friend. "How 'bout I pick a place to go tonight?"

"That would be great," Robbie eagerly agreed. "Where?"

"Well, last month we saw Jack playing at Poly. That was a pretty good game, wasn't it?" Red Hawk smiled with his understatement.

"I'll bet you didn't know that the next two years—1928 and 1929—Jack played for the great Mount Washington Club team, one year while he was still at Poly and the next spring after he had actually graduated from Poly but was not yet enrolled at Johns Hopkins."

Robbie offered Red Hawk a baffled look.

"It is a bit of a long story, Robbie. But we should probably talk about it and take a look. The time that Jack spent with Mount Washington those two springs really defined

him as a player and a person. Try to imagine a player coming out of high school today, going straight to Major League Lacrosse for two years, and then returning to college after that experience. Think of how much better, stronger, and more mature a player would be upon returning to college. That is comparable to what Jack did."

Robbie still stared back in total confusion, unable to imagine the circumstances that might have led to that situation. "I'd love to hear that story."

"O.K., well to begin with, Jack started at Poly a year before he probably should have. He did O.K. with his grades, but certainly not great. As Jack struggled more and more as he went along, his parents asked the school to hold him back one grade so he could catch up.

"Then he lost his eligibility for his senior year due to the fact that he had played four seasons already. And then he graduated in February so he was no longer enrolled and, obviously, could not play that year either."

This was all new to Robbie.

Red Hawk continued, "Jack always said that his coaches and teammates had the greatest impact on his life. As I hope you'll see, his teammates at Mt. Washington took him under their wings and really helped him. His brother Doug was on the team, which also had a huge impact on him. One player, the team captain, Oster 'Kid' Norris, though, became Jack's mentor in every respect. But what really happened was that Jack ended up with about twenty-five big brothers on that team.

"Let's look a little at the Mt. Washington-Crescent game, O.K.?"

"That would be great!" Robbie said eagerly.

"The Crescent Club is from Brooklyn, New York,

Robbie. They are one of the best teams in the country and have had a great rivalry with the Wolfpack for many years. There are Jack and Doug," Red Hawk pointed to each. The game had just begun.

After Jack's first pass, he was knocked to the ground with a high and late body check by a Crescent defender, which was not called as a foul by the officials—though it clearly should have been. Doug noticed the cheap shot on his brother but was prepared to let it go for now. Kid Norris, as captain of the team, was not nearly as ready to ignore it and approached the offender.

"What was that?" Norris yelled.

"What was what?" the defender snapped back.

"That was a bad hit. Come on, you should know better than that. And he is a high schooler right now. We don't need that garbage."

"If he is in high school, maybe he shouldn't be out here."

Norris started to respond but simply walked away from the discussion, knowing any further comments would be of no use.

Doug stood by quietly knowing that Jack would be up to the physical challenge and had actually become a bit amused by the discussion. He also knew that the next time Norris had an opportunity to 'communicate' with this defender, it would likely be with a body check. It didn't take long for Norris' opportunity.

Just a couple of minutes later, the defender had just picked up a loose ball near Norris, who took the opportunity to pay back the hit on Jack. Norris delivered a rock-solid chest-to-chest hit that not only dropped his opponent—the first point of

contact as the Crescent defender hit the ground being his shoulder blades—but caused him to drop the ball—and his stick. Mount Washington gladly picked up and attacked the goal.

Robbie felt himself cringe—and chuckle a little—as he watched.

As play continued on, Robbie counted no less than six jarring body checks on the same Crescent player by different Mount Washington players who had taken Norris' lead. Norris added one more 'reminder' toward the end of the game after the outcome on the scoreboard had long-since been decided. Robbie noticed that all of the hits were perfectly legal and well placed but had certainly made a point.

In between the collisions on the Crescent defender, Robbie studied both Jack and Doug. He had never seen Doug play in his visits with Red Hawk. Though maybe not quite as flashy as Jack, Doug was incredibly steady. Robbie noticed the little things that Doug was doing so well. He picked up five or six loose balls by simply being in the right place at the right time. Doug's efforts on his team's rides—defending on the attack end of the field when his team had lost the ball—were exemplary. His stickwork and footwork were as clean and crisp as Robbie had ever seen.

