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THE SPORTING SCENE

ONE-STOP SHOPPING

The college lacrosse tryouts that aren't.

BY JOHN MCPHEE

College Park, in early summer, and high-school rising seniors from all over the United States have been playing lacrosse all day. And all yesterday. On a pair of fields below the Comcast Center, on the vast campus of the University of Maryland. The two fields are parallel and generously fenced—parents not permitted inside the fence. Along the back-to-back sidelines in the blazing sun—in the narrow strip that separates the fields—middle-aged men sit on their personal Renetto Canopy Chairs, or, more commonly, on folding chairs under large golf umbrellas. As they trudge in daily, they resemble caddies, thick elongate bags hanging from their shoulders. Inside the bags are the chairs. The designer chairs are one-piece erections, bag as canopy, canopy as bag. Who else could these people be that they are so prepared? They are college lacrosse coaches. Outnumbering the players playing on the fields beside them, they are from Lehigh, Lynchburg, Trinity, Denver, Virginia, Michigan, Maryland, Moravian, Massachusetts, Princeton, Penn State, Pennsylvania, Providence, North Carolina, Ohio State, Towson, Pace, Washington and Lee, Grand Canyon, Army, Navy, Merchant Marine, Air Force, Eastern Connecticut, Stevens, Siena, Syracuse, Loyola, Lafayette, R.P.I., Randolph-Macon, Bucknell, Cornell, Brown, Dartmouth, Birmingham-Southern, Holy Cross, Colgate, Georgetown, Gettysburg, Rollins, Salisbury, Haverford, Harvard, Hofstra, Hampden-Sydney, Queens, Cabrini, Hobart, Johns Hopkins, Franklin & Marshall, Yale, Christopher Newport, et cetera. They can swivel in their chairs to watch one game or the other, in sunshine or rain. They carry clipboards, rosters on the clipboards, and mainly they are writing cryptic notes, but bits of conversation

now and again float down the midway.

COACH 1: Why did you turn around?

COACH 2: I just wanted to watch Walker Clinton.

COACH 1: Is he good?

COACH 2: No.

Walker Clinton is an invented name, in order to protect the kid who is no good.

COACH 3 to COACH 4: Have you considered Name Withheld?

COACH 4: He has a ninety-seven average but I can't take him. I haven't got room.

COACH 5 to COACH 6: I can't see what he sees in him.

COACH 6: Do not disagree with the man. He hasn't got an opinion unless he's right.

COACH 7 to COACH 8: He has



Each year, promising high-school lacrosse players prac

pretty good skills, but he needs serious work in the weight room.

COACH 8: He can't play.

COACH 9: He's probably not going to get it done for us.

COACH 10: I don't think he can play for us, either.

COACH 11: He needs some work stickwise. He's pretty athletic, though. He's tough as shit.

This is like being in a barn at a quarter-horse auction.

Princeton, Towson, and Maryland do not need umbrellas. Princeton, Towson, and Maryland are in a polyethylene pavilion. Their coaches run this camp. When it began, in 1989, it was called Top 205, because two hundred and five high-school players is the number it hoped to attract. It has two overlapping sessions now—each three nights, four days—that draw some eight hundred and eighty high-school players, who are all here on their coaches' recommendations. By N.C.A.A. rule, there can be no "tryout camp," so 205 sends recommendation forms to every high-school lacrosse coach in the country, and the camp must accept, on a first-come first-served basis, anyone who applies. The players want to come because they know

who is going to be watching. The guys that resemble caddies are—together—about two hundred in number. Princeton's Bill Tierney describes the camp as "one-stop shopping for coaches."

The cryptograms they write to themselves on their roster sheets seem to look upon punctuation as a delay of game.

thick goes hard good skills does too much  
clunky  
big, athletic, black, rough skills  
weak skills, hides  
slow good position afraid to engage  
no skills, runs away  
slow overaggressive dumb  
unselfish  
selfish solid skills  
flashy stick quick burst  
good skills too cool?  
looks better than he is  
looks awkward, gets job done  
looks ugly, gets job done  
solid athlete, very vanilla  
bad athlete  
avg athlete lost on field  
not horrible

On the first morning, the camp runs one-on-one drills, then half-field scrimmages, then full-field scrimmages, while the camp's own coaches (mainly college assistants) watch. The camp's coaches then pick their teams in a nine-round draft—twenty teams, twenty-two

