

TAKE MY WHISTLE, PLEASE!



PETER LASAGNA



HOW MUCH MORE?

For generations lacrosse players have carved a “love to party” reputation. Club lacrosse with Dad and his keg buddies. The Vail Shootout, where legend is measured in championships won and condominiums bashed. Final Four college teams loading adult beverage cases on team buses after semifinal wins.

This “play hard, live hard” banner has long waved over lousy and transcendent athletes in many sports. But devotees of lacrosse, a proudly “fringe” sport, take this chip-on-the-shoulder dare to a celebrated level.

It may be time, with the unparalleled explosion, mainstream attention and a sporty Buick namesake, to examine the costs of lacrosse’s social culture.

Recent wakeup calls come from outside the lacrosse fraternity. In December the NCAA’s Bill Saum stood before college coaches at the United States Intercollegiate Lacrosse Association (USILA) meetings with a sobering message. He and other senior administrators had just finished reviewing the NCAA’s 35-page study on Division I, II and III student-athletes. Their findings, summed up by Executive Director Myles Brand, stated that, “Lacrosse has a problem!”

While Saum’s central focus that morning involved the negative consequences to college athletes that gamble, he described “high-risk, impulsive” motivations that connect a variety of potentially harmful actions. Seventy-one percent of all student-athletes surveyed said they test themselves by “taking risks.” Fifty-seven percent of these edgy kids rated “...excitement more important than personal security.”

Saum, a former football coach, acknowledged the temptation to ignore a star’s inability to draw acceptable lines. “We may pray that he survives Saturday night but we love his fearlessness on the field,” he said.

Daring players—athletes that separate themselves from the crowd—attract attention, win

games and get heavily recruited. Disregard for their bodies is part of what enables them to excel.

But it also makes it likely that they will never achieve their dreams.

None of this information surprises John Underwood. Underwood works with U.S. and international Olympic athletes and world champions. A trained physiologist and elite distance runner, he has conducted many of the most thorough studies on the metabolic effects of alcohol and marijuana on training, recovery and “Pure Performance”. What amazes him, and what he presents to high school and college athletes throughout the country, is how many young people are crippling their potential with chronic use.

John compares his own data with the NCAA statistics and sees disturbing trends. Seventy-nine and a half percent of all NCAA athletes studied (men and women) report drinking regularly. What starts in high school (58% of senior varsity athletes drink) accelerates through college.

By NCAA sport, men’s lacrosse ranks fourth for frequent alcohol use (89.4%) and second for pot use (47.9%). These kids arrive in the most competitive athletic settings that most of them will ever experience actively sabotaging their ability to succeed.

Underwood breaks it down to the molecular level. He describes what one’s body needs to store, burn and replenish for “optimal performance”. Every organ necessary for maximum physical and mental output is compromised by heavy alcohol and pot use. The liver stores and makes energy available for fast- and slow-twitch muscles. If an athlete’s liver is burning fuel by processing the 10 drinks he consumed last night, it cannot supply his brain, heart, legs and arms. Dehydration and poor recovery yield poor training. Poor training equals regression and injuries. Poor practices lead to disappointing game results.

Underwood observes that most college athletes quickly lose sight of their former potential. Every athlete should improve during freshman year. Skill level naturally goes up with repetition against better players.

But rapid escalation of extracurriculars also occurs. Students see most players around them involved in the same fun and still watch their games

ascend. One must not be hurting the other!

Young bodies are resilient. Exceptional moments, quarters, even games are possible during regular abuse. However, most simply grow accustomed to inferior play.

Says Underwood, “They forget their peak end of personal best and settle for wasted talent. Thirty hours of training. Twenty hours on a bar stool.”

A year and a half ago, Underwood spoke at Johns Hopkins. Athletic Director Tom Calder made the meeting mandatory for all JHU student-athletes. In a packed auditorium, Underwood noticed when the men’s lacrosse team walked in together and took up the front two rows. He presented his compelling information, and was suitably impressed when, “...every single guy on that team walked up, shook my hand and thanked me.”

Maybe the risk-taker’s dare of, ‘How close to the abuse abyss can I tightrope without falling in?’ needs to be replaced.

Coach Dave Pietramala remembers John’s talk well. “The information was eye-opening,” he says. “I believe that many of our players left wondering HOW MUCH MORE would they be capable of achieving, as an individual and as a team, if they took better care of themselves during training?”

John Underwood understands that he will not change every college athlete’s mind. He simply provides them with undeniable facts.

“At least when I’m done you’ll know that what I’m saying is true,” he says. “Then it’s your decision.” He tells coaches that if they “demand more, they will get more.”

Maybe it is time to interrupt the cycle in our sport. Almost leading the NCAA stats in alcohol and marijuana use is not a positive promotion for the players of this great game. Maybe the risk-taker’s dare of, ‘How close to the abuse abyss can I tightrope without falling in?’ needs to be replaced by ‘How good can I really be?’

Maybe the truly daring lacrosse player asks, “HOW MUCH MORE?!”

Peter Lasagna is the head coach at Bates College. A former DI Coach of the Year at Brown, he’s also a Past President of the U.S. Lacrosse Men’s Coaches Council.