Walt’s Observations

President Walter Harrison reflects on the formula for success in team sports, classrooms, and life.
Before I was a university president, I was a scholar of the place of sport in American culture. I am conditioned intellectually and by scholarly practice not to read too much symbolism into an individual team’s triumphs. Most successful teams are the results of coaches who provide professional expertise and establish a culture that values hard work and selfless pursuit of excellence—combined with a complex but complementary collection of players who come together to win. Knowing this, I almost always resist the temptation to say that a team represents the greater culture of a university, a city, a region, or a country.

Notice that I said “almost always.” I am going to break with my usual practice to say something about the 2011 University of Hartford men’s lacrosse team, the first Hawks lacrosse team to win the America East Conference Championship and represent the conference in the NCAA Championships. The team’s success was chronicled in the last issue of the Observer, and you can catch up on the latest news at hartfordhawks.com.

Ryan Compitello’s winning goal, breaking a 10-10 tie, with one second left in the Conference Championship game against nationally ranked Stony Brook before a national television audience, was the most exciting finish of a game in University history. It ranks with women’s basketball’s first America East Conference Championship in 2002 and its historic NCAA first-round win against Temple in 2006 as my proudest moments as a Hawks fan.

In the case of lacrosse, as with most spring sports, I miss attending much of