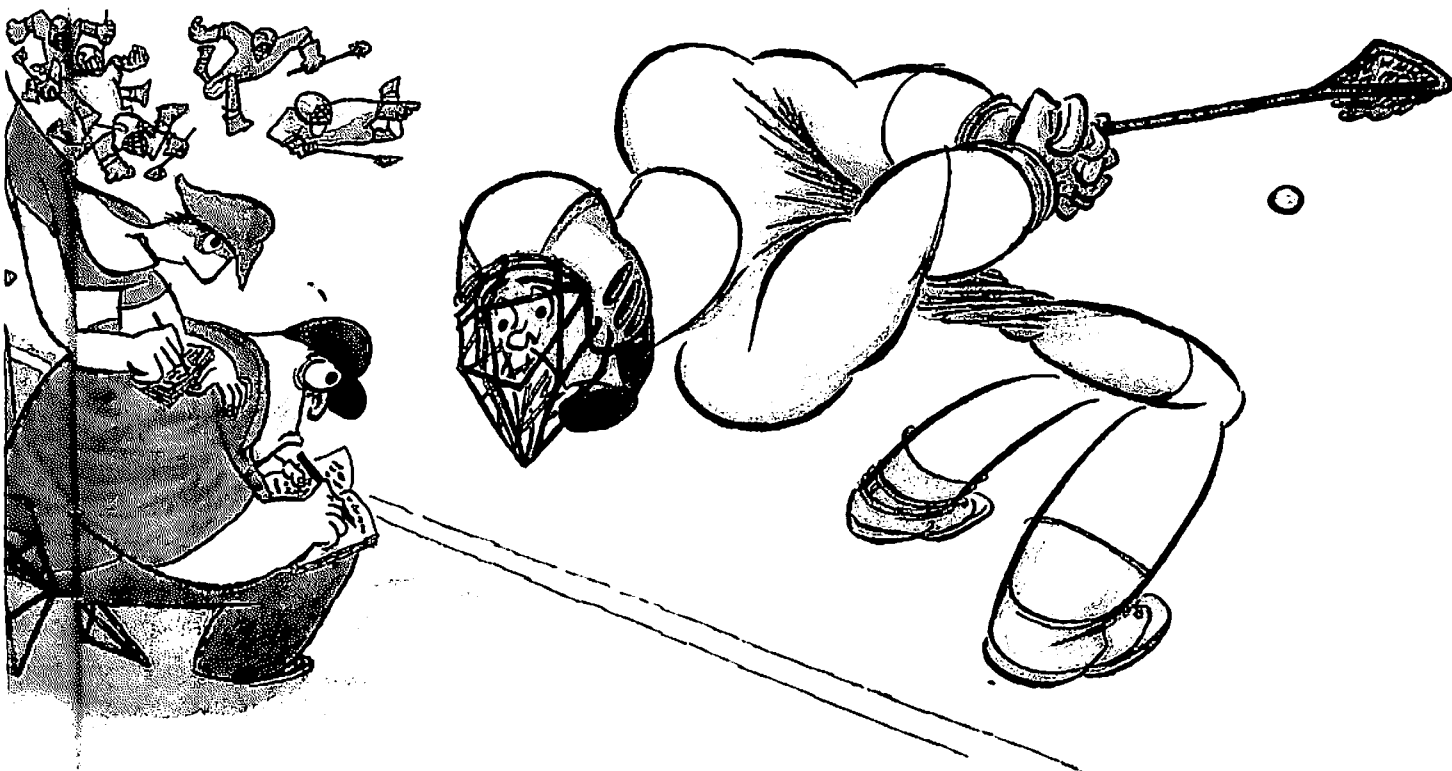
players per team—and these are the units that compete before the visiting buyers.

A kid picks up a ground ball with one hand, saunters toward the crease, and throws a pass away. Fifty coaches write "lazy," or something less flattering.

They very much have in mind the lacrosse I.Q. On a scale from zero to a genius pro like the New York Titans' Ryan Boyle, where does a kid register?

great hands smart  
stone hands dumb  
good skills tough smart  
alert  
not aware  
has a clue  
LH moves well has a clue  
NTB  
slow overaggressive dumb

Sometimes at other lacrosse camps, high-school parents will be seated in grandstands in the presence of college coaches, and maybe looking over the shoulders of coaches at their notes. Princeton's Tierney hopes they think "NTB" means "not too bad." It means "not too bright." A kid can have 2400 S.A.T.s and a medal from the National Science Foundation and still be not too bright. He moves in a disadvantageous direction. He thinks in



layers practice in front of as many as two hundred college coaches, who record their skills and defects in almost cryptographic shorthand.

the present rather than the future. He "gets mentally in trouble, makes a bad decision with the ball." "LH" means "left-handed."

good skills dumb dodger  
good vision  
quick dumb w/ ball  
good eyes  
not bad sees field  
good skills athletic understands game

Tierney, on his clipboard, primarily assesses size, speed, and skills. He recognizes four speeds: slow, average, fast, and burner. "A kid can be small if he's fast, but not if he isn't." Size includes huge, midget, meatball, stocky, gross, dumpy, and thick-ass dodger. Among skills are bad stick, average stick, and great stick. "Size, speed, skills—you need two out of three. You can improve stick, but not the other two."

