

THE SPORTING SCENE

SPIN RIGHT AND SHOOT LEFT

The shot, the stop, the outlet pass will have taken as much as two seconds.

BY JOHN MCPHEE

You're on defense, zone defense. You pick up a loose ball and look for the outlet pass. You see it, throw it, and go down the middle on a fast break, taking the return pass. Now you're looking for a three-on-two or a two-on-one before they can set up their defense. Too late, they're settled—man-to-man. You're still looking for a two-on-one, but it's more complicated. You see and sense everybody—where they are, where they're headed, as things develop in almost constant motion. You watch for a backdoor cut, and for someone posting up. Maybe go for an outside shot. The coach is yelling his mantra, "Look for the open man!" There is no open man. Wary of a double-team, you give up the ball with a bounce pass. One player to the next, the ball moves two, three, four times before you set a pick, roll, take a no-look pass, and go to the hoop for a layup. Are you playing basketball? No.

You could be, of course, every term and move alike. But this is lacrosse, which is essentially the same game—an assertion that loses a good deal of its novelty in the light of the fact that James Naismith, best known for inventing basketball, in 1891, and writing and publishing basketball's original rules, in 1892, was a lacrosse player. A Canadian, he had played lacrosse in the eighteen-eighties at McGill, and also for the New York Lacrosse Club.

Lacrosse and basketball are siblings of soccer, hockey, and water polo. When the rules of ice hockey were written, in the eighteen-seventies, a model they followed was lacrosse. The transfer of lacrosse from Iroquoian to European culture had occurred in Montreal in mid-century, and while the white sport was to emigrate and develop most emphatically in the eastern United States, Canadians would retain it strongly here and there—"here" being southeastern Ontario, "there" consisting of some great leaps over territory unfamiliar in the game. Paul and

Gary Gait, twins who played for Syracuse (1987-90) and who constitute in themselves a hall of fame within the Hall of Fame, grew up in Victoria, British Columbia, a hotbed of lacrosse. David Mitchell, Cornell '07, a prestidigitation stickhandler who plays in both professional lacrosse leagues (indoor and outdoor), grew up and went to high school in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Wayne Gretzky, ice hockey's historically greatest star, grew up in Brantford, Ontario. As winters wore on, Gretzky has said, "I could hardly wait to get my lacrosse stick out and start throwing the ball around. It didn't matter how cold or rainy it would be, we'd be out firing the ball against walls and working on our moves."

In lacrosse as in hockey, Gretzky was at home in the power play, also known as "man-up" and "e.m.o."—the extra-man opportunity that results when somebody is sent out of the game for a time as a result of a violation, such as "slashing," an unambiguous term common to hockey and lacrosse. Hockey's power play is still a bit rough-hewn—for example, one player, in close, acting as a screen, the others stitching around him a silhouette of slap shots—and in evolutionary terms has not progressed nearly as far as the fast-weaving passes of lacrosse, which gradually tease apart an open man. Water polo—whose fakes and shots will translate into the other games—uses the e.m.o. to punish various torts, like taking your opponent to the bottom of the pool. In lacrosse, advancing the ball from one end of the field to the other is known as clearing, and the defensive attempt to stop the clear is known as riding. Soccer coaches have said that soccer consists of lacrosse's clearing and riding. The basketball term for riding is "full-court press." The most difficult pass in lacrosse traverses the field from one side to the other while both players are running. Soccer calls that square ball. Of these five games—



A lacrosse stick is a rigid slingshot. American

with their picks and screens, their fast breaks and rotational defenses, their high degree of continuous motion—water polo, in its sluggish medium, is surely the most awkward, and lacrosse, at the other extreme, creates the fastest and crispest accumulation of passes and is the prettiest to watch.

Four of these sports are played in the Olympics. The other is lacrosse. There is a Bulgarian Lacrosse Federation, a Korean Lacrosse Association, a Deutscher Lacrosse Verband, an Österreichischer Lacrosse Verband, a Nederlandse La-

RALPH STEADMAN



toddlers learn to handle lacrosse sticks in certain locations more than in others—notably, in Baltimore.

crosse Bond, a Suomen Lacrosseliitto ry, Lacrosse Polska, Schweiz Lacrosse, and similar organizations in Spain, Hong Kong, Latvia, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Bermuda, Scotland, Ireland, England, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic. A few years ago, the Princeton lacrosse team finished its season by touring Japan, because there were fifteen thousand lacrosse players in Japan. To the Japanese, a visiting Division I American lacrosse team was an educational opportunity. Near the end of the visit, Princeton was

asked to play, against assorted Japanese teams, eight complete lacrosse games in one day. Bill Tierney, Princeton's coach, was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. Like American football teams, lacrosse teams usually play once a week and need the time to recover. Holding up a pair of fingers, Tierney said, "Two."

