

# GRATITUDE AT ALTITUDE: A MIDDLEBURY LACROSSE REUNION AT THE VAIL SHOOTOUT

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More than 40 years ago, as a member of the varsity men's lacrosse team at Middlebury College, I experienced a formative and life-altering opportunity to be a part of something that was much bigger than me or any other individual team member.

The shared experience with so many high-quality men afforded many of us associated with Middlebury lacrosse the luxury of fostering close lifelong relationships that have served as a foundation for us to launch successful careers, provide meaningful contributions to our communities and help form important family units.

These Middlebury brothers have been there for one another to help celebrate the inevitable triumphs in our lives, but more importantly, to be there for support through the intensely tough times that have also come along for many of us.

Throughout the fall of 2018 and into the first months of 2019, all Middlebury lacrosse age 60 and older, began to receive a series of communications about an effort to pull us together to play in the Zen Masters Division of the 2019 Vail Lacrosse Shootout, a tournament held for the last 47 years in the beautiful town of Vail, Colo., in late June and early July. This great tournament hosts hundreds of teams for boys and girls in high school, and for adult men's and women' players.

In addition to being held in one of the most beautiful places on earth, the Vail Shootout is also located in a town at an elevation of more than 8,000 feet, adding to the challenge of playing in a competitive lacrosse tournament for many of us who had not played a second of competitive lacrosse since college in the 1970s.

There were several leaders of this call to action, including Will Graham '76. Will took the lead, sending multiple emails to the leaders of individual classes, starting with the Class of 1981 and stretching back into the classes from the 1960s, and those leaders began urging each other on. The momentum began to build as guys committed to come together to honor one another and to honor the coaches who helped make our experiences so meaningful and such a lasting part of our lives.

Will's coach was a man named Rob Pfeiffer, who was pivotal in setting the table for the success Middlebury has had since the 1970s, with the Panthers winning several national championships and consistently playing high-quality and winning lacrosse. Coach Pfeiffer led the Panthers to their first ECAC championship in 1975. More importantly, he taught his players powerful lessons about the value of teamwork and of hard work.

Will Graham's respect and appreciation for his coach came through loud and clear in his multiple email communications to all of us, and reminded all of us of the positive impact our coaches had on our lives. Will let us know that Coach Pfeiffer would be leading our team at Vail.

With Will's urging and that of Eric Kemp '80 and Bobo Sideli '77 — as well as some prodding from captains for each of the individual classes — the roster began to shape up and grow as we approached the spring. At final count, our leaders had managed to coax 45 players to commit to playing in the tournament and another group of seven to come along to participate in the experience without playing on the field.

Remarkably, all five varsity coaches who have led Middlebury since the early 1970s — Rob Pfeiffer, Dennis Daly, Jim Grube, Erin Quinn and present coach Dave Campbell — also made the commitment to be a part of the experience with us in Vail.

**WE HAD LIVED ENOUGH LIFE TO KNOW THE TWISTS AND TURNS, THE HIGHS AND LOWS, THE TRIUMPHS AND DEFEATS, AND NOW WE COULD ENJOY THE PERSPECTIVE THAT THESE LIFE EXPERIENCES HAVE LENT TO ALL OF US.**

Will Graham was an outstanding two-sport athlete at Middlebury in football and lacrosse. He went on to have a very successful career as an independent school teacher, coach and administrator. Will's last 10 years were spent as a head of school at Midland School (Calif.), where he embraced and enhanced the school's commitment to self-sufficiency and sustainability. Will's positive influence on so many kids throughout his nearly 40-year career speaks powerfully to the notion that he has paid it back many times over.

Like many of us, Will has had his fair share of success and happiness in his personal and professional life. Recently, however, Will experienced the sudden and tragic loss of his son, Angus, an adventurous man in his 30s who died in a horrific car accident. Will, a big bear of a man, relied on and continues to rely upon many of his Middlebury brothers for the emotional support to live on with the grief associated with his own journey. Pulling all of us together, no doubt, was a positive step forward.