Robbie also noticed Doug contributing in a different way in support of Jack. He simply raced by the defender who had offended Jack—three times in a row, almost mocking him with the ease in which he did it, and scoring each time.

Jack was able to tally two goals and Doug went about his business by totaling four. The Mount won 9–5, though the score was an afterthought to the real story, which was the way that Jack's teammates backed him up physically. There were no more cheap shots on Jack in that game or any others the rest of the season.

"You know, Robbie," Red Hawk offered, "Jack told me in one of my visits that the support he received from his teammates in that game was the highlight of his lacrosse career. For such a young player to have earned such respect from a world-class team like that—and it had nothing to do with being Doug's brother and everything to do with himself—it meant the world to him and cemented his confidence on the field for the rest of his career.

"Kid Norris, who was the first one to stick up for him, played and coached at Mount Washington for thirty years! So he remained an active part of Jack's life for about fifteen years after this. The field where the team now plays, by the way, is named in Kid's honor. From all I have learned about him, I think all of his teammates, coaches, and players will tell you that he had a tremendously positive impact on their careers—not the least of whom was Jack. Kid was inducted into the National Lacrosse Hall of Fame in 1962. Some of the other guys on that team played for many years, as well. So the Mount Washington Club team was a bedrock of Jack's life. He went from being a ball boy when he was little, to a star even while in high school, and then returned as a superstar after his three years at Hopkins. He loved playing with that team and those players and coaches."

"Three years at Hopkins? Don't most players go for four?" Robbie asked.

"Three years—that's right. We'll get to that part later," Red Hawk teased.

"There is one other piece of 1928 that I think I should mention, Robbie," Red Hawk continued. "The organizers for the Olympic Games in Amsterdam decided to add lacrosse as a demonstration sport. General Douglas MacArthur, the head of the American Olympic Committee,

formed a group to determine the team to represent the United States. He established a playoff format between Mt. Washington, Navy, Rutgers, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Maryland.

"Mount Washington was undefeated going into the Olympic qualification tournament and played Hopkins at Baltimore Stadium in front of about 9,000 fans but lost 6-4. Hopkins later beat Maryland to earn the Olympic berth. They went on to play in front of huge crowds in Amsterdam and ended up with the best overall record based on goal differentials!

"You know that Jack competed in the 1932 and 1936 Olympics. He was pretty close to being there in 1928 also! So, I hope you would agree that 1928 was probably the most important year in Jack's career in just about every respect."

Robbie nodded in agreement.

"I'll see you soon, Robbie," Red Hawk closed.

"Thanks, Red Hawk. See you soon!"

You Are What Your Performance Says You Are



"We don't talk very much."

Navy SEAL Commanding Officer

Robbie,

I hope all is well. I like this letter from my father—hope you enjoy it, as well.

My best to you and your family.

"Respect the Game!"

Bruce

Robbie opened the enclosed letter.

June 6, 1957

Dear Bruce,

Congratulations on your graduation from West Point! Your mother and I are extremely proud of you and this tremendous accomplishment.

I know that I have shared a number of my father's sayings with you. Well, here is another one that you may want to remember as you head off to lead soldiers in defense of our country, **"You are what your performance**

says you are." I think this one is about as simple as it can be. In short—talk is cheap. You can talk all you want about doing things but if you haven't *done* them, then it is only talk.

As I have confessed to you during your journey to and through West Point, I cannot claim to have first-hand experience in the ways of the military. But, please remember that I have found many remarkable similarities in my business experience. Some would even argue that leadership in the civilian sector might be *more* difficult than in a number of military settings. I can assure you that every one of my employees looks at me in the exact same way that your troops will look at you. So please take these thoughts to heart—I think they are largely universal.

I suspect that the soldiers under your purview will be watching you like a hawk. Every single thing you do—key word *do*—will be heavily scrutinized by your troops. They will know when your actions match your words and when they will not. To be sure, you will need to speak, write, and communicate clearly. And you should work hard on these aspects of your leadership skills. When I say that talk is cheap—that is true. But, at the same time, it is critical to communicate your thoughts effectively. Then, as you put your words into actions, the true value of what you have said will come to life. There is a time and a place—a critical time and place—for clear talk. But none of your talk will be worth your bars if you can't 'walk the talk.'