As lacrosse has spread to the Far East, the Far East has entered the cerebral cortex of lacrosse. Dave Pietramala, the head coach at the Johns Hopkins University, has studied Sun Tzu on military strategy. Sun Tzu dates from twenty-five centuries

ago, in the time of Aristotle and Alexander the Great. After reading Sun Tzu on deception ("All warfare is based on deception"), Pietramala looked more favorably than ever on the Hopkins defensive fake slide. Like his ancient mentor, Pietramala preaches patience. Sun Tzu: "If it is to your advantage to make a forward move, make a forward move; if not, stay where you are." Hopkins has won nine N.C.A.A. championships since the N.C.A.A. began its tournaments, in 1971. (Before then, national champions were declared.) Pietramala achieved his

first in 2005. In 1928, in a premature attempt to sell lacrosse to the Olympics, Major General Douglas MacArthur, the president of the American Olympic Committee, organized a lacrosse tournament to determine what American team would demonstrate lacrosse in matches against Great Britain and Canada at the summer Games in Amsterdam. Hopkins defeated Maryland for the honor.

The International Federation of Women's Lacrosse Associations has held a World Cup tournament every four years since 1982. The first was in Nottingham. The most recent one was in Annapolis, Maryland (Australia 14, U.S. 7), and the next one is in Prague. Men's World Lacrosse Championships have been held every four years since 1974, most recently in London, Ontario, where Team U.S.A., which had won the tournament seven of nine times, got past the Iroquois, 21-13, but lost in the final to Canada. The populationally outnumbered Iroquois hold their own in these tournaments, usually finishing well up in the column. They do not seek membership in the Indian National Lacrosse Federation. At a bar in Dublin late last spring, a manager of the English national men's lacrosse team remarked that some Iroquois have two sets of sticks, modern ones and old "woodies,"

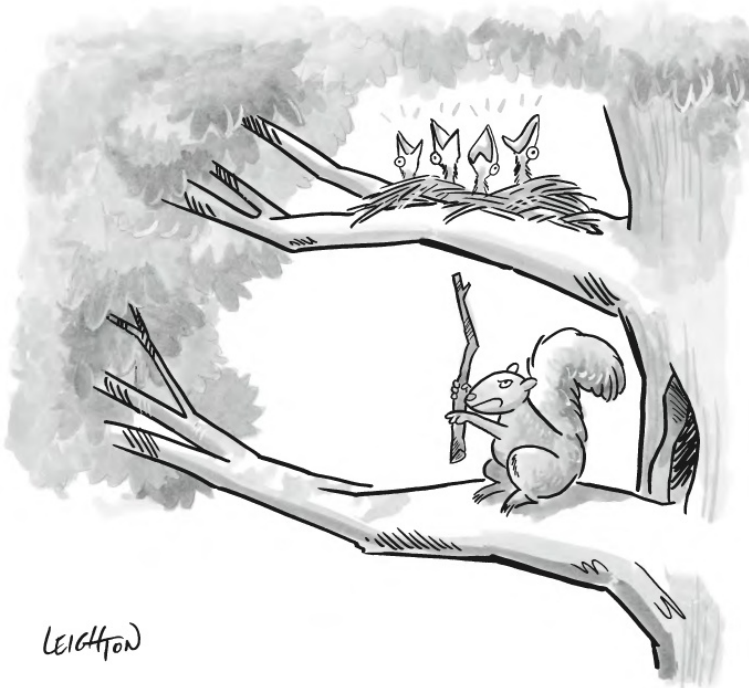
"and man do they hurt when they check with them." He said, "They really do hold their own as a lacrosse nation." In 2006, after narrowly beating England, "they took the Australians apart; they bring something special to every World Championship—they are the life and soul of our sport."

I was in Dublin with the Princeton men's lacrosse team, of which I am a Faculty Fellow (an official position, not unlike shaman, that was thought up some years ago by the university's athletic director, Gary Walters, who can think up just about anything). Earlier, we had been in southeastern Spain, near Cartagena, at a high-rent sporting club called La Manga, where Spanish Open golf tournaments have been played, where a tennis stadium is surrounded by twenty-seven outside courts, and where a spread of cricket pitches and no fewer than eight state-of-the-art soccer fields have attracted cricketers and footballers of the highest level. Manchester United warms up there. Princeton—scheduled to play two games on consecutive days against the English national lacrosse team—arrived on the eve of the first match after a long bus ride to J.F.K. that included streets of midtown Manhattan, a night flight to Dublin, a

6 A.M. departure for Alicante, which is as close to Dublin as New York is to Minneapolis, and, finally, an hour's bus ride from Alicante to La Manga, where the team arrived with ample time to change into their uniforms, get into other buses, and ride to a field to practice. Goals, grass, sidelines, restraining boxes, end lines, creases—everything was perfect, and perfectly marked. Bill Tierney ran his team for two hours. They didn't seem at all sleepless, and he finished them off with wind sprints. Then he called them together for a word: This was no Roman holiday; these were games of importance to international lacrosse, and they were to play with finesse, not flash, proving how well they could play, not how showily. Looking around, he didn't need to add: No behind-the-back passes, no behind-the-back hot-dog shots at the English goalie. Since they apparently thought sleep was what other people do, he told them to make curfew, and he would be around to see that they did. "Give this team a good game," he said. "They have better sticks than we do."