My own commitment to play with this wonderful group of guys did not come quickly or with ease. I was not a star player at Middlebury. In fact, I had never played lacrosse previously. In college, I was competing with and against other guys who had played since prep school or earlier. I had a great deal of catching up to do. I wondered if I would measure up as a player in Vail. I worried about getting injured.

Eventually, I decided to go based mainly on an experience I had in my own life several years ago.

Like Will, I also had lost a son to a sudden and tragic death. My youngest, Donny, died when he was 24 in 2013. I hope that this will be the lowest moment of my life, as it felt unlike any pain I have experienced. I did not know how I ever would pick myself up and continue with my life and my career as an independent school teacher, coach and administrator.

Fortunately, many of the people in my life helped pick me up, including my wife, Laurie, my family, my friends and my school community. In February 2014, more than 40 of my lacrosse and football teammates and my lacrosse coach, Jim Grube, came from all over the country to visit me for a weekend of fun, fellowship and healing in Austin, Texas, where I lived and worked at the time.

The weekend was a huge boost to me at a time when I am not sure I could have carried on without this support. I will remain grateful to the efforts of so many of my friends for organizing and executing this weekend. This loomed large in my own decision to play in Vail with my Middlebury brothers.

As June approached, Will's email barrages continued, and I looked forward to the spark that these messages created for me and the motivation they provided for me to train and stay in the best physical condition so that I could contribute to our team. It was clear from the many messages traded back and forth that playing lacrosse was going to be part of this experience in Vail, but also that the rekindling of bonds, the opportunity to be together with friends, teammates and coaches and the chance to have meaningful conversations and connections with others really was the driving force for coming together for this experience.

My own coach, Jim Grube, visited my house the night before our trip to Vail, as we were both flying out of D.C.-area airports. Jim, my wife, Laurie, and I had a nice, simple meal together, and we spent some time talking about our expectations for our trip. Jim and I have stayed in touch, and we have spoken a number of times about the role of athletics in schools and the role coaches play in guiding their players to live honorable and meaningful lives. I wondered out loud about what transpire in Vail over the next several days.

Would this be a meaningful experience? An opportunity to reconnect? Or could it devolve into meaningless and forced socialization? I soon found out that this experience would prove to exceed all my expectations in terms of the meaning and significance.

Arriving at the airport in Denver, I made my way down to the baggage claim to pick up my gear, with no firm plan for how to make the three-hour drive to Vail. Almost immediately, I crossed paths with two wonderful men who I have kept in touch throughout my adult life and

career. Both Fred Beams '65, our oldest returning player, and Duane Ford '78 greeted me and offered me a ride to Vail.

Fred spent his entire career working as a math teacher, coach and administrator in independent boarding schools. Our paths had crossed regularly throughout the last 40 years. Duane began his career coaching collegiately, moved into a role as a boarding school educator in his 30s and is still going strong.

Both of these guys have been close friends, mentors, role models and sources of advice and support to me over the years. It was comforting to see both of them. Both men were very accomplished and great lacrosse players, while more importantly being wonderful guys who have both contributed mightily to their school communities and paid it back numerous times over — a common thread among many of the men who came back for this experience.

On the first evening in Vail, we had a practice of sorts. Coach Pfeiffer began with some bonding exercises that set the tone for how our team of 45 was going to work together through the next several days and the four games we were going to play. There was an immediate feeling of belonging and a sense that something special was beginning for all of us. We felt joy to be playing the great game of lacrosse in a beautiful setting with a great group of people.

After practice that evening, one of my classmates, Peter Hurwitz, invited the eight members of the Class of '81 and their families to have a delightful dinner at his vacation home in Vail. We celebrated being together again. We shared stories, caught up on life news and thoroughly enjoyed the time together as if it were 40 years earlier and we were all in college again. I was amazed at how comfortable and easy it was to reconnect and to be together. We even celebrated the 60th birthday of John Burchard, one of the finest and fiercest midfielders of our time at Middlebury.

