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2001 National Lacrosse Finalist Plaque

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2001 National Lacrosse Finalist Plaque

Description

Amidst a dusty trophy case in Bream Athletic Center sits a small plaque. It has a gold lacrosse stick and simply states: "2001 National Lacrosse Finalist". Most people would walk by and never even notice the plaque, and if they did they probably wouldn't think twice about it. However, upon delving into the history of the plaque I found a story of intense on-and-off-the field rivalries, the emergence of a national power, players learning to come together to overcome adversity, the culmination of years of building, and eventual heartbreak. [*excerpt*]

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- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

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History | Sports Studies | United States History

Campus Location

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Hidden in Plain Sight:
2001 National Lacrosse Finalist Plaque

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Devin Hewitt

Spring 2006

Amidst a dusty trophy case in Bream Athletic Center sits a small plaque. It has a gold lacrosse stick and simply states: “2001 National Lacrosse Finalist”. Most people would walk by and never even notice the plaque, and if they did they probably wouldn’t think twice about it. However, upon delving into the history of the plaque I found a story of intense on-and-off-the field rivalries, the emergence of a national power, players learning to come together to overcome adversity, the culmination of years of building, and eventual heartbreak.

Up until 1987 Gettysburg had achieved moderate levels of success in the men’s lacrosse program. However, the previous coach was also a teacher and athletic trainer along with being the men’s head lacrosse coach and simply did not have a great deal of time to give to the lacrosse program. Henry Janczyk had played lacrosse at Hobart College in the mid 1970's and was part of a national championship team in 1976. He later would become head coach at Salisbury State and Colgate before coming to Gettysburg in 1987. Janczyk had achieved great success in his previous two coaching positions including being named the national coach of the year while at Salisbury. Yet he was drawn to the Gettysburg coaching position because he saw Gettysburg as a “diamond in the rough... that just had so much potential it was impossible to pass up.” Even upon taking the job Janczyk “truly believed that Gettysburg could become a serious national power and even challenge for the national championship.... Of course I knew this would not be an quick or easy process, but I always believed it could happen.” Janczyk felt that not only was Gettysburg in an ideal location (close to both Long Island and Maryland, two areas where lacrosse thrives), but the college offered strong academics and community that could attract high school students.¹

¹Interview with Henry Janczyk on February 15th 2006

Janczyk could not have been more correct with his assessment of Gettysburg. The team began to achieve more and more success each year. With that success came an increase in national exposure and status. Janczyk noted that once a school begins receiving this national attention it becomes that much easier to recruit top notch student athletes and build upon a program's success.

Two of Janczyk's recruits were Tommy Pearce and Mike Plantholt. Both of them entered Gettysburg in the fall of 1997. Neither was heavily recruited by the larger D1 powers coming out of high school (Plantholt actually did not start until his senior year in high school), but Janczyk saw them as young men that could really thrive at a school like Gettysburg and could contribute if put into the right type of lacrosse program. Pearce and Plantholt viewed Gettysburg with similar interest as they were struck by the "sincerity" of Janczyk and the community they found at the college. Of course at the time they committed to Gettysburg, no one knew what they would be able to achieve or how far they would bring the program.²

Pearce is a Chestertown, Maryland native who grew up playing lacrosse with the goal of playing at the college level. Entering into his senior year in high school he had narrowed his choices to Washington & Lee and Gettysburg, but was very uncertain as to where he would go prior to his visits to both schools. Washington & Lee had been a D3 powerhouse for quite some time, but Gettysburg was just beginning to achieve that status. When he visited W&L Pearce recalled his meeting with their head coach with great clarity: "he spent about 15 minutes with me without discussing any other aspect of the school other than lacrosse and then promptly said that he expected me to call him with my decision on Monday.... I was a little shocked by how he conducted himself and his apparent lack of concern about the actual fit of a school and a