What that meant was that the English would pass, catch, shoot, scoop, and cradle with more stickhandling skill than their American opponents. Really? Really. In the first game, an English midfielder, sprinting up his left sideline to take a pass on a clear, looked over his shoulder and saw that the ball was headed wide, low, and out of bounds. Without breaking stride, and keeping his feet always inches inbounds, he extended his left arm and lacrosse stick far over the sideline, lowered the head almost to the ground, and turned the pocket backward. Seven feet from the player's shoulder, six inches above the ground, the ball went into the pocket, then, still running full tilt, the English midfielder flipped the head of the stick and brought it up into shooting position as he veered toward the Princeton goal.

A lacrosse stick is a rigid slingshot. American toddlers learn to handle lacrosse sticks in certain locations more than in others—notably, in Baltimore. Manchester has been called "the Baltimore of English lacrosse." The Mancunian press has called Baltimore the Manchester of the United States. That English midfielder was a Mancunian. Some seventy-five per cent of English lacrosse players are natives of Greater Manchester. Men's world championships have been



and will be held in Manchester (2010). In the eighteen-nineties, at the British lacrosse championship, a Mancunian donated a trophy for the winner, calling it the Iroquois Cup.

After the lacrosse games in Spain and a third game a few days later against England in Ireland—after the Princeton players got into their buses and went back to their rooms—Bill Tierney stayed on, at the request of the English nationals, to conduct clinics for the English players. It being his opinion that they were long on stick-handling and short on strategy, he told them that they expended too much energy “running east-west and not enough running north-south.” He told them he was “seeing a lot of green down the middle, down that alley,” and they were not taking advantage of it. “When you dodge and run, head to the far pipe. Going for the far corner of the pipe is a mental idea.” He talked volubly, rapidly, with the absence of hesitation of someone completely grounded in his subject, and he showed no concern for his American accent; he was speaking lacrosse. If he mentioned isos, they understood that he meant isododging—one against one. “North-south” is parallel to sidelines, “east-west” is parallel to end lines. You don’t accomplish much running east-west; you attack by running north-south.

“The guy who makes the play is often not the guy who got the assist or the goal. It starts two or three passes earlier. We all get the goal.”

“Lacrosse is essentially a matter of looking for a two-on-one. You get it by dodging, passing, or picking.”

“If you hear the word ‘switch,’ put your shoulder in it and go for the goal.”

“Get outside your comfort zone—go left.”

“Number 40, you used your shot fake enough times to make it ineffective. Use it when it counts.”

Tierney himself seemed to have been trained in some sort of diplomatic clinic. He had many genuine compliments for the English players, seasoned with deprecations of his own players (who weren’t there). On the craft of scoring, he said, “You shoot to the opposite knee.” On the art of precision shooting, he said, “If my guys could hit the corners, I would tell them to shoot there. But I tell them to shoot for the knees or the shoulders. Then they’ll hit the corners.” (He has had players who could hit a falling leaf.)

“If you shoot from square, you can’t get everything on it that you want.” (When you shoot from square, a line drawn between your feet would be perpendicular to the direction of your shot.)

“Do your inside roll. Feel the pressure of the defense.”

“Do the rocker step, come back up top.”

“Split hard to his top foot.” (Make your dodge and pass the defender on the side where his foot is more advanced.)

“That’s about as far as you are going to get to go before they double you.”

Setting up drill lines for two-on-tuos, he taught them a pick-and-roll variation that he called Kodiak, because Princeton invented it for a game against Brown. It was reminiscent of the confined space, tight maneuvering, and superb stickhandling of Iroquois and Canadian indoor lacrosse, transposed by Tierney to the outdoor game. Occurring topside (in front of the goal), it could result in various achievements, such as causing a long-stick defenseman (a “pole”) to be replaced by a defender with a short stick, or producing a maneuver resulting in a score: set the pick, and after the roll “make that little Kodiak-type pass, over the shoulder.”

Both figuratively and literally, the most exploitable dimension in the game of lacrosse is the more than eight thousand square feet of playing space behind each goal, the focus of which is an area known as X. Tierney mentioned various dodges crafted for coming out of X, the simplest of which was pure speed—the “speed dodge,” the “rush dodge,” the “bull dodge.”