One of my favorite aspects of the Vail experience was the shared meals we enjoyed every morning and every evening. Breakfast was a feast and served at the Manor Vail hotel beginning at 6:30 a.m. It was a treat to see grown men come down to breakfast in their uniforms. As in other venues, the conversations and interchanges were lively and fun. I personally enjoyed hyping the game at these breakfasts, usually asking, "What time is it?" My teammates would answer, "Time to Beat the Navy Goats," or whatever team we played that day. There was lively banter and loud conversation between guys in preparation for our upcoming 8 a.m. battles each day.

This routine of asking the time was a tribute of sorts to longtime equipment manager Peter Kohn. Pete, a man with some disabilities, was offered the opportunity by Coach Grube to join the Middlebury lacrosse program in the early '80s and stayed with the team for many years until his death in 2009. Pete is a beloved member of the Middlebury community, and many of his customs remain with the team as a powerful reminder that the lacrosse experience is much more than what happens on the field.

Our first game was at 8 a.m. on Saturday, June 30, with another to follow at 9 a.m. that same morning. I was nervous in ways that I have never been for a game as we prepared for the battle, first against a team called the Navy Old Gnarly Goats, a collection of Navy grads.

We had some adjustments to make as a team. Although we had all played Middlebury lacrosse at some time, we were never a team that played a game together as a unit. We started slowly, but as the game wore on, one could feel the positive change in the team and the onset of unity and togetherness. Miraculously, we won that first game 3-2 largely behind the efforts of our goalies — Curt Viebranz '75, Billy Kuharich '76 and Eric Westergard '77 — who turned away numerous Navy shots as we were figuring out how to play with each other.

One guy who particularly impressed me was midfielder Mike Mulligan '75, who I had also known for many years. Mike was the head of Thacher School in California for many years before retiring in 2018. Mike was a stalwart supporter of boarding school education and a national leader in the advocacy of the special type of education. He had been the heart and soul of his school for many years.

During his last year at the helm of his school, Mike had sustained a serious head injury after being kicked by a horse during an excursion with students. After seeing pictures of his injuries, I was amazed that Mike survived, and now it was remarkable to see him running around the field as if he were still in college. Mike displayed peak physical condition and fearless play that certainly inspired me and I think others as well. His tenacity was exceptional, especially given the devastating injuries he had recently sustained.

Our first game was under our belts. After a five-minute break, we were confronted by another game, this time versus Peaked, a group of mostly of players who were Coloradans. This team was the defending champs of the Zen Masters Division and a formidable opponent at any time, never mind following our first game — an encounter that sapped a lot of energy especially at this high elevation.

Peaked was facing us in their first game of the day, a clear advantage in this over-60 division. We hung tough as a team in the first half, mainly behind the efforts of our defense, which was led by my roommate and longtime friend Eric Kemp, another very large and nimble athlete who was an All-American defenseman in lacrosse and a fearsome defensive tackle in football.

Eric is the man largely responsible for starting the effort Middlebury alumni have made to play together over the years. Twenty-three years ago, operating on a fax machine out of his office, the man I call Bullwinkle because of his moose-like characteristics fired out hundreds of messages urging many of us, including me (he refers to me as Rocky from the cartoon “Rocky and Bullwinkle”) to come to Vail to play in the Masters Division (30 and older).

At that time, Middlebury had never fielded an alumni team of any kind in the Vail Shootout. Through his often clever, funny and always inspirational faxes, Eric managed to convince about 35 of us to play in the 1997 Vail Shootout.

Bobo Sideli '76, another big defenseman and football lineman, took over for Eric in promoting the opportunity. From that point on, Middlebury alumni teams have been a constant presence at the tournament, often fielding men's and women's teams in multiple divisions each year.

Although body checking is not allowed in the Zen Masters Division, it was clear that some of the members of the Peaked team were wary of Eric "Bullwinkle" Kemp. Being a talker, I was in regular communication during the game with members of the opposing team, and some confided with me their caution in getting tangled up with big Eric. One opponent did try to take a run through Eric at one point, and it appeared that when he ran into Eric, he had run into a brick wall. That player fell to the ground and had to be assisted off the field. He did not return.

After a scoreless first half against Peaked, we simply ran out of gas in the second half. We fell to a worthy opponent 3-0, taking some of the air out of the momentum we had built with our win against the Navy Goats.

