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THE SPORTING SCENE

PIONEER

A star coach goes west.

BY JOHN MCPHEE

In coats and ties, the University of Denver men's lacrosse team caught the five-o'clock tumbrel to the Carrier Dome. It was actually a chartered bus, and the ride from their hotel was scarcely a mile, but this characteristically boisterous group was silent now, on its way to face off with Syracuse, the No. 1 team in the college world, national champions in 2008, national champions in 2009.

At the Carrier Dome, you could begin to sense hostility even before you stepped inside. The Carrier Dome is a large, inflated tent—capacity forty-nine thousand—and if certain doors are not opened and shut in correct sequence air can come blasting out at Force 11. If you make it to and past the first door, a second one might suddenly swing shut so hard it could crush a hand, and has done so. Negotiating the air locks, the Denver team was victorious in reaching its locker room. Denver was undefeated. Syracuse was undefeated. For both teams, this was the first game of the 2010 season.

Five months earlier, the Denver coach noticed that Syracuse had nothing on its schedule for February 19th. He telephoned John Desko, the Syracuse coach, and asked him if he would like to open his season against Denver. No problem about the travel, he assured Desko; Denver would be pleased to come East. In the old Western world of the quarter horse—of itinerant peddlers and country tracks—this was known as “jumping a trader for a race.” The two coaches knew each other well. Three times, they had been the final two. Desko at Syracuse had won five national championships. Bill Tierney, the Denver coach, had won six national championships as head coach at Princeton. Over all, they were, as record books render it, the two “winningest active coaches” in the game.

In June, just after the 2009 season, in Tierney's ivied-tower office high above a Princeton gym, Tierney got a call from Denver, asking for advice on the selec-

tion of a new lacrosse coach, the job being vacant. In mid-conversation, Denver said, out of nowhere, “What would it take to bring you here?” Tierney stopped the shot and looked for the outlet pass. Of the sixty Division I men's lacrosse teams, only Denver and the Air Force Academy were west of the Mississippi. A few decades ago, U.S. lacrosse players of all ages were numbered in the hundreds and played for East Coast schools. Now, male and female, there are five hundred thousand U.S. lacrosse players, and their schools are in Texas, California, Oregon, Washington, and many other Western states. The explosion is so current that several hundred lacrosse teams are coming into being every year. Nowhere is the Western expansion greater than in Colorado, where lacrosse goals line the mountain front from Cañon City to Fort Collins, where the Vail Lacrosse Shootout draws two thousand participants, and where the one-day LaxFest at Dick's Sporting Goods Park, in Commerce City, involves more than two hundred and fifty teams and five thousand players.

Tierney, who grew up in Levittown, on Long Island, and played at Cortland State and was an assistant at Johns Hopkins before his years at Princeton, could go to Denver, improve its already accomplished team, serve a deep commitment to the geographical reach of the game, offer athletic scholarships, and hire his older son, Trevor, already a resident of Denver, as his assistant coach. That was what it took to take him there.

The Eastern lacrosse world reacted to the news as if a Vince Lombardi had left the N.F.L. to teach American football at Harrow. All publications that cover lacrosse, and even some that seldom do, were full of puzzlement and surprise, and the most employed word was “shock.” How could he leave Princeton? It can be done. And Tierney knew what he was doing. He was going to live

through the hype (as he described his early summer), get out to Denver, and start teaching. When he picked up that phone and called John Desko, he was not just jumping the national champion to give his boys experience. He actually meant to go East and beat Syracuse. "I felt I needed to justify myself to the team," he said in Syracuse on the eve of

handed shot, the words "Greatest Player Ever" running under and connecting the two pictures. Jimmy Brown was not going to play tomorrow.