“You just sprint to get topside. Gauge your defenseman. If he can’t run with you, you’re going to beat him all day.” (Defensemen, who were once burly and slow, have become burly and fast—or especially adroit at changing direction.) “Don’t run curving routes. Make sure that whatever you can do is in straight lines. Sprint to seven and seven.” The numbers refer to a topside locale called the island—seven yards wide of the goal and seven yards in front of it. What to do on the island? “You have four options: Turn and shoot with your opposite hand; for example, spin right and shoot left-handed. Split and go under. Plant, and inside roll. Rocker step, then shoot from topside.” The English faces suggested nothing short of complete comprehension until Tierney added, “Five and five is

what you really want when you say seven and seven. It’s like saying the curfew is at 1 A.M. and they get in at three.”

In Dublin, most went to the Guinness brewery, some visited the Book of Kells, and I missed the bus to the lacrosse game. One moment, two buses were waiting—at Juries Inn Christchurch—and the lobby was a sea of orange-and-black equipment bags and uniformed players. I went up to my room for something I had forgotten, and when I returned the lobby was vacant and the buses were gone. I had nothing on paper that said where the game was to be, and I don’t text-message anybody. The *Irish Times* did not know where the game was. The *Irish Times* does not know lacrosse from camogie or hurling. I went to the front desk and asked the clerk where the buses had gone. She was an intern from China, and she did not understand me. She said this was her first full day in Ireland. I asked a male clerk. No comprehension (Bucharest). I consulted my cash position. Two euros. But money was the least of my problems; I knew nowhere to go.

Into the rising panic, three remembered letters came forward from who knows where—initials detached from the context in which they had been spoken: “U,” “C,” “D.” I went out onto Christchurch Place and asked someone where I might find the nearest A.T.M.

In the smoke shop past the corner.

I ran to the smoke shop past the corner. The A.T.M. was down. I kept going, along Lord Edward Street, toward Dublin Castle. In a stone wall I found an A.T.M. The wall was stuffed with euros. What seemed like blocks later, I reached the Dame Street Taxi Rank, near Trinity College. To a kindly, graying driver, I said, “U.C.D.” And where would I be going at U.C.D.? he asked. It’s a great sprawling place, more than three hundred acres, and lying several miles from the city center.

“I don’t know. I missed a bus. I’m supposed to be at a lacrosse match. Can you help me?”

It was a long ride, but not nearly long enough for the conversation that developed. At the first stoplight, he said, “And what might lacrosse be?”

I said it was football, basketball, and ice hockey in an advanced stage of evolution. It was played with a solid rubber ball

weighing a third of a pound and carried in a small basket at the end of a stick. If you grasped it like a hockey stick (hands apart) or even like a baseball bat (hands together) and swung it with full leverage, you could throw a lacrosse ball more than a hundred miles an hour. You could kill somebody. So players wear genital cups, pads, helmets, face masks. The idea is to throw the ball past a keeper into a netted goal.

How does a match begin? Does it begin like football?

It's like nothing you ever saw.

The ball is set on the ground at the center of the field. Close over it, two men face each other. The referee says, "Down!" as if he were addressing mastiffs. They go into deep knee squats with their stick heads back to back, inches apart but not touching the ball. After the referee blows a whistle, the face-off men grunt against each other and attempt by various maneuvers to gain possession of the ball. The face-off in women's lacrosse is more scenic. There is nothing collisional about women's lacrosse—no contact. The ball, held at shoulder height between the two opposing sticks, is flung upward as if on the jet of a fountain. Players converge from all directions and someone gains possession. Tribal face-offs were once quite similar to women's face-offs today. To begin a lacrosse game, Iroquois teams of the eighteenth century formed facing parallel lines, and a beautiful maiden (according to Samuel Woodruff, of Windsor, Ontario, writing in 1797) put the ball down on the field. Players from each team went to the ball "and with united bats raised it from the ground to such an elevation as gave a chance for a fair stroke."

In an ice-hockey face-off, the referee throws the puck down between two players and they fight it out. When my father, who was born in 1895, played basketball in high school and college, the referees tossed the ball into the air between two players after every score, and also at the start of each period. Basketball's face-off is known as the tip-off, and now, in college play, you see it only as it starts a game or in overtime. In lacrosse there is no more important play. After a score, the scored-upon team is not simply awarded the ball. It has to fight for it in a face-off, and teams that are good at facing off can score multiple consecutive goals while the other team, again and again, fails to gain possession of the ball. Because lacrosse substitu-

THE FOUNDATION

1.

Watch me, I'm running, watch me, I'm dancing, I'm air;
the building I used to live in has been razed and I'm skipping,
hopping, two-footedly leaping across the blocks, bricks,
slabs of concrete, plaster, and other unnameable junk . . .

Or nameable, really, if you look at the wreckage closely . . .
Here, for instance, this shattered I-beam is the Bible,
and this chunk of mortar? Plato, the mortar of mind,
also in pieces, in pieces in me, anyway, in my mind . . .