Do the work. Be the first one there and be the last to leave. Be there for your soldiers. Don't talk about being there for them. Don't talk about why you were not there—be there.

Good leaders don't just direct people to do things—they *explain* why that task is necessary and important. Once a person understands *why* they are doing something, they are much more likely to *want* to do it—and do it well. That, I think, is true leadership.

As I have told you and your brothers and sisters many times, it should be painfully clear to every person with whom you come in contact that you are the product of a strong family and an excellent education. Certainly not in an elite, haughty way, but in a warm, gracious, caring, hardworking, intelligent, and strong way. Your soldiers should be able to tell from the first minute that they meet you that you will be the kind of officer they want, need, and *deserve*.

There was rarely any time when we children did not know where we stood in our father's eyes. He expected us to be polite, courteous, gracious, hardworking, and tough-minded. When we displayed any deficiency in these areas or talked about why we hadn't accomplished a specific task, he addressed us quickly, firmly, and positively. It seems to me that this would be a good way to engage your soldiers.

Our father always preached performance,

performance, performance. "Get the job done. Don't *talk about* getting the job done. *Get* the job done."

Jack wrote to us frequently about the difficulties and challenges he and his men faced in the War. I know for a fact that he was able to lead his airmen as effectively as he did because of the lessons our father taught him.

I think Jack would tell you to work hard on your relationships with your soldiers and to take good care of them. He would tell you to not underestimate the importance of your material readiness, train hard, teach your soldiers to execute under duress, build a Team Ethos within your unit, and bring a positive attitude every day.

You certainly can't be a good officer without being a good person. It will require intense work and dedication to continue to learn, improve, and grow in the ways that you will need and want to—but your soldiers will deserve—and appreciate—your very best.

I know that you are capable of excelling in the future as you have to this point. However, I suspect that West Point was the easy part. Get ready to really work.

You are what your performance says you are.

With Love and Pride,

Dad

Football & Hockey



"Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and annoys the pig."

sign in the office of former
Pittsburgh Penguins (NHL) Coach
Bob Johnson

Red Hawk visited Robbie again on the next full moon.

"Robbie, how about we take a little different look at Jack this time?"

"Sure. What do you mean?"

"Well, we haven't talked too much about Jack's other sports—but he was All-State in football when he was at Hopkins, and he also played ice hockey, you know. How 'bout we look at some of that?"

"Great!"

Red Hawk began the scene a few minutes before kickoff at a Hopkins football game in 1931. He began to share a little history with Robbie, who was clearly excited to be there.

"There is Jack," Red Hawk pointed. "He plays halfback and defensive back for the Hopkins football team. They have not been particularly strong the last couple years—but Jack has really helped them improve from 1-8 his freshman

year to where they are this year, 5-2, going into this last game. Jack led the state in scoring a couple of years ago and was selected All-State.

As play began, Jack received the opening kickoff and returned it about thirty yards. As Robbie had experienced on some of his other trips, he found himself spellbound by Jack in his playing days, as well as by the uniforms and equipment (or lack thereof) of the players. Robbie smiled at the baggy pants, high black shoes, small shoulder pads, long-sleeve padded jerseys, and facemask-less leather helmets.

Robbie's heart raced with excitement as Hopkins huddled for their first play. Red Hawk offered, "I think Jack really enjoyed the variety of sports he played. He worked very, very hard on each one, but the variety kept things fresh for him. I think so many boys your age are starting to just focus on one sport. Is that a fair statement?"

Hopkins broke the huddle and set their formation. Robbie was amazed by the formation and stances of all of the players. Jack received a pitch out wide to the right and immediately turned upfield. Jack wiggled past the first two would-be tacklers and then slammed into the last two as he was being driven out of bounds. Robbie noted that Jack gained about twelve yards—pretty nice run.

After giving the previous question some thought while Hopkins huddled, Robbie replied, "I think that's true. A lot of my friends keep saying they want to just play lacrosse. They say they will train all fall and all winter just for the spring and summer seasons. They play on club teams and travel so far away. Do you think I should I do that to get better?"

Red Hawk sat quietly smiling. He had seen this change just in the past decade. He advised, "Robbie, I think you should play a few sports for as long as you can. You learn

so much more that way."