²Interview with Tom Pearce and Mike Plantholt on February 16th 2006

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program.” Pearce was impressed by his meeting with Coach Janczyk at Gettysburg the following week; “he was so sincere and so attentive to what concerns I had in picking a school...I knew it was the right place for me when he said that he would love for me to come to Gettysburg but he would be more than happy to help me in any way he could if I decided that Gettysburg was not the right place for me.... I knew right then that he was a special coach, and I had always felt that if I came to Gettysburg I would have a shot at a national championship before I graduated.”³

Planholt was also from Maryland as he grew up in Cockeysville and attended Loyola High School in Baltimore. Planholt found himself buried in Loyola’s incredibly strong lacrosse program and did not even start until his senior year. Planholt was not recruited until late into his senior year when he began to get some attention from a few D1 schools (UNC, Navy, Ohio State). However, they were not confident in his ability to play at a college level and told him that he would most likely not play for at least his first two years. After looking at a few of the larger schools Planholt realized that the feel of such a large school was not what he was looking for, nor was he interested in waiting at least two years to be given a shot to play. He found exactly what he wanted at Gettysburg in both the school and the lacrosse program.⁴

Entering into their junior year Gettysburg’s lacrosse team was emerging as a championship contender. They had briefly obtained the #1 ranking in the South going into the NCAA tournament in 1999 before being knocked out in the second round by RIT in overtime. Going into the 2000 season the team felt like it was finally poised for a breakout year and that it could make a serious run at the national title. Preseason thoughts seemed to be validated as

³Interview with Tom Pearce on February 16th 2006

⁴Interview with Mike Planholt on February 16th 2006

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Gettysburg beat W&L 6-4 in early March and knocked off #3 ranked Middlebury 10-6 later that month. With a #2 national ranking the Bullets steam rolled towards a showdown with #1 Salisbury.⁵

Aside from the obvious importance of a #1 versus #2 game, the Salisbury/Gettysburg game was and is a bitter rivalry. The rivalry is based on more than just lacrosse, but is a clash of schools, fans, student bodies, and their cultures. Both schools draw lots of their students from Maryland, but with Salisbury being a much larger state school it is stereotyped to have more lower/middle class student body while Gettysburg is stereotyped as quite the opposite and having a much more white collar student body.⁶ While there is certainly some truth to these stereotypes, they are grossly exaggerated, yet the stereotypes are used. Gettysburg fans and students typically refer to Salisbury as nothing but “Maryland trash” while Salisbury thinks of Gettysburg students as “soft rich kids.”⁷ This creates a rivalry that transcends lacrosse and enters into the clashes of two different cultures.

The spring of 2000 was no different as the two schools prepared for their annual game, which was to be played at Gettysburg and had already been dubbed as “the hottest game of the year” by *Inside Lacrosse* magazine.⁸ Pearce recalled how many fans were packed into Musselman Stadium from both schools on the afternoon of April 1st in anticipation of what was expected to be a great game. He remembered how even then Salisbury was thought of as the “the dark side” of D3 lacrosse as it built a program around bringing in D1 transfers ever year with

⁵[Insidelacrosse.com](http://insidelacrosse.com)

⁶Interview with Henry Janczyk on February 15th 2006

⁷Interview with Mike Plantholt on February 16th 2006

⁸[Inside Lacrosse Magazine](#) as seen on [Insidelacrosse.com](http://insidelacrosse.com)

little regard for academics.⁹ Furthermore, Salisbury was seen as a very rough team that would try to intimidate whomever it played before the game had even started by standing at the midfield line and “talking trash... which was generally filled with obscenities” to the other team before the game had even started. On this particular afternoon, Salisbury tactics would work to perfection. Both Pearce and Plantholt remember the seniors on Gettysburg being skittish as the game began. Salisbury wasted no time in taking advantage of this as they exploded out to a 7-1 halftime lead. What was supposed to be a showdown ended up in what would be dubbed as the “April Fools day Massacre” by *Inside Lacrosse* and *laxpower.com* (a website dedicated to forums for fans to discuss lacrosse) as the final score was 14-3 in favor of Salisbury. Plantholt and Pearce both remembered how embarrassing the game had been and how shell shocked the team was after losing that badly on such a big stage.¹⁰ Coach Janczyk felt that in order to be the best, you had to beat the best, and by being beaten that badly he felt that the team’s confidence suffered tremendously.¹¹