Aristotle and Nietzsche, Freud and Camus and Buber,
and Christ, even, that year of reading "Paradise Lost,"
when I thought, Hell, why not? but that fractured, too . . .
Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Kant, and Goffman and Marx,

all heaped in the foundation, and I've sped through so often
that now I have it by heart, can run, dance, be air,
not think of the spew of intellectual dust I scuffed up
when in my barely broken-in boots I first clumped through

the sanctums of Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, and the Arcopagite,
even, whose entire text I typed out—my god, why?—
I didn't care, I just kept bumping my head on the lintels,
Einstein, the Gnostics, Kabbalah, Saint This and Saint That . . .

tions are unlimited, many face-off players have become so specialized that they are known as FOGOs: Face Off, Get Off, to be replaced by a midfielder more skillful at attacking or defending. In the words of the professional midfielder Matt Striebel, of the Philadelphia Barrage, "The FOGO has become one of the most highly sought-after positions in lacrosse, the object of intense recruiting. It is the most important position on the field, besides goaltending. A great FOGO is like a great place-kicker."

A FOGO's repertory includes but is not limited to the basic clamp, the pinch clamp, the rake, the jam, the plunger. Some FOGOs hold their sticks with the motorcycle grip (both palms down), the better to roll the head and clamp the ball. Danny Brennan, of Syracuse, the 2008 N.C.A.A. champions, has said that the pinch clamp was his best move: "I try and suck my stick down low and beat his clamp. I use it a lot." A great general athlete is not going to be intimidated by a FOGO. The midfielder Kyle Harrison, of Johns Hopkins's 2005 national champions and now a profes-

sional with the Denver Outlaws, told *Inside Lacrosse* magazine, "FOGOs are almost always very quick to the ball. So instead of trying to beat him to the ball, I forget the ball and focus on crushing the head of his stick with the shaft of my stick between my hands. Notice how I've slammed the shaft of my stick into the top part of the scoop of his stick. If I hit my shaft into the right part of his head, he's got no chance of stopping his head from spinning in his hands. So once I've pushed his head away from the ball I can use the shaft of my stick to pop the ball behind me where I can cut him off and get to the GB first. Just remember when you do this move do it hard and fast and relentlessly. There's no room for nice guys on face-offs." A GB is a ground ball. In 1888, Princeton's face-off man was Edgar Allan Poe. His granduncle (ibid.) wrote "The Raven."

As in the sibling sports, once you have the ball the idea is to free up someone, or free up yourself, to shoot—by picking and rolling, by dodging half a dozen ways, and even by resurrecting basketball's old-time weave (Hopkins's spaghetti offense). A ball

2.
Watch me again now, because I'm not alone in my dancing,
my being air, I'm with my poets, my Rilke, my Yeats,
we're leaping together through the debris, a jumble of wrack,
but my Keats floats across it, my Herbert and Donne,

my Kinnell, my Bishop and Blake are soaring across it,
my Frost, Baudelaire, my Dickinson, Lowell and Larkin,
and my giants, my Whitman, my Shakespeare, my Dante
and Homer; they were the steel, though scouring as I was

the savants and sages half the time I hardly knew it . . .
But Vallejo was there all along, and my Sidney and Shelley,
my Coleridge and Hopkins, there all along with their music,
which is why I can whirl through the rubble of everything else,

the philosophizing and theories, the thesis and anti- and syn-,
all I believed must be what meanings were made of,
when really it was the singing, the choring, the cadence,
the lull of the vowels, the chromatical consonant clatter . . .

Watch me again, I haven't landed, I'm hovering here
over the fragments, the remnants, the splinters and shards;
my poets are with me, my soarers, my skimmers, my skaters,
aloft on their song in the ruins, their jubilant song of the ruins.

—C. K. Williams

thrown with such power that it does not even begin to curve toward the ground is called—as in baseball—a frozen rope. The N.R.A. would call it a round. As it passes above one or the other of the goalie's shoulders, he might not notice it. The lacrosse goal is vastly smaller than a soccer goal, of course, but—like a basketball hoop—it is larger than it seems to be. The apparent degree of difficulty of a parabolic basketball shot is diminished by the knowledge that the diameter of the hoop is nearly twice the diameter of the ball, which, as it drops in and begins to swish, occupies scarcely twenty-seven per cent of the targeted area. The lacrosse goalie defends a square plane, six feet on a side, framed by metal pipes. The surface area occluded by a goalie's body and the head of his stick is twenty-five per cent of the goal plane, give or take some fat. That leaves seventy-five per cent of a goal open at all times. A shooter has twenty-seven square feet always open, if not always in the same place.

