

Planting the Seeds of Lacrosse in Newark

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NEWARK — When Fernando Pereira began playing lacrosse as a freshman at East Side High School two years ago, neighborhood acquaintances would see him in his uniform walking home from practice or a game.



Richard Perry/The New York Times

John Dudley started the lacrosse team at Newark's East Side High. The team has 36 players, 23 of whom had never played before.

“You play soccer?” they would ask. The answer was yes, he did, but not in the spring, so he would shake his head and show the helmet he was carrying.

“Football?” the friends would ask. He played that, too, but only in the fall. Keep going, Pereira would say, but by then, they were typically out of guesses. Some had never heard of lacrosse, much less seen the game played.

At East Side, in the Ironbound section, the only public school in the city where lacrosse is played, the game was a mystery that had to be solved and then sold by John Dudley, the coach.

“You ever hear of Jim Brown?” Dudley, a student assistance coordinator at the school, would ask a recruit in the hallway. “He was one of the greatest football players ever, but he was even better at lacrosse.”

Jim Brown? In 2010, he may as well be Jim Thorpe.

“Go home and Google it,” Dudley would say.

In his fourth season coaching at East Side, second on the varsity level, Dudley lists 36 players on his roster, 23 of them cradling a stick for the first time. There is plenty of room in this urban planter's lacrosse universe for those willing to learn and to lose, often lopsidedly, at what has mostly been a suburban sport. After winning twice last year, losing 16, this season's scores reflect the collective apprenticeship: a 20-1 defeat to St. Peter's Prep; 21-2 to Newark Academy; 17-0 to [Seton Hall](#) Prep. East Side lost 13 straight before defeating J. P. Stevens of Edison, 7-2, Saturday behind Pereira's five goals.

“We tell them this is going to take time,” Dudley said. “You’re not going to learn the skills overnight. You’re going to get frustrated, ticked off. We’ve all been there. We know.”

Dudley, 42, is a role model of qualifications and of color. An African-American, he did not learn lacrosse until his sophomore year at Montclair High School but wound up playing one season at the United States Naval Academy and three more at Kean University.

As an assistant at Fairleigh Dickinson University in the mid-1990s, he was on a scouting mission to the Baltimore area when he motored past a pickup game in a park and decided to watch.

“I’m walking in, getting closer and closer, and then I realize that all the legs are brown,” he said. Inspired, Dudley returned to New Jersey and eventually started a youth club in Newark, Brick City Lacrosse. When he landed his current student coordinator’s position at East Side, he asked the school’s principal, Dr. Mario Santos, about starting a team.

“As much as the academics are important, and there is nothing more important, there are some things we can’t capture in an English or math class,” said Santos, an East Side graduate. “When John proposed lacrosse to me, I said, ‘I know it’s huge in the suburbs.’ Then I said, ‘Why not here?’ ”

East Side already had another sport not often played in the inner city, hockey. Delighted by the lacrosse participation and realistic about the results, Santos said he would next like to start a crew team.

Asked how East Side could afford adding sports in financially challenging times, he said, “Budgeting is budgeting,” while noting that much of the lacrosse program’s support has come from the coaches — Dudley and his assistants, Wayne Braxton and Jim Robbins — tapping the private sector.

East Side is not the only lacrosse-playing school in North Jersey from a more urban environment. Union Hill High School in Union City — which recently defeated East Side, 6-5, in overtime — has also embraced the fast-growing sport.

According to United States Lacrosse, high school participation grew by 125 percent from 2001 to 2009. In New York City, the Public Schools Athletic League reports that there are 15 boys and 15 girls programs, including boys and girls teams at Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem.

In sports like soccer and football, East Side teams go to the suburbs with a competitive swagger. But after winning 15 games as a second-year junior varsity, the varsity startup has been a test for what teenage boys and naturally competitive athletes can endure.

“The first year was eye-opening,” said Malikul Aziz, a college student who played two years at East Side for Dudley and is now a coaching volunteer, known around the team as Coach Mal. “We went to places we had never even thought of, all this land, driving past huge houses with lacrosse nets and sticks all over the front lawns.”

Aziz, who is of Pakistani descent, said the Red Raiders traveled as diverse and proud invaders. But how do you match skills with players who have been handling a stick since third or fourth grade?

Dudley preached practice and perseverance, but inevitably, there were problems.

“We get a lot of kids who have situations beyond their control,” he said. “They have to be the baby sitter after school. They may have a family member that doesn’t speak English, and they have to act as a translator.”

Mike Barros, a strapping attacker, missed several games last year when a parent was laid off from work and he had to take an after-school job. Barros returned for his senior season and hopes to continue playing next year at Mercy College, where he has been accepted as a music student. In the interests of growth, Dudley tells his players at the end of the season to bring a friend for the start of the next one — the more athletic, the better. He did not have to with Pereira.

With the benefit of watching his games, Pereira’s younger brothers did not need to Google Jim Brown. Now Felipe Pereira, a freshman, is on the East Side team and Fabio, a fifth grader, is often cradling a stick when he can make a practice or game across town at Weequahic High School.

With no field available in Newark’s Ironbound section, the team travels a few miles in two buses — one for East Side students and another for the handful of players from magnet schools, like Newark Science Park High School and University High School, whose students are allowed to play.

“It would be ideal if we had our own field, but we make do,” Dudley said.

One recent late weekday afternoon, the bus pulled up behind the old high school building, adjacent to the empty football field. The players piled off in their strange-looking helmets, crosstown rivals bearing alien equipment.

Long-handled sticks in hand, these Red Raiders had come not to rumble but to prepare for their next game. Nyell Williams, a freshman goalie, had come to do neither.

Wearing a Yankees cap and dark glasses, carrying a white plastic bag, he explained to Dudley that he could not work out because he had been hit in the eye — his one good eye — in gym class that morning.

But Williams, who was born with congenital glaucoma, had something in the bag he wanted to show Dudley: a brochure he had scooped up the night before at a college fair.

“Roanoke College,” Williams said. “Their coach was a great goalie. I want to go to one of his camps.”

“Bill Pilat, know him well,” Dudley said. “If you want, I’ll give him a call.”

Dudley smiled as Williams, who had been playing lacrosse for less than three months and compensates for his sight limitations by remembering his coach’s advice to keep his “head on a swivel,” ambled contentedly away.

Life was good, Dudley mused. One of his seeds had sprouted.