"Really?" Robbie questioned.

"Definitely. Watch Jack."

On the next play Jack took another pitch but to the other side this time. Again Jack slipped through the first couple of tacklers, ending up with about an eight yard gain.

"Did you just see how Jack used his eyes and shoulders to fake those defenders trying to tackle him?" Red Hawk asked.

"That quick little fake?"

"Yes. That perfect amount of hesitation to bait his defender into biting right, then taking off to the left," Red Hawk explained. "You can learn so much from playing multiple sports. Your skills complement each other as they transfer from one field onto the next. The basics of the games are the same. The only thing that really changes is the equipment."

"That was like a split dodge!" Robbie realized.

"Sure was," Red Hawk agreed.

The boys continued to watch Jack grind out sizeable yardage on every carry until his team scored. Robbie noticed that Jack was never brought down by the first tackler—and usually not even the second or third.

Conversely, when Jack was in the defensive backfield, he didn't miss a tackle. What a joy to watch, Robbie thought.

Red Hawk continued, "I think you can see that Jack had a lot of natural football skill, but I think he has also learned so much from playing all of his sports. I think the strength and toughness that he has worked on in football translated very well to lacrosse and hockey. I think the skill

and finesse that he has developed in lacrosse and hockey has helped him out here in football. They all work together. All of the sports require strength, skill, toughness, and teamwork.

"I'd like to quickly show you one more thing tonight, Robbie. Is that alright?" Robbie stared at Red Hawk with a quick nod of approval.

The scene quickly changed and suddenly the boys were inside a chilly hockey arena close by in Baltimore. "Amateur Hockey League" read a sign on the boards near the middle of the rink. In order to play games, Hopkins sometimes had to play against Baltimore's semi-professional team.

Red Hawk and Robbie sat in the cramped bleachers near Jack's bench quite a bit before the scheduled game time. Jack always got to the rink earlier than expected to try to hone his stick and skating skills, which were slightly below the level of his more-experienced comrades. The small stick he played with was held easily in one hand, and his muscle and speed helped him compensate on the ice—particularly on loose pucks and defense, but Jack always sought to improve his skills.

Jack began circling the rink, slowly at first to warm up. But he quickly increased his pace and began a series of challenges. He first worked on his skating—practicing his starts and stops, changes of directions, and skating backwards. The only other person in the rink was the manager who had opened it early to allow Jack some ice time. Jack worked and worked on his skating.

After about thirty minutes of just skating, Jack took his stick from the bench and scattered several pucks around the rink. He then, systematically, began working on his stick handling, racing between the blue lines simply handling the puck. He worked on his wrist shot—taking at least one

hundred. Then on to his slap shot—another one hundred or so.

By now Jack's teammates and their opponents began to straggle into the locker rooms. Jack continued to work. Now he mixed up the skills, skating and shooting together. Frontward, backwards, weaving in and out of imaginary defenders, stopping, starting, passing pucks off the boards to himself, shooting.

Jack took a short break right before his teammates began to make their way onto the ice and then he joined them for their normal warm-up. Robbie guessed that Jack had done about an hour's worth of practice on his own.

"He does that a lot," Red Hawk shared, familiar with Jack's routine.

The boys continued to watch as the game began. Though Jack was clearly not the smoothest skater, passer, or shooter on his team, Robbie could feel the intensity Jack brought to his team. His tenacity, effort, and athleticism were evident. On every shift, it seemed Jack threw a strong body check on an opponent, which made them think twice about trying to slip by Jack again.

Jack's shifts—he played defense—looked remarkably similar throughout the game—strong, aggressive, and effective all night. He gathered in a number of loose pucks by sheer will. Though Hopkins lost the game 4-1, Robbie and Red Hawk could see Jack's team's play actually pick up every time he was on the ice. His mere presence seemed to inspire his comrades.

"I hope you enjoyed that, Robbie. Though Jack was obviously one of the all-time greats in lacrosse, he took an equal amount of pride in his football and hockey pursuits—and derived a great deal from doing all three," Red Hawk closed. "We better go."

"Wow! Thanks, again, for another great trip, Red Hawk," Robbie beamed. With that, Red Hawk waved goodbye for the month.