Shooters aim for the lower corners, the upper corners, and the "5 hole" (between the goalie's legs). Good scorers can catch and shoot in a single motion. Good feed-

ers make that possible. If an attacking player with his back to the goal takes a high feed and in one continuing windmill motion brings the head of his stick down past his knees and fires a shot into the net behind him, he has done a Canadian egg roll. An elevator is a shot that starts low and ends high. A wormburner is a shot that is low all the way. A bounce shot can be hard to stop, especially if it has sidespin on it. Bill Tierney complains that his Princeton players resist learning to put sidespin on a shot. (There have been exceptional exceptions.) Sidearm, sidespinning shots bounce higher, even past a goalie's shoulder. When a shot misses the goal and goes all the way over the end line, the ball is given to the player—attacker or defender—who was nearest the ball as it went out of bounds. In Tierney's words, "It's the only game in which if you miss the goal you get the ball back."

Goalies bait shooters. Goalies stand way over against one pipe and wait for some sucker to shoot into all that empty space—which has just been filled by the anticipating goalie. A shot that is fired straight into the pocket of a goalie's stick

is a gumball. It is also called popcorn. The shooter should stay after practice and practice shooting. Goalies are so quick that they can sometimes "stuff" a point-blank shooter. An unguarded shot from three feet out can be caught by a goalie. Most shots, of course, come from greater distances, and when the goalie has the ball in his stick his eyes go back immediately to the source of the shot, because the goalie's teammate who was guarding the shooter will have turned upfield and is the first choice to receive the outlet pass. The shot, the stop, the outlet pass—the complete reversal of direction—will have taken as much as two seconds.

Of course, I didn't blurt out all this right there in that Dublin taxi—only the essence of it, of ninety per cent of it, in response to the driver's questions, which came one upon another and suggested a lifetime of attention to sporting games no matter how outlandish they might be. After we had been through Ranelagh and were just passing Royal Hospital Donnybrook, he asked if I had ever played lacrosse myself.

Once, I told him, but only for a season, at Deerfield Academy, in western Massachusetts—a postgraduate year between high school and college, my mother's map of a route to maturity. I played basketball, compensating with quickness for a grave lack of height, and after a close and raucous game one Saturday night a teacher came through the departing crowd, stopped me on my way to the locker room, and said his name was Mr. Haviland, and that he was the coach of Deerfield lacrosse. He said come spring he would like me to try out for his team.

I might have been less surprised if he had asked me for a tip on the third at Gulfstream Park. In any case, that dialogue at courtside with him seems impossible, but this was 1949, when, nationally, about one-hundredth of one per cent of the population of the United States had ever heard of lacrosse, and five-thousandths of one per cent had ever played it. There had been no lacrosse at my high school, or, as far as I knew, at any other public high school in New Jersey. Besides, I had been on the high-school tennis team. I told Mr. Haviland that I had fiddled around with lacrosse sticks maybe ten times ever while I was growing up in Princeton, but I didn't play la-

crosse, did not know how to play lacrosse.

His response was that I had just been playing it, in a sense, and that I could learn fairly quickly to play in the midfield, where defense would be much the same, and I could also learn quickly to scoop up a loose ball, after which my job would be to carry it to the other end of the field and throw it to a teammate who knew what he was doing. He said he thought I could be a real hoover, a ground-ball machine, and he would teach me the Baltimore crab (a twisting scoop on the dead run, also known as the Indian pickup). He said if I didn't learn to cradle well (create centrifugal force to keep the ball in my stick) I could hold the stick straight out in front of me, pocket up, ball inside it, as I sprinted up the field (a move known as walking the dog). "All you need to be is inn-terr-esst-edd," he said. I would before long be aware that the word "interested," pronounced in four discrete syllables with the accent on the "esst," was not only a criterion statement of what a player had to be but also the highest compliment Mr. Haviland had to give.

All through spring vacation, I threw lacrosse balls at anything that would send them bouncing back to me. Some things didn't. They broke. On the high-school level in New England at that time, there was so little lacrosse that we had on our ten-game schedule only four high-school teams, and one of them—Manhasset—was from Long Island. The three others were Mount Hermon, Phillips Andover, and Phillips Exeter. Lacrosse had been played at Andover and Exeter in the eighteen-eighties but was not really established at either school until the nineteen-thirties. Andover's first modern coach was renowned for dancing nude in his living room while accompanying himself on the violin. Deerfield 10, Andover 6.

Absent other secondary schools to schedule, we played the junior-varsity team of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the freshman lacrosse teams of Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth, and Williams, and, at West Point, the U.S. Military Academy plebes. Everybody was interested, one syllable at a time, and we won all those games. We were undefeated. We beat the plebes, 10-9, on the Plain. We beat Manhasset, 17-3, a scant six months before the unstoppable Jimmy Brown—by long-time consensus the greatest lacrosse player in the modern game—entered Manhasset High School as a freshman. Phew!