The 2000 season ended with an early exit from the playoffs at the hands of W&L by the score of 12-10. With only four seniors returning for the 2001 season there were plenty of questions surrounding the team and many doubts about the upcoming year. It seemed as though the only people that didn’t doubt how good Gettysburg could be in 2001 were the four seniors themselves. They all felt that they had the makings of a great team if some key players stepped up, and they thought that anything short of reaching the National Championship would not be a successful season. This feeling was kept quiet for much of the fall but it was boldly thrust onto

⁹Interview with Mike Plantholt on February 16th 2006

¹⁰Interviews with Mike Plantholt and Tom Pearce on February 16th 2006

¹¹Interview with Henry Janczyk on February 15th 2006

the table in a very controversial move by the assistant coach Mike Cornell when he ordered shirts for the team that said “2001 National Championship” in January before the season had even begun. While some players did not like this, it did make it very clear that from an internal standpoint anything less than the championship would be failure.¹²

However, despite the team’s high expectations it promptly lost 8-7 to W&L in early March. Janczyk remembers this being a crossroads for the team where it would have been easy to go into a tailspin with the frustration of losing again to W&L. Gettysburg would never fall into this tailspin as it scraped out tough one-goal wins against talented Denison and Ohio Wesleyan teams where the players just “came together and found a way to win.”¹³ While the four seniors led the way, numerous underclassman stepped up to fill holes left by graduation, most notably Jake Van Nostrand at attack and red shirt freshman goalie Tim McGinnis who both stepped into significant starting roles as freshman.¹⁴

Despite a strong record going into the 2001 game with Salisbury, Gettysburg had been far from dominate and was not commanding much respect. Salisbury was once again the real test for the Bullets as the road to the championship would have to go through Salisbury at some point. Pearce recalled how focused the team was as it watched “Remember the Titans” on the bus ride to Salisbury. Instead of being intimidated like the previous year Gettysburg as a team had decided that it couldn’t worry about anyone but themselves; “the team had learned from the past experiences of the last 3 years, which culminated in the special group that we had in 2001.”¹⁵

¹²Interviews with Mike Plantholt and Tom Pearce on February 16th 2006

¹³Interview with Tom Pearce on February 16th 2006

¹⁴Interview with Henry Janczyk on February 15th 2006

¹⁵Interview with Tom Pearce on February 16th 2006

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The game went back and forth with both teams making tremendous plays until Pearce hit Matt Twombly with a pass in overtime to give Gettysburg the 11-10 victory on Salisbury's home field. Gettysburg goalie Tim McGinnis summed it up when he said, "It feels so good to get the monkey off our back, last year they put a whopping on us."¹⁶ That game was a huge confidence boost for the Bullets as they believed that no matter what the score or who they were playing they would find a way to win.¹⁷

After winning the conference tournament over Washington College the team prepared for the playoff run with any doubts that they may have had erased by their twelve game winning streak. Their momentum would only build with a 15-10 win over Springfield in the second round of the tournament after their first round by. In the semifinals Gettysburg found itself matched up against Denison (which had knocked off Salisbury in the previous round). In contrast of the tight low scoring game they had played in March with Gettysburg winning 4-3, Gettysburg defeated Denison 13-7, which Pearce felt was symbolic of how far the team had come from the beginning of the year. With Gettysburg sealing their invitation to the national championship game Middlebury defeated Nazereth in the North semifinal to return to the national championship game for the third time in three years.