Tierney called a huddle to review the actual opposition, mentioning a rare danger in three defensive midfielders all hungry to break out and score, mentioning a Syracuse player "who wants to

necticut, Maine, Minnesota, and California, and two from Texas (small identical athletic twins, both in the midfield). On Denver's over-all roster, twenty-five per cent were from Colorado and more from the East, but none from Baltimore or eastern Long Island, primal hotbeds of U.S. lacrosse. When Tierney began his second year at Princeton, in the fall



Bill Tierney's move from Princeton to Denver shocked a lacrosse world traditionally dominated by East Coast colleges.

the game. "There had been so much hype about my coming there. I wasn't bringing lacrosse to Denver. This team was well established in Division I and was one of the sixteen in the tournament in 2008." Arriving at the Carrier Dome, he said, "All right, guys. This is what we've been waiting for."

They had been there practicing the day before, and the coach was impressed to notice how unintimidated they seemed. They did not gawk. They were not struck dumb by the three-tiered palace with private suites, by the championship banners, by the eight-hundred-square-foot hanging tapestry of Jimmy Brown, featuring side-by-side pictures of Brown in his football uniform and Brown holding his lacrosse stick high for a right-

shoot every time he gets the ball," mentioning the unusual number of Syracuse players who favor the left side, and another who is a "great finisher. More dodge and shoot than a passer. We can slide to him." He mentioned Chris Daniello ("left-hander, tries to go to goal really hard"), John Lade ("best defenseman"), Joel White, Jovan Miller, Stephen Keogh, and, especially, "big, powerful, left-handed" Cody Jamieson.

"But this is not about them," he said. "It is about how we play defense. When we have the ball, dodge hard, throw simple passes, take simple shots—don't try anything fancy." One of his players would try a behind-the-back shot in the game. Three of his starters were from Colorado, one each from Ontario, Con-

of 1988, he outlined to his astonished freshmen—the first group he had recruited—what they would have to do to win a national championship. Eyes rolled. Glances oscillated. Somebody may have twirled a finger beside an ear. A national what? Tierney's 1988 team had won two, lost thirteen. Princeton had lost forty-six games in four years, and had not won an Ivy League championship in twenty-one. The N.C.A.A. tournament was as far off its scale as the Bowl Championship Series is to Princeton football teams. Yet those freshmen with the rolling eyes went to Philadelphia four years later and beat Syracuse in the national final in double overtime. Now, at the practice in the Dome, Tierney ended his remarks to

his Denver players by mentioning “the importance of presenting an air of confidence at the opening whistle.”

Next evening in the locker room and dressed for the game, Denver was not presenting an air of confidence. They had brought techno with them and were being jackhammered by two loudspeakers. Two players had squatted low and were doing face-offs on the carpet, while the majority sat on folding chairs in front of their lockers and stared straight ahead. When the techno went silent, it revealed their silence. A percentage, not a small one, collected in a corner, knelt together, and prayed. When all had returned to their chairs, Trevor Tierney, first assistant coach, led them through their psychological preparation.

“Sit up as you would on your blocks in yoga,” he said. With their hands tightly clasped and their eyes closed, they were like passengers on a jet in heavy turbulence. There were long pauses between phases of the preparation. The second phase was Third-Person Visualization. This was not the same planet that Trevor’s father had played on, but he sat as quietly as his team while Trevor spun out the hypnotics of modern sports psychology. Visualization is what golfers do. You imagine the ball where you want to hit it, imagine every aspect of its flight thereto. In this milieu, Trevor told them to watch themselves in action. “Picture yourself as if you’re watching a highlight reel of yourself making big plays throughout the game, making big hits, picking up ground balls—as if you are watching yourself do it,” he said, and then paused for a couple of minutes while they watched themselves on their internal TVs.