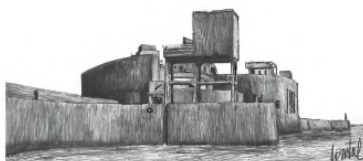
Jimmy Brown was born on St. Simons Island, off mainland Georgia. From the age of eight, he grew up on Long Island, where his mother worked as a domestic servant. At Syracuse University in the nineteen-fifties, he became, yes, the greatest football player in the school's history (on his way to becoming the greatest running back in the history of the National Football League), but he was not, in the usual manner, a football player who played lacrosse. He was a lacrosse player who played football. He loved lacrosse, called it his favorite sport. "Lacrosse is probably the best sport I ever played. . . . I could express myself fully in lacrosse. I could run two hundred yards at a stretch. I could duck between players. I could feel free to make the plays that suited me best. It wasn't like football or basketball, where coaches tell you what foot to put down." He had grown up in lacrosse—Manhasset High School '53. He was not a massive defenseman with a long stick killing intruders. He was a massive midfielder with a four-foot stick that looked a lot shorter in his hands. Cradling with one wrist, he would lower his left shoulder, and—in various versions—say, "Look out! I'm coming through." Bob Scott, the head coach at Hopkins then and for twenty years, remembers Jimmy Brown as "a man playing with boys." Scott continues, "He weighed two-twenty-eight. Holy mackerel! The thighs were huge. I don't think anybody would try to take Jimmy Brown. Mt. Washington guys threw body checks at him—at a brick wall. You couldn't double-team him. He'd just go through it. He just went by people and fired it in the goal. He startled the lacrosse world, he was so good."

Our sticks were fashioned like shepherd's crooks from steamed and bent hickory. For every team then playing the game, they were made almost exclusively by the Iroquois. Where sticks were available from sporting-goods companies, they had been bought wholesale, primarily from Onondagas and Mohawks, Iroquoian tribes. The Iroquois made tens of

thousands of sticks a year, each stick requiring about a year to cure, steam, bend, and string. It was not a particularly expandable industry. On average, the lower trunk of one good hickory yielded eight sticks, and this tended not only to affect the oak-hickory ratios in climax forests of northeastern America but also to limit the growth of the game. Sticks were idiosyncratic, as different as thumbprints. It was said that certain high-level lacrosse teams had the best sticks because the coaches had curried favor with the Indians. The pocket was shaped from woven stiff rawhide and leather thongs. As a result, the ball was harder to handle than it is now and spent more time loose on the ground.

Ask a modern player what he has in his hands, and, typically, he might say, "Cyber head on a black Swizzle Scandium." Next player: "A Penetrator head on a Gait Anarchy shaft." Next: "An Evolution 2.0 on a Kryptolyte shaft." Shafts are made of patented aluminum alloys, of graphite, of vanadium, of zirconium, of weapons-grade titanium. The teardrop heads are plastic and are bilaterally symmetrical (forget the shepherd's crook). The heads fit snugly and are secured with a screw. The revolution from wood to plastic took place in the nineteen-seventies, in a factory in Boston and another in Baltimore owned by a lacrosse all-American who had carried a wooden stick. The event is sometimes called the plasticization of lacrosse. It changed the game to the same great extent that pole-vaulting was changed when fibreglass replaced bamboo. With the new stick, a lacrosse player could do a great many things more surely, rapidly, and precisely—shoot, pass, pick up a loose ball, cradle to protect it. The fastest of running games became even faster, and even prettier to watch.

The custom stringing of tennis racquets is abecedarian compared with the subtleties that have developed in the stringing of lacrosse sticks. Nobody over nine uses a factory pocket, or so it seems. Some players carry around with them as many as seven heads. They bake their heads and reshape them. They carry different heads for different weather, because moisture changes the webbing. The "traditional pocket" of woven thongs is still in use, but more than ninety per cent of players go for nylon mesh, woven in various geometries, for the most part in vertical or horizontal diamonds. The ball rides in a pocket of