Both reached Rutgers University for the finals extremely confident and focused on the task at hand. However, once there Middlebury coach Erin Quinn recalls that the team was able "to really focus and ignore all the distractions, for most of our guys it was their third time

¹⁶As quoted in: Sam Atkinson, "Bullets Shoot Down Gulls in Overtime, 11-10," Inside Lacrosse Magazine as seen on *Insidelacrosse.com*,

¹⁷Interviews with Henry Janczyk, Mike Plantholt, and Tom Pearce

there.”¹⁸ The situation was quite the opposite for the Bullets as both Pearce and Plantholt described the “wow” factor that most of the team felt. While Pearce felt that he was able to stay focused through all the events leading up to the game, he remembers players bringing video cameras with them and having a police escorts with them wherever the team went, getting spending money from the NCAA along with numerous other free items provided by them; “it made it really hard to treat it like a regular game, and a lot of guys just couldn’t.” Plantholt himself admitted that he was distracted by all the hype around the game; “I still remember this banquet they had for the teams who had reached the finals....They had sent film teams out to our playoff games and had put together a highlight reel for each team that looked like something done by ESPN with music and everything...they had a slow motion shot of me landing a check that was zoomed all the way in on the other guys stick and I was just blown away”. It seemed as though the whole team was overwhelmed by the finals experience, which can be devastating especially when playing a team that has been there before. ¹⁹

The lack of experience showed as Middlebury defeated Gettysburg by a score of 15-10. The key to the game was when Middlebury went on a 5-0 run during a short span in the second quarter as Gettysburg was forced to play catch up the rest of the game. Plantholt distinctly remembered the run and how Gettysburg began to lose its composure for the first time all year: “everyone began to lose their poise as we felt like our goal that we had since we came here was slipping away right in front of us....It was even more frustrating in retrospect because it was that same poise that had enabled us to win close games all year.”²⁰ It was this lack of poise and

¹⁸Interview with Erin Quinn on February 18th 2006

¹⁹Interviews with Mike Plantholt and Tom Pearce

²⁰Interview with Mike Plantholt

mental focus that prevented Gettysburg from finishing key opportunities and making the big plays that they needed to make. Middlebury, on the other hand, frustrated Gettysburg with its patience and calmness as it took advantage of every opportunity. Coach Quinn from Middlebury echoed this in his recollections of the game; “By the time we found ourselves in the championship game we had mastered the ability to focus on the task at hand without ahead or behind and it allowed to play with confidence and relax.”²¹ By the time the “wide eyed Bullets” were able to battle back it was too late and Middlebury never relinquished their lead.²² While Pearce and Plantholt feel that it was more Gettysburg losing the game than Middlebury winning it, Janczyk acknowledged that when it came down to it Middlebury was a better team that year. He felt that “they had much more depth than us and it showed later in the game when they really just ran us into the ground”. The reasons for the Gettysburg loss would be controversial as some people thought that Gettysburg had simply not played their best, while other attributed it to Middlebury dominating the game and making Gettysburg look bad.²³

Regardless of the reason Gettysburg lost, it did not take the sting away from the players that had put so much into that team. Pearce said that not only was he playing for that year’s team, but also all the teams over the past 10-12 years that had helped build the program to what it was today. He felt as though he had let all of them down by not being able to win the championship that day. Despite losing, the feeling of team unity never left the Bullets. Even when Pearce, Plantholt, and a few others were dragged up to the podium for post game interviews all they

²¹Interview with Erin Quinn on February 18th 2006

²²Sam Atkinson, “Middlebury ‘Hop’ over top-ranked Gettysburg 15-10; Panthers defend their title”, Inside Lacrosse Magazine as seen on *InsideLacrosse.com* (May 27th, 2001).

²³www.lax.com/stories/554

remembered was just wanting to be with the group of guys that they had come there with and to not be separated as an individual.

While Janczyk acknowledged how “huge it was for the program to finally get to the championship” he was humbled by how hard it is to do and how much work it takes to get there, much less win it.²⁴ While Gettysburg went back to the championship the next year, they once again fell to a powerful Middlebury squad. Since those teams, however, the Bullets have never been able to reach that next level and return to the championship game despite years with extremely talented teams. This year the team once again has high expectations going into the year with a #5 national ranking, but it remains to be seen if it can come together and reach its ultimate goal as the 2001 team was almost able to do.

²⁴Interview with Henry Janczyk

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