



NORTHWESTERN
LACROSSE
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Game CHANGER

by Anne Stein

LACROSSE COACH KELLY AMONTE HILLER HAS LED NORTHWESTERN'S WOMEN'S TEAM TO SEVEN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS. NOT ONLY HAS SHE ENGINEERED THE END OF EAST COAST DOMINATION OF THE SPORT, SHE'S ALSO BECOME THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE EXPANSION OF WOMEN'S LACROSSE THROUGHOUT THE NATION.

WITH SEVEN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS IN EIGHT SEASONS, an overall record of 196–30 and a long list of honors for her players and herself — including five National Coach of the Year accolades — Northwestern's Kelly Amonte Hiller has no trouble recruiting talented lacrosse players.

A dozen years ago, that wasn't the case.

"When I first got the Northwestern job in 2000, there was a certain style of play [in collegiate lacrosse], where players were big, tall, athletic and very skilled. I kind of went with the players who were left over — raw, athletic kids who were short and fast and whom I could teach." In her first recruiting class, the rookie head coach ended up with 15 first-year students and four sophomores, including two who'd never played the game.

Charged with rebuilding a varsity lacrosse team from scratch as part of the athletic department's compliance with Title IX — the landmark 1972 legislation that banned gender discrimination in academics and athletics and resulted in an explosion of women's sports — Amonte Hiller was always on the lookout for potential talent.

She spotted Courtney Koester (McC05) and Ashley Koester (SESP05), twins from Richmond, Ind., jogging by her office and was intrigued. When she later saw the two playing intramural flag football on Floyd Long Field, she approached them about playing lacrosse — a game neither had ever seen. She gave each sister a lacrosse stick to take home over Thanksgiving break, and when they returned, both Koesters joined the team. "They were strong and athletic, and two were better than one," Amonte Hiller recalls.

She told that first group of recruits they were going to win a national championship. "A lot of them laughed at me, but once they saw my belief in them, they started to believe it too," says Amonte Hiller. The then–26-year-old coach's

words came true: Four seasons later, in 2005, the team posted an astounding overall record of 21–0 and captured the NCAA women's championship, becoming the first team outside the Eastern time zone to do so. Since then, Amonte Hiller has built a dynasty, introducing innovations and popularizing the sport in a way that's being felt nationwide.

MULTITALENTED TEEN ATHLETE

Sports history has shown that the most-accomplished players often don't make the best coaches. For whatever reasons, their superior skills and relentlessly demanding personalities don't translate to coaching the ordinary athlete. Amonte Hiller is an exception.

The Hingham, Mass., native was so spectacularly athletic at age 13 that her high school lacrosse coach, Lisa Miller, who was 23 and playing on the U.S. national team, couldn't keep up with her. "Besides her athletic skills, her game understanding, even at that age, was at a high level," says Miller, now Harvard University's head coach.

That was Amonte Hiller's first year playing lacrosse.

"We used to refer to her as 'the kneebreaker,'" says Miller, who ranks Amonte Hiller among the top three players in women's lacrosse history. "We couldn't stay with her because she was so agile and quick. She had great hand-eye coordination from the beginning and a phenomenal work ethic that you just don't see that often. She was almost a perfect storm of athletic talent, high sports IQ and tremendous work ethic. Plus she loved the game."

Amonte Hiller was the youngest of four athletic kids — big brother Tony Amonte went on to an all-star NHL career. At age 6 Kelly began playing T-ball, the only sport available at the time for little girls. "My mom said I was itching to do anything I could," recalls Amonte Hiller, whose 5-year-old daughter plays in an Evanston youth

Kelly Amonte Hiller watches her team during warm-ups before Northwestern's semifinal showdown with her alma mater, the University of Maryland, at the 2012 NCAA Women's Lacrosse Championship in Stony Brook, N.Y.

lacrosse league, which Amonte Hiller happens to coach. (She and husband Scott, an attorney, also have a 1-year-old daughter.)

Amonte Hiller soon added ice hockey, soccer and basketball, often competing with boys. Her parents were at home nearly full time because Amonte Hiller's dad, a contractor, suffered a massive heart attack in his early 30s. "He and my mom were faced with the decision to either retire and not have a lot of resources, or for him to go back to work and jeopardize his health — so they decided he should stay home."

Amonte Hiller credits her parents with mentoring her and credits her father especially with teaching her to believe in herself. "I also had the benefit of having my siblings around and learning from their successes and failures," she says. "I had to work for everything I got, whether it was on the playing field or the playground or getting a job. That really established the type of person I am."