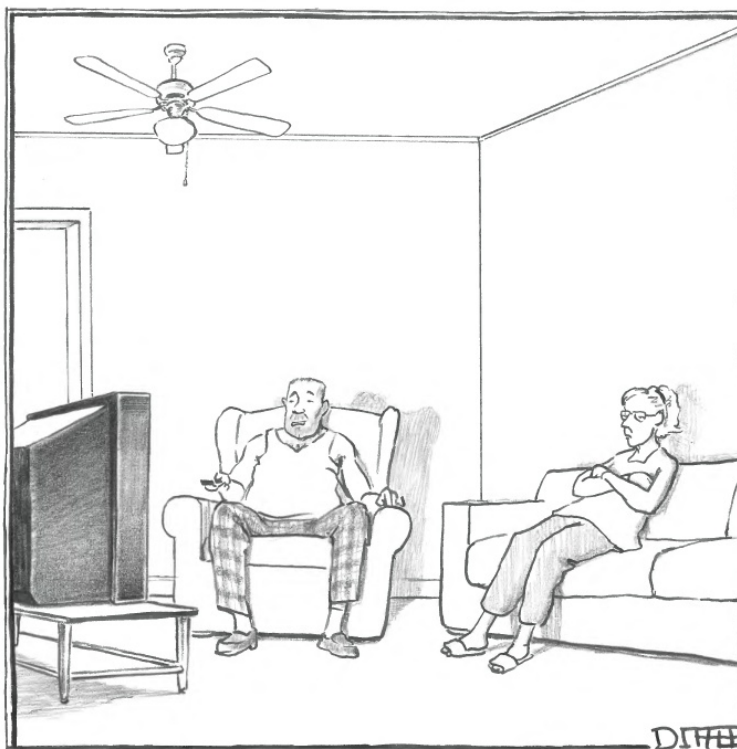
assorted legal depths, and when it is thrown it first moves over the mesh toward the top of the stick. In the high and widest part of the mesh—woven in and out, from side to side—are the shooting strings, almost all of them laces made for hockey skates. There the ball trips, backspins, and fires. Out she goes in three digits, if you've got the rhythm and the muscle to make that happen. Lacrosse shops are not unlike fly-fishing shops in the bewildering range of what they have to offer, and players carry the topic forward into preoccupation, cryptoscience, and voodoo. They boil their mesh. They use Jergens lotion on their mesh. They buy pocket pounders and pocket screws that shape the mesh and hold it in place, like blocking a hat. They tune their shooting strings according to the kinds of shots they anticipate making. They tighten a "shooter," loosen one, take one out, thread another in the shape of a U. They string and otherwise shape the pocket to control its softness and legal depth.

This craft is too advanced for most lacrosse players, who turn to "stick doctors" for assistance. Usually, there is at least one on any team. Charlie Kolkin and Alex Capretta are the incumbents at Princeton. Others describe their work as having gemlike characteristics. The University of Virginia has had its lacrosse sticks strung in California, by, so to speak, a plastic surgeon. His name is Lyle Tomlinson and he wore the number 34 when he played the game long ago. His "Pocket 34" is world famous—well, lacrosse-world famous. If a pocket can be called a sack—a real bag—it is deep and soft and will release a ball with a lot of "whip." Ask a lacrosse player how much whip is in his stick and he'll say something like "seven on a scale of ten." The more whip, the faster the shot. The more whip, the more erratic a throw is likely to be. Among other things, whip tends to bend trajectories downward. Bill Tierney is wary of whip. "It can cause bad passes," he explains. "Most mistakes are bad passes—thrown too low, for example, because of the whip in the passer's pocket."

These are things that players have confided to the writers of *Inside Lacrosse*:

I keep my pocket high in the stick, right under my bottom shooting string. I like a lot of hold at the top so I can take a deep windup when I shoot.

If you're a middie who shoots hard off the dodge or a guy who does most of his



"Here's something called 'The Fifty Greatest Countdown Shows Ever!'"

damage on set shots, you might want to have a decent amount of whip in your stick. It helps lock the ball in place under the shooting strings so you can really reach back and sling it. . . . If you want a lot of whip, tighten the top shooting string.

My best chance at scoring is by having a huge whip. . . . My theory is that if I don't even know where my shot is going, how the heck is a goalie going to guess where it's going?

Off Stillorgan Road, we turned in at University College Dublin, and the driver got out at a security hut to ask where, if anywhere, at U.C.D. we might find a lacrosse match between England and a team from America. There was no immediate response. Then: "Lacrosse?"

"Lacrosse," the driver affirmed, in a yes-of-course tone, as if suggesting that Cuchulain himself had played the game.

Security made calls on a mobile phone. At length, he seemed vindicated. No one else at U.C.D. knew from lacrosse. The one possibility was a sports ground on the far side of the college, and we would have

to drive around the college to find it—about two miles.

So we started off again, the taxi-driver asking how an aboriginal game had acquired in the first place such an unfathomable name.

The etymology has a lot of whip. A player's stick is also called a crosse. It is said that when the black robes of the seventeenth century saw the sticks of the Iroquois they thought of ecclesiastical crosiers. In some parts of France, cricket has been called *la crosse*. A game more or less like field hockey developed in France and was also called *le jeu de la crosse*. Prairie La Crosse, where the La Crosse River enters the Mississippi, is where the Winnebagoes played, and where La Crosse, Wisconsin, is now.

Off Clonskeagh Road, we turned once again into the college, and a quarter mile later came upon a large parking area—buses, cars—and a fenced pitch covered with lacrosse players in red-and-white and orange-and-black. The driver said he would like to stay and watch. ♦