

That's no butterfly net - Lacrosse goes from elite to the street

By Wendy Plump (*For The Trenton Times*)

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EWING - After much rummaging in an equipment storage shed, Coach Ken Foulk emerged with a set of lacrosse arm guards, useful against the bashing of someone else's lacrosse stick on your forearm. Foulk strapped the pads onto the arms of a surprisingly fit little boy who was somewhat late for practice, but who wouldn't choose to be anywhere else.



Figure 1 (Martin Griff) - Ken Foulk, executive director of the Bobby Campbell Lacrosse Foundation, at a practice.

This is Jahmir Page, an 11-year-old who attends Martin Luther King Elementary School. Jahmir is playing his second season with Foulk's team as a middie, or midfielder, both an offensive and defensive post.

"When we were first trying to recruit kids we went to the Boys & Girls Club of Trenton after school," said Foulk. "We'd hold up a lacrosse stick and say, 'Can anyone tell us what this is?' We'd get answers like a butterfly net or fishing net. No one really knew what it was.



Figure 2 (Martin Griff) - Jahmir Page, 11, at a practice.

"But we got over that quickly. You take them out, you show them a stick and a ball and a grassy field and they just love it," added Foulk. "It's fast and exciting and everyone on the field is involved. And it has a lot of physical contact, which, for the boys, especially, is a great attraction."

He is good at it, as he should be. An athletic boy, Jahmir has played football, basketball and soccer for years. But he gave up everything this spring in order to play lacrosse, a sport few in his Trenton neighborhood have ever heard of.

So how did a sport traditionally associated with elite, mostly white private schools end up with a roster of more than 50 inner-city youngsters who play it like they were born to it -- despite the absence of grassy playing fields in downtown Trenton?



Figure 3 (Martin Griff) - Don Sanasac, a physical education teacher at the P.J. Hill Elementary School in Trenton, leads a practice.

That would be the happy responsibility of the Bobby Campbell Lacrosse Foundation, whose namesake grew up in Princeton and who thought the sport merited membership beyond his privileged community. Founded 10 years ago, the foundation, which Foulk coaches and directs, started out as a way to memorialize Campbell. He was a captain on the Princeton High School lacrosse team in 1978 and, subsequently, a coach there into the late 1980s.

Campbell died in a car accident in 1999.

The foundation began as a way to promote lacrosse in central New Jersey, with scholarships handed out each year to promising players and an annual clinic with the Princeton University lacrosse team. Eventually, though, the founders -- including Princeton's Riverside Elementary School Principal Bill Cirullo -- decided the foundation's purpose should be expanded to include nontraditional players. Foulk formed a relationship with a group devoted to such initiatives, and in 2006, the foundation fielded its first inner-city youth team.



"Bobby Campbell was one of the great people of my life," said Cirullo in a phone conversation last week. "When he passed, we sat with Bob's mom and said we were going to carry his name through at least our lifetimes to represent that beautiful young man. So that's what we've done, starting the foundation in Princeton and extending it to Trenton."

Foulk, who knew Campbell through a mutual college friend, added, "This was Bobby's dream. He was always encouraging everyone to play lacrosse. He said, 'Here's a city 10 miles down the road from Princeton. Why aren't these kids playing lacrosse?'"

Today Jahmir is one of nearly 50 children -- mostly boys -- who come to a big, grassy field at the Marie Katzenbach School for the Deaf three times a week to play lacrosse for the foundation. It is open to Trenton, Ewing and Hamilton residents in grades three through eight. The kids are provided all their equipment and a lot of room to run in.



Unlike most suburban children, whose parents track their every sporting moment, these kids arrive at practice largely on their own, by skate and by bicycle. The cost for participation -- low even for an inner-city program -- is \$35 per season for a Trenton resident. Ewing and Hamilton residents pay slightly more.

Teaching the sport to an unfamiliar audience has come with its challenges, said Foulk. After a few years working with students in the Princeton community, Foulk said, coaches had to tweak their educational approach in order to reach their new charges.

"These kids are definitely more stressed. They face different challenges every day. Transportation is a huge issue. Economics is, too. So is the simple environment they go to school in. In several instances in the last five years we haven't had kids at practice because their school was on lockdown that day -- the

real deal, with someone shooting in the streets," said Foulk.

"On the other hand, kids are kids. We get them before they're hardened and they love the game," he said, obviously choosing his words with care. "It's a great little oasis of calm out here for them."



Figure 4 (Martin Griff) – Bobby Campbell Lacrosse Foundation practice in Ewing.

Among those attending practice this particular afternoon is foundation alumnus Kai Richards, a young man apparently so well-liked he is hailed on sight by all of the players and most of the adults watching. Richards, 15, a Trenton resident, is a freshman at Conwell-Egan Catholic High School. The lacrosse skills he developed through foundation play landed him on the varsity lacrosse team his first year there.

"This is where I started," Richards said. "I knew nothing about lacrosse. I was at an after-school program where I met Coach Ken.

He just picked up a stick and ball and started throwing it against a wall. When I started, I couldn't put the stick down. I just love it. And now, at high school, I actually have more experience than most of the people I'm playing with."



Figure 5 (Martin Griff) – Program alumni Kia Richards and executive director Ken Foulk get equipment ready for practice.

Asked what he likes best about the game, Richards runs through a catalogue of serious physicality: cradling, roll dodges, split dodges and bull dodges, lots of stick work (including bashing) and an almost insane amount of running.

The foundation team plays other area youth programs in Hopewell, Princeton and Robbinsville. Games have also been played in Harlem and Brooklyn, with barbecues afterwards to reinforce the friendly element of competition.

Like most area organizations, the foundation has suffered under the economy, losing in the past year both a part-time assistant and program-run transportation (now it's up to parents and Coach Foulk). All the equipment this year is used. Most distant games have been canceled -- the Brooklyn trip this year is in doubt. And home games are also canceled for now. Why?



Figure 6 – Program alumni Kia Richards at a practice.

"If it's a home game you have to pay for a referee," said Foulk.

The foundation operates on a yearly budget of \$150,000, most of which comes from private donations and individuals.

"The main thing we need is financial support, because all other things flow from that -- the ability to bring on extra staff, to play more games, to enroll more kids and to get new equipment," said Foulk.

"People have been great in donating equipment, so I don't want to sound like we don't appreciate it. We do.

"But our kids deserve to have the best, too."

Wendy Plump / Special to The Times