At Thayer Academy, a college prep school in Braintree, Mass., Kelly Amonte was a three-sport captain in basketball, soccer and lacrosse. She was recruited to play on a scholarship for former Northwestern lacrosse coach Cindy Timchal at the University of Maryland; by this time she'd whittled her sports down to lacrosse and soccer. "Kelly wanted to be the best she could possibly be, and she demonstrated that every day of practice and at every game," says Timchal, now head women's lacrosse coach at the U.S. Naval Academy. (Timchal coached nine seasons when lacrosse was a varsity program at Northwestern the first time around, between 1982 and 1992.)

FROM TOP PLAYER TO TOP COACH

Amonte Hiller led the Terrapins to national lacrosse titles in 1995 and '96, earned All-America honors in lacrosse and soccer, was named Atlantic Coast Conference Female Athlete of the Year (1996) and graduated as the all-time leader in goals, assists and points in lacrosse.

"Kelly was all about competing and making the team better. She was the key for us starting that string of national championships," Timchal says. (Maryland won seven consecutive titles from 1995 to 2001.) After graduating in 1996 with a speech communications degree, Amonte Hiller played for the U.S. national team, dabbled in triathlon and was an assistant coach at Brown University. She started a graduate business degree at the University of Massachusetts, transferred to Boston University and served as a volunteer assistant coach at BU for two years. (Amonte Hiller would like to finish her MBA at the Kellogg School of Management, she says, but at this point "it's hard to fit it all in.")

By this time she'd met her husband, Scott Hiller, a four-time UMass lacrosse All-American and two-time Major League Lacrosse coach of the year who'd been coaching men's lacrosse as an assistant at Harvard University before entering law school at Suffolk University. Amonte Hiller also started developing her coaching philosophy, which is guided by three principles: positivity; belief in self; and hard work, the cornerstone of everything, Amonte Hiller says.

"I think I learned to coach by being a strong player," says Amonte Hiller. "That doesn't always translate into being a strong coach, but through my upbringing and experiences as a person and through athletics, I developed a lot

of passion for teaching and giving back, especially to young girls, getting them to understand their strengths and that they can achieve anything they put their minds to.

"That's the driving force for me — to get them to believe in themselves."

Northwestern's former athletic director Rick Taylor and former senior women's administrator Nancy Lyons had worked at BU and had followed Amonte Hiller's career since high school. They invited her to interview for Northwestern's new varsity lacrosse coaching job in fall 2000. Lyons, recalls Amonte Hiller, "really liked my positive coaching style and my belief in self. So they offered me the position, which was crazy. I didn't have much coaching experience, and they took a chance on me."

She turned to a number of sources for advice on building a successful team. She went to her brother Tony's Chicago Blackhawks practices to learn about NHL skills, drills and coaching techniques. She bounced ideas off of her husband, who is now an integral part of her staff as a volunteer assistant coach. And she thought about how she was coached in high school and college and borrowed ideas and philosophies from her mentors, ranging from her dad to her college coach, Timchal.

She has since revolutionized the sport. The Wildcats' defense, for example, is known for its unusual aggressiveness. "That level of tenacious, all-out, outrageous defense is part of what defines Northwestern women's lacrosse, and it's a little intimidating for other schools," Timchal says. "But I applaud them because that level of intensity is something most schools strive for. Kelly's gotten that level of commitment from her players, who are willing to work harder than anyone in the country to be as good as they are."

It's been the team's style since its first championship, Amonte Hiller says. "We try to keep evolving as much as possible, but we're definitely fast-paced and relentless."

She also instituted another change, switching her athletes' attire from traditional lacrosse skirts to shorts because she wanted the sport to be taken seriously. "It's important for me that student-athletes are respected," says Amonte Hiller.

"She's the initiator, the outlier, the standard setter," says Harvard's Miller. "She's changed the way people practice, bringing the discipline and training from soccer into the lacrosse world."

"Kelly's a step ahead of everyone else in the sport, and she's always coming up with things that have never been done," says senior midfielder Amanda Macaluso, who has won two national championships under Amonte Hiller. "We never do the same drill twice. If a new rule comes out, she tries to figure out how to use it to our advantage."

She's also helped to grow the sport, both locally at Chicago-area high schools and across the nation. Each summer Amonte Hiller hosts popular lacrosse camps for girls at Northwestern and in Massachusetts and New York; more than half of her players over the past 11 years have been former campers. Lacrosse is now the fastest-growing youth sport in the nation, with a 218 percent increase in participation from 2001 to 2010, according to a Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association survey. And 13 universities, including several in the Midwest and West, are adding women's lacrosse as a varsity program in 2013-14.

