

High Achievement

Teamwork, commitment, and camaraderie prove to be Middlebury's winning combination.

BY JOHN M. MCCARDELL, JR.



IT IS SAID THAT EACH YEAR, on July 1, when he was treasurer, the estimable Carroll Rikert would call his colleagues to wish them “happy new year.” Indeed, June 30 does constitute a line of demarcation in the College year. Though the work of the Language Schools and Bread Loaf goes on without regard for fiscal anniversaries, on that date the ledgers close; the value of the endowment is determined; and thoughts begin to turn to the year ahead.

This year, however, June 30 took on additional meaning. For lacrosse alumni it provided

an opportunity for what has become an annual reunion at the Vail Shootout in Colorado. This event brings together lacrosse players from across the Middlebury generations to recall old times and to take the field, wearing Middlebury blue, against other, lesser, squads that, though sporting the mufti of prestigious liberal arts colleges, consist primarily of ringers. Under the able leadership of Bobo Sideli '77, our team competes with considerable pride and a fair amount of skill. The outcome matters, of course, but these players are now approaching middle age, and they understand that the experience matters even more.

There is something charmingly contrarian about the Vail Shootout. Though it does not deny the realities of age and the inevitable erosion of speed, agility, and endurance, it offers a moment of defiance. Over these several days of early summer a player is young once more, competing in a game for the sheer love of the experience. This is a choice that flies in the face of Father Time. It seeks to recover the unrecoverable.

Or so it might seem to those who, as the saying goes, know the words but don't know the music. The Vail

Shootout is about far more than a collegiate game with a clock, equipment, officials, and rules. Those things matter, but they are not why the game is played, not why it is loved. No, our alumni come, year after year, to Vail, because it represents things that defy logic and the human constructs of time: things like friendship; teamwork; the pursuit of excellence. At Vail there is no one dominant or domineering voice or group. If you know the players at Vail you will have no trouble running the plays, and most of the time, you will win.

June 30 also had additional meaning for those of us at the College involved in a different kind of shootout. Last October the Board of Trustees reaffirmed a bold decision that had been originally made in February 2002: to proceed with both the Library and Atwater Commons projects. Construction on both projects had begun in the summer of 2002. By October we were most definitely “in the ground.” At the same time, the economy continued to deteriorate, and the value of our endowment continued to decline. The College's ability to maintain its financial equilibri-

um in a period of protracted uncertainty, especially after all this new square footage began to incur operating expenses in the fall of 2004, became a matter of intense discussion. The board, over an entire weekend, engaged in a comprehensive debate over “risk” in both its quantifiable and its nonquantifiable forms.

The board's confidence was buoyed when an anonymous donor pledged to contribute \$10 million by June 30, 2005, if the College could secure commitments of \$30 million by June 30, 2003, payable in full by June 30, 2005. Success in this ambitious undertaking would introduce into the conservative assumptions of our planning model a level of giving that would significantly reduce the risks of proceeding with the projects.

The meeting concluded with the administration pledging to present a balanced budget for 2003–04 that met spending guidelines established by the board, and with the board agreeing to accept the \$40 million challenge.

For the next nine months, my colleagues strove with exemplary diligence to pare expenses. I had initiated this process by pledging that staff layoffs would not be an accept-

able solution to our budget difficulties, adding that, in return for this pledge, salary increases for 2003–04 would probably be quite modest. Other conditions arose, as well. I found it imperative that we maintain our need-blind admissions practices, while meeting the full need of students on financial aid. Also, as proposed cuts were suggested, we placed an emphasis on preserving the quality of our educational program. Compromising the overall student experience at Middlebury—in the classroom, on the playing fields, in the auditorium—was not an option. By May, we were able to present a budget to the board for approval that complied with every condition, including a 1 percent contingency, and even assumed an endowment performance of –6 percent for the current year. Real endowment spending will be at a lower rate than authorized.

Meanwhile, we had nine months to raise \$30 million in new commitments, all of which had to be payable by June 30, 2005. Our College Advancement team hit the road with energy and enthusiasm. We traveled thousands of miles, met with many friends of the College, learned that the College endowment was not alone in being treated shabbily by the economy, and saw the numbers rise slowly, very slowly. By the December board meeting we had barely \$8 million in commitments. By February we had reached \$15 million, the halfway point, with four months to go.

Facts can be stubborn things; numbers don't lie. But people make the difference. This spring, in anticipation of attending the Vail Shootout, I

talked with Curt Cushman '50, the "father of Middlebury lacrosse." After World War II, many students returned to Middlebury and, according to Curt, "brought their sticks and balls with them." There was enough interest among these men to form a lacrosse club. Curt's former coach at Deerfield "had a wonderful inventory of surplus equipment," which he passed on to

lacrosse before," Curt notes, but they quickly learned the game. Splitting gas money for travel, these student athletes—among them "Pappy" Fitzgerald '48, Jack Guetens '51, Bob Hughes '51, Tom Metcalf '49, Bernie Schlesinger '50, George Shumway '50, Guido Tine '51, and Don Maddock '49, who managed the team—came to know one another, and they became a

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the fledgling club. In addition the players borrowed helmets and gloves from the hockey team and jerseys from the football squad. Coach Arthur Brown, athletic director, made space available for practice. Coach Duke Nelson '32, seeing lacrosse as a good way for football players to stay in shape during the off-season, agreed to coach the team.

The team's first game, in 1949, was a 9–1 loss to RPI, "a real power," Curt recalls, "but we were the first team to score on them that year." The 1950 season was more successful, so much so that the sport gained varsity status. One year later a women's club was established.

What is especially striking in Curt's account, is that only about 15 to 20 students showed up regularly for practices. "Maybe fifty percent of the team had never played

team. They had a simple vision, and they knew that, somehow, that vision could be attained. They may have seemed contrarian; most new ideas are. But they began a long and distinguished tradition at Middlebury. Our ability to compete successfully for national championships is directly traceable to the confidence these players had in one another and, as well, to the confidence the College had in this new enterprise.

Curt Cushman was at this year's Vail Shootout, and he told many stories of the early days of Middlebury lacrosse. I marvel, still, at his ability to recreate a time and place that, temporally, seemed quite remote. Yet his audience of College alumni and their families understood. They knew what a group of highly moti-

vated Midds can accomplish in alma mater's name. They recognized that in 2003, as in 1950, whatever the College set out to do, it would do.

And so I thought of them as, departing Colorado, I announced that the College had met the \$40 million challenge. They in particular would understand and appreciate that these dollars had come from parents, friends, and alumni, who were willing to stretch in this time of need. These donors did not require charts or elaborate projections; a clear, compelling request was all that was necessary. As specified by the challenge donor, every dollar will go to meet existing needs: academic programs, the Commons residential and new library projects, and scholarships.

Perhaps most remarkable, the three largest gifts to the challenge, representing almost half of the \$40 million total, were given anonymously. Is there, anywhere, a better example of selflessness or teamwork? Is there a more fitting way to express how fully the College transcends individual needs for credit or recognition? Can there be any more compelling evidence that our College and its people—its many, many people—exceed in strength and determination and reliability any numbers on any spreadsheet?

If there is any doubt, come to a Middlebury lacrosse game—men's or women's—and learn how tradition and commitment and camaraderie and plain hard work can spark the kindly light that leads through encircling gloom to championships on the field and to the lofty places on which we mean to set our feet—by June 30, 2005, and for many years to come. 🐾