



Lacrossing Cultural Boundaries

An Ivy-League Sport goes Downtown

BY LOYD MCINTOSH PHOTOS BY KARIM SHAMSI-BASHA

ON A COLD AND BLUSTERY TUESDAY IN MARCH, a group of teenage boys from Hayes High School gather on the athletic field behind the 47-year-old school building for practice. It's just like any other high school practice anywhere across America, with coaches barking instructions through gruff voices, whistles blowing, wind sprints being run across the field. The players, ranging in ages 14 to 18, are brimming with sweat, determination and a healthy dose of testosterone mixed with a youthful sense of invincibility.

But, what makes this practice different—indeed socially significant—is the realization that in just two days this group will make history as the first Birmingham City School to field a lacrosse team and play in an organized high school league.

The Hayes Pacesetters is a collection of 20 young men, 18 African American and Hispanics, many of whom had never even heard of lacrosse—much less played it—just a few short weeks before taking the field for the first time against Hoover High School. It's a poignant moment that many in Birmingham's lacrosse community have been working towards for two decades.

"They are making history," says Mitch Damsky, one of two volunteer coaches helping to get the fledgling Hayes lacrosse program off the ground. Coach Damsky, along with Davis Lawley, began working with the team in February three days a week, teaching them the fundamentals of lacrosse, a sport that has earned a national reputation as a game for the upper-middle class in the wealthier suburbs.

Both men have a keen sense for the significance of the Hayes program. Not only does the school primarily educate minority students, but it serves one of Birmingham's poorest communities. Located on Messer Airport Boulevard, Hayes is surrounded by the Birmingham International Airport, Sloss Furnace and other remnants of the city's collapsed steel industry. Government housing, a criss-crossing network of railroad tracks, vacant businesses and the shadows of downtown Birmingham all add to the Hayes experience.

For these two coaches, both of whom live and work 'Over the Mountain,' the Hayes lacrosse team is a small part of the city's healing from a troubled racial past. They're certainly not shy about using the word "historic" around when talking about the team.

"It's truly historic and shows how far Birmingham has come," says Coach Damsky.

"It really is historic considering we're in the Deep South, in the cradle of the civil rights movement," Coach Lawley adds. These kids are getting the chance to play this big Eastern sport, many times it was an elite sport. To provide this for these kids is amazing."

Despite their youth, the players understand what's at stake. While they realize that it will take a lot of time, effort and commitment to develop their skills, they're excited about their role as trailblazers and the direction they could lead athletics in Birmingham's inner city.

"I think about it all the time," says Richard King, a 16-year old sophomore. "We're the first ones to do it. We're the starters and everybody else will just be following us."

"It feels good," adds Xavier Parker, a 14 year-old freshman. "I'm going to feel proud of myself and feel like I did something and was a part of something that's new.

I'm going try to encourage other folks to try it. Usually you just have baseball, basketball and football, but I want to encourage them to try something new."

The project was launched after a meeting between the two coaches and Hayes assistant principal Yancey Williams, who liked what he heard. The team received 20 sticks through a grant from the U.S. Lacrosse Foundation. After the team's first practice, Coach Damsky realized they needed additional help. He sent an e-mail to the members of the Birmingham Youth Lacrosse League asking for help.

The BYLL raised \$8,000 that was used to purchase state-of-the-art equipment and uniforms. Before playing their first game, the Hayes Pacesetters looked like a team of all-stars. Teaching them to play like a team of all-stars in a few short weeks was a different matter.

The Birmingham Youth Lacrosse League, founded in 1989 has seen tremendous growth in Over the Mountain communities. Facing





Hayes in the high school division are Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills, Hoover, Spain Park, Homewood and John Carroll, schools with tremendous parental support, abundant resources and a nearly 20-year head start.

"They're playing teams where the parents send their kids to camps up at Navy and Georgetown, so the skill level is tremendously different," Coach Lawley says. "What we're trying to teach them is the beginning of the skills and to get them up to an adequate level that they can feel comfortable with and, at the same time, be competitive at the lower levels of play until they can get their skills up.

"We don't anticipate that in one season," he adds. "None of the Mountain Brook or Hoover kids had those skills. I know, because I was coaching them at the very beginning."

The wins early on for these players will be hard to come by. While all the boys on the Hayes squad are still learning the fundamentals of lacrosse, many of the players they will line up against are being recruited by colleges with nationally-recognized lacrosse programs. However, these facts don't scare these kids. In fact, for many, like Player 1, this is a chance to represent their community with pride.

"We're going to go out there like we're the best and we're going to play our hearts out. Every game you play you learn more," Player 1 says. "We just want to learn from our mistakes. Another team might be able to teach us something we didn't know about in this game."

The buzz about the team has created some excitement throughout the community and even some interest elsewhere in Birmingham. Coach Lawley says the Birmingham Parks and Recreation Board is interested in the program and other city schools are taking notice. However, the excitement is too late to save Hayes High School. The Board of Education has announced Hayes will be one of more than a dozen schools closed at the end of the school year, forcing this team that has bonded so quickly into other schools.

The news of the closing added a layer of uncertainty to a school that already had its share of problems. In 2006, Hayes students scored an average of 16 on the ACT, four points below the state average and almost one and a half points below the average set by other Birmingham schools. In the same year, only 55.6 percent of Hayes 11th graders passed the reading portion of the Alabama High School Graduation Exam —on the low end of scores elsewhere—with 73.8 percent passing the math portion —on the high end of comparable schools.

The everyday realities facing students at Hayes has understandably created a sense of hopelessness throughout the school. However, Coach Damsky believes that having lacrosse at Hayes has helped give 20 young men something to be passionate about.

"The fact that the school is closing creates an institutional apathy that translates back to these kids," he maintains. "If you go around to the classrooms you'll see a lot of [other students] with their heads on their arms just waiting for 3 o'clock. But these kids are excited. This is the best thing Hayes High School has going on."

Despite the closing, both coaches have assured their players that they will have the chance to keep playing in the future. And they also hope to realize their dream of spreading the game to a new community of athletes.

"We've promised the kids that wherever they go, we'll go too," Coach Damsky says. "They will have an opportunity to play lacrosse next whether they go to Carver or Woodlawn or Huffman."

"We came here because we needed to light a fire somewhere and this was a school that didn't have anything," Coach Lawley says. "If we can transition to a Woodlawn or a Carver and have the support of the principal, the faculty and the athletic staff then I think we're in good shape to spread the game." Although some people may have doubted that such a preppy game as lacrosse would have made it in the downtown area, both coaches have given both the game and its players more than a fighting chance of succeeding in a tough environment. ●

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