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"Our sport is heading in such an amazing direction," Amonte Hiller says. "The expansion within universities to add women's lacrosse is just staggering."

Former Wildcat All-American and assistant coach Lindsey Munday (C06) leads one of those new programs as head women's lacrosse coach at the University of Southern California (see "Kelly's Coaching Tree" on our website, www.northwestern.edu/magazine). She describes Amonte Hiller as "one of the hardest workers I've ever seen." It's the first comment — along with her intensity — from any former player or assistant when asked to describe Amonte Hiller.

"Every day you were expected to work hard and be better than the day before, and the expectations were the same for assistant coaches working for her," says Ann Elliott (C07), who won five championships at Northwestern as a player and assistant coach and is now head coach at the University of Colorado at Boulder, which recently launched its varsity program. "Every day you showed up to push yourself and the team. There were no days off."

During practices, Amonte Hiller works as hard as her players, constantly demonstrating drills and giving instructions. "She's always active, always positive, always pulling someone aside and saying, 'Hey, try it this way,'" says Macaluso. "She's always telling you what will help you get to the next level." During games, the only time Amonte Hiller yells is when her instructions for running a play need to be heard above the roar of fans at Lakeside Field.

"She's never negative," Macaluso says. "She's never going to point and yell at you for messing up. One of her philosophies is to take risks and try new things — to go out there and enjoy the process and be comfortable. That's one of the best things about her — you never feel scared or nervous to try something new."

COMPASSIONATE AND DRIVEN

Athletes know that for all of her intensity, the surprisingly soft-spoken head coach clearly cares about each athlete's success and happiness, on and off the field. In her second year as an assistant coach at Northwestern, recounts Elliott, her brother passed away in the middle of the season, and Amonte Hiller and husband Scott helped her get through it. "Just being there and understanding goes a long way," Elliott says. "She told me to do whatever I needed to do."

And when Munday tore an ACL while coaching for Northwestern and playing on the national team, Kelly and Scott bought her a first-class plane ticket so she could fly home comfortably.

That combination of compassion and drive has earned her the players' perpetual, and mutual, respect.

"Everything she said was gold," says Munday, who played for Northwestern from 2003 to 2006. "A lot of us earlier players weren't recruited much, and we appreciated the opportunity and were willing to do whatever it took to show her how valuable and special it was to be on the team."

In fact, her student-athletes are so devoted to Amonte Hiller that during a dodgeball game a few years ago, one player dove across the floor face first to stop a ball from hitting the head coach.

Along with the emphasis on intensity and drive, Amonte Hiller has instituted a code of ethics that includes being respectful and courteous and giving teammates



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positive feedback. The team meditates and uses visualization, and the coach encourages players and coaches to enjoy their journey, whether it's celebrating a great pass in practice or a goal during a game.

Amonte Hiller says her greatest challenge now is dealing with the complacency some athletes might feel as a result of the team's success. She has brought in other coaches, including Pete Carroll of the Seattle Seahawks and Northwestern's Pat Fitzgerald (SESP97), to inspire her athletes. She and her coaches constantly come up with new drills, and lately the team's been working out at Evanston Boxing Club, hitting the heavy bag and learning footwork.

Now current and incoming players expect to win. "But you have to go into every situation with no expectations, work your hardest, and be able to adjust, react and respond," Amonte Hiller says. "If you're not focusing on the present, on the small details, your goal won't come to fruition."

When the Northwestern women's team won its first national championship in 2005, the lacrosse world was shocked, admits Amonte Hiller. It was a Cinderella story, but many considered it a fluke. In 2006, she says, "People were like, 'Wait a minute, what's going on here?' In 2007, they said, 'OK, this is enough.'"

"Everyone wants success for their program. That's the nature of it. And that's the exciting part, that our sport is so competitive," she says. "We're really excited about the direction of the sport, and hopefully we've had some impact on that expansion. I also hope that we've given some of these new programs hope that they can succeed quickly."

But that task is easier said than done, and Amonte Hiller is still the master. "You're dealing with young people who are going to make mistakes, and you need to teach them how to learn from mistakes and still believe in themselves," says Amonte Hiller. "It's a challenge every single day."

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PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Northwestern coach Kelly Amonte Hiller runs ground ball drills before the finals of the 2012 NCAA Women's Lacrosse Championship against Syracuse.