When Trevor spoke again, he said, “If you are feeling nervous, nervous is good. All right? It makes us stop thinking about things. It makes us ready to play. If you’re nervous, that’s fine. Feel nervous.” This Trevor, who is thirty, is a film-star-handsome dark-haired dude, who wore to the Carrier Dome a silver tie and a dark-blue pin-striped three-piece suit. He was now in his Denver assistant’s sweats. In the 1998 N.C.A.A. quarter-final, Duke jumped out to a devastating lead over Princeton, and the Princeton season appeared to be over. What to do? Head Coach Tierney pulled his starting goalie and sent his freshman son, Trevor, into the net. If Duke had continued to widen its lead and the game had ended in a blowout, a tragedian might have seen possibilities in the story. It was something like the Alcázar de Toledo in the Spanish Civil War when the Falangist colonel was under siege in the palace and was called on the telephone by the attacking Republicans, saying, Colonel, we have your son—surrender in ten minutes or he dies. According to the story as perpetuated by the Falangists, the colonel asked to speak to his son. After the Republicans put the boy on the phone, the colonel said to him, “Commend your soul to God, shout ‘Viva España,’ and die like a hero.” Making stop after amazing stop, Trevor stuffed Duke and stuffed them some more, while the Princeton attack passed Duke going away. Trevor was twice All-American, and in his last college game—an N.C.A.A. final—his team beat Syracuse, 10–9, in overtime.

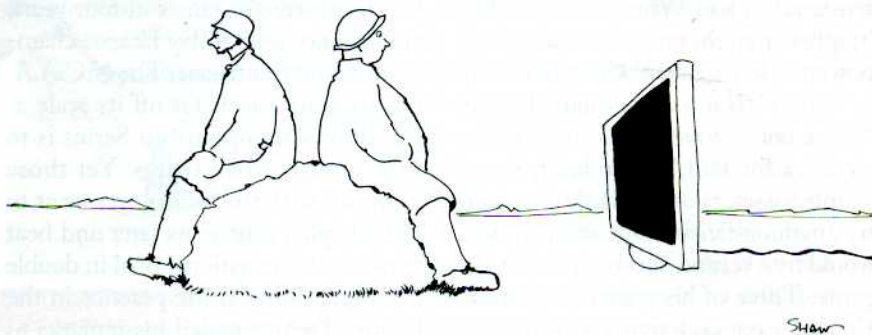
Now he was saying to the Denver team, “If you’re scared, there’s nothing to be scared about. If you’re scared, you’re

thinking about what’s going to happen: What am I going to do wrong? How can I fail? You’re not going to fail. Picture all those Syracuse guys. They’re ranked No. 1. They’re all spread out. We are all together. If we play hard tonight, there is no one and no team that can stop us.”

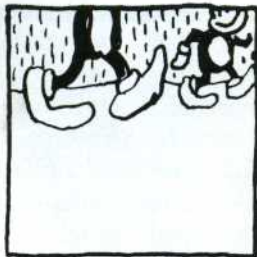
Bill Tierney had the last word before his Denver Pioneers took the field. He told his players what it had been like for him coming to the Carrier Dome in earlier years. As he appeared on the field behind his team, heavy words always came down upon him: “Fuck you, coach! You suck! Your team is going to get blown out!” This time, he said, people he had already encountered in the Dome were saying things like “Good luck, coach” and “Hope it goes well, coach,” in tones a kindly warden might use to someone eating his last meal. “This game is about dodging hard, getting out of each other’s way, and shooting the daylights out of the ball,” Tierney said. He spoke of “the importance of clears”—they could make “a five- or six-goal swing in a game like this.” And he said, “Just get up the field and push the thing down their throat. Any questions on that? Since June, fellas, this whole thing has sometimes been about me. It’s about us now. It’s us. It’s we. This journey is going to be about ‘us’ and ‘we.’ I’m tired of ‘me.’ What I want it to be is ‘you.’ This crowd, they’re real nice now, but we’re going to come out there tonight and we’re going to play our asses off, with our hearts, with our legs, and with our heads. And the next time we come I want to hear ‘Fuck you, coach!’ All right, let’s go get ‘em.” The Pioneers erupted in a roar, and ran out onto the field.