Since the nineteen-eighties, the number of summer lacrosse camps has gone from under forty to more than four hundred. Tuition at the 205 camp is five hundred and ninety-five dollars. The University of Maryland understands math, baking, and how to slice a pie. It feeds the kids nine meals. They sleep in un-air-conditioned dorm rooms, and drag their mattresses into air-conditioned common rooms.

loves to shoot  
dumb shooter  
good dodger/bad shooter  
black hole  
tough kid athletic run by anyone bad shooter  
black hole, not aware  
chucker

A black hole never gives up the ball and a chucker shoots every time he gets the ball.

In 1881, *Harper's Weekly* recalled the near-demise of lacrosse a decade earlier, when "physicians described the dangers of such fast and long-continued running, and anxious parents tried to smother the game in its infancy." Now, at 205 camps, parents wait outside the fence for the arrival of the college coaches and hand them DVDs of their sons' lacrosse highlights. Bill Tierney receives a fair number of DVDs and similar souvenirs ("Are you the Princeton coach?"). "Recruiting is a long-term investment," he says, speaking from his side of the fence. At any given time, he is in contact with six hundred

kids—"kids who write us, and kids we write to."

#### Understanding goalies:

good poise good position  
quick hands  
not bad stopper  
oversteps w/ right foot  
drops hands on high shot smart talks too much

#### Players on defense:

very big, athletic, lazy on D  
overaggressive  
tall thin good slide fast rough  
smallish good stick sees field no hustle on D  
bad feet  
good feet  
no feet too much stick  
slapper

Three of the many crucial matters in the attack and the midfield are T&R, no beat, and bag. Like a great open shooter in basketball, if a guy has time and room, he is going to do something positive. If he is "no beat," he is not going to get past any defender. If he has "bag" written all over him, he has a big sloppy pocket and he throws bad passes.

#### Appraisals of the offense:

good skills very solid smooth slick hangs perimeter  
nifty stick  
just catch & finish, no dodge  
big good passer, awkward LH shot  
slow no shot no dodge  
good size quick shots  
RH good skills dumb dodger  
bad approaches  
skinny feeder gets in the way no move  
quick moves good vision 2-hander  
quick aware fair skills

I cannot resist revealing the name of "quick aware fair skills." From Canandaigua, New York, he is Tom LaCrosse.

good size athletic wants RH no finish  
good cutter  
athletic tough physical covers ground  
LH tough hard nose vg stick  
vg off ball  
not a ball carrier  
good skills LH quick COD  
explosive very quick good skills RH side arm drop  
slick in traffic, dances

"COD" is "change of direction." "Sidearm drop" is not a large compliment. A lacrosse ball is more likely to end up where the thrower intends it to if his stick goes through a vertical plane. If you lower the stick and wing a sidearm shot, the ball may end up breaking a window somewhere. The

great shooters shoot on any plane. Others that imitate them drive their coaches nuts.

In the University of Maryland's Women's Lacrosse and Field Hockey Stadium, under lights in the deep evening of Day 3, twenty-two selected players play against twenty-two other selected players in an All Star game. Eight are from the region of Baltimore and Washington. Six are from Long Island. The high schools of the others are scattered from Connecticut to California, Michigan, Ohio, Georgia, Tennessee. Division I lacrosse coaches are especially attracted by this game. Nearly all present are standing near the end lines—three times as many coaches as players on the two teams. Sitting in the bleachers are about five hundred other spectators. Some are parents and siblings of the players, but most of them are the four hundred campers who were not chosen for the game.

And what a game. Goal answering goal. Fast. Full of isododging, inside rolls, two-on-ones, and Gilman clears. Some of the college coaches are far enough along in recruiting talks with some of these high-school stars that they have come to regard them as theirs. A rising senior much in Tierney's field of vision is Forest Sonnenfeldt, who is six feet six, weighs two hundred and forty pounds, and plays in the attack. Among the several things that are unusual about Sonnenfeldt is that he goes to school in the Bronx and lives in Manhattan. In the geography of lacrosse, his would-be college coach says, "a first-rate player from New York City is something very rare." Sonnenfeldt scores. The other team scores. Sonnenfeldt scores again. He moves well. He is hard to stop. He is "finisher big target RH shooter good skills."

The game will end in a tie and be resolved in overtime. Meanwhile, though, notice big Dave Cottle, head coach of the University of Maryland, who grew up in the row houses of Baltimore, played at Salisbury (on the Eastern Shore), and is one of the five winningest coaches active in the game. As he watches, a rising high-school senior, cradling right-handed, goes into a rocker step, does an inside roll, sprints left, dives headlong, shoots, scores.

Someone says to Dave Cottle, "Is he one of yours?"

And Cottle says, "Not yet." ♦