The first day had been a success, however. We sustained some injuries and lost some of the 45 players to pulled hamstrings, bumps and bruises, plus one more serious shoulder injury. But our spirits were high. We seemed to be figuring out how to play together, and everyone was having a great time.

Throughout the rest of the day, groups of guys stayed together to explore Vail, to sit in the pool, to continue to catch up with each other and to soak in the experience. That evening, under a beautiful clear sky with a nearly full moon, we came together as a group with spouses, kids and friends to share a beautiful meal together in Ford Park under a pavilion. It was an opportunity to relive the day, as well as to reconnect with each other and the many who came to support us at the tournament. The food was delicious and the atmosphere was enchanting, but the real treat was the rekindling of human connection we all felt on that special star-filled evening.

We were up and at 'em again Sunday morning for our shared breakfast at the Manor Vail.

"What time is it?"

"Time to beat the Eldest Statesmen!"

At 8 a.m., we would face a group of Hobart alumni in the tournament semifinals. The Statesmen were very successful during our time in college, winning multiple NCAA Division III championships. They clearly were the dominant team of that era. They were also a team of men who had played together at other tournaments, and we knew of their success as a men's club team. We knew we were up against a formidable opponent in the Eldest Statesmen.

This game was a tough one for the Panthers. Though we put in our best physical effort, there was no stopping the Eldest Statesmen, and they rolled over us throughout the game. Although it was a somewhat discouraging result, the disappointment fueled many of us to come back strong the next day for the consolation game — an 8 a.m. rematch against the Navy Old Gnarly Goat. I began to hype this rematch as *our* championship game.

We all enjoyed the rest of the day with friends spread out throughout the Vail area. That evening, we came together again, this time at a reception sponsored by Middlebury College. Each of the

teams representing Middlebury at Vail, along with alums who were in the area, attended the banquet. Although this was a great event, I looked forward to being with my own teammates and to playing our championship game the next morning.

Monday morning arrived with the same routine of breakfast together in our uniforms, some a bit smelly after three days and four games of wear and tear. The weather was glorious, and we scheduled to begin our game at 8 a.m. on a field at the Vail Mountain School, a field that has spectacular views of the mountains, including some impressive waterfalls cascading from rocks above the field. We took the field for warmups, and there was excitement and electricity in the air as the game began and our team seemingly put it all together.

My own classmates, Garret Gifford '81 and Bill Maggard '81, both midfielders, stepped up, took charge and dominated the play as middies. Long-stick middle Steve Clancy '81, who told me before the game that he might not play because of back pain, rallied and picked up numerous ground balls and shut down the middies on the Navy squad. The trio of Roy Heffernan '78, Duane Ford '78, and Jack Dobek '78 — no doubt in my mind the best midfield unit ever to don the Middlebury Blue — also played great lacrosse and showed flashes of their skill and athleticism.

We ran out to a 4-0 lead and cruised to a 7-3 victory, sealing what I considered to be our championship. The games were over, and it was clear that although we competed hard and did our best to win each of the games, this experience was not about winning championships.

The Vail Shootout was all about gratitude. We were all grateful for the chance to be together, continuing, rekindling and, in some cases, beginning relationships with a wonderful group of men. We had lived enough life to know the twists and turns, the highs and lows, the triumphs and defeats, and now we could enjoy the perspective that these life experiences have lent to all of us.

Vail was not just a lacrosse experience. It was bigger and deeper than that. It allowed us to appreciate the journey of life, to pause our lives to be with others who are in a similar place in their journeys and to truly treasure the friendships, camaraderie and love we all shared openly for one beautiful four-day stretch in Colorado playing a game that has given us so much.

I have often thought about the Vail experience I had with my Middlebury family since I returned home from Colorado. At my advancing age, it represented a rare opportunity to fully immerse myself in a lacrosse experience at one of the best tournaments in the world. I am very grateful for that opportunity, but overwhelmingly, I am left reflecting on how lucky I am to have been with my Middlebury teammates, coaches, friends and family members, celebrating the relationships that have evolved over a lifetime.

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