Ninety-three seconds into the action, Alex Demopoulos scored for Denver. Trevor Tierney was pacing the sideline as much as his father was. If their relationship in Trevor’s undergraduate years was Shakespearean, so was this. At 8:39 of the first quarter, John Dickenson, one of the identical twins, out of Highland Park High School, in Dallas, scored for Denver. Early in the second quarter, Bill Tierney was screaming at a referee, “Hey, Mike! Up in the face! They can’t do that.” Trevor put an arm on his father. Evidently the team’s shrink, Trevor was

WAITING FOR GODOT AND THE CABLE GUY.



equally mindful of the head coach, ready to do what he could to calm him when necessary, which is not a part-time job. At Princeton, Bryce Chase, a volunteer assistant coach who was also a trial lawyer, hovered close to Tierney during every game, to muffle what he could muffle, and help avoid technicals. A year or two ago, Tierney, shouting, laid a string of slanderous words on a passing referee, and that very referee was one of the three officials before him now, working this game in the Carrier Dome. (Tierney: "It's not a problem. He's used to it.") At 2:53 of the second quarter, Todd Baxter, out of Eden Prairie



High School, in Minnesota, scored for Denver. Four minutes into the third, Denver's Alex Demopoulos scored again (Avon Old Farms School, Connecticut). He would score twice more. And Andrew Lay (Denver East High School) would intercept a Syracuse pass and drill a goal from thirty feet. Unfortunately (for Denver), this montage of Denver goals was insufficient.

So let's roll back the clock and start again: Forty-one seconds after the opening face-off, Jovan Miller (Christian Brothers Academy, Syracuse, New York) scored for Syracuse. Twelve seconds later, Kevin Drew (John Jay High School, Cross River, New York) scored for Syracuse. The game was not yet one minute old. A minute and a half later, Max Bartig (Northport High School, Northport, New York) scored for Syracuse. Jeremy Thompson, out of Lafayette High School, in Lafayette, New York, was doing face-offs for Syracuse, with his braided ponytail hanging Iroquois style down his back all the way across his number to his waist. And why not? He's an Onondaga. This was north-central New York, where the Iroquois developed this form of this game, and where they have lived for at least a thousand years. Onondaga, Mohawk—on Syracuse's 2010 men's and women's lacrosse teams, two of the Six Nations of the Iroquois are represented by one or more athletes.

Big, powerful, left-handed Cody Jamieson scored his first goal of the season three minutes and sixteen seconds into the game. In last year's N.C.A.A.

final, in the Patriots' stadium, in Foxboro, Massachusetts, Cornell had a three-goal lead over Syracuse with four minutes to go, and apparently had the championship secured. But Syracuse exploded—one, two, three—and the game went into "sudden victory" overtime, the politically uplifting form of sudden death. Cornell got the overtime face-off and set up one of its shooting stars. He was going into a dodge when Sid Smith, of Syracuse, hit him with a clean check that dislodged the ball. Smith scooped it off the ground and began a clear that ended in the stick of Cody Jamieson, who released a shot so perfect that he did not watch it as it won the championship but ran instead eighty yards south to embrace his teammate Smith. Mohawks both, they had grown up together at Six Nations of the Grand River, an Iroquois reserve in Ontario.

Jamieson is of running-back size—five feet nine, two hundred and thirteen pounds—and out from under his helmet his look is boyish, his hair down his forehead in bangs. His elbows were heavily padded, his right leg was completely wrapped in some sort of therapeutic sleeve. His thighs and calves are massive, but they taper to a sprinter's ankles. His inside rolls resembled a spinning top. Eight and a half minutes into the game, he rolled right, dashed left, and scored again, unassisted. He would score four times. He wears 22, the number that Syracuse, in long tradition, has assigned each season to its best player.

Syracuse had a six-goal lead at the end of the first quarter, a nine-goal lead at the end of three. The starters retired. The final was 15–9. No one heckled the Denver coach.

Generally speaking, nobody beats Syracuse twice in one season. So if you lose to Syracuse you can dream about surprising them late. This Western team could come back East and get them at the Ravens' stadium, in Baltimore, in the N.C.A.A. tournament, in May. If not this May, some May. ♦

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A conversation with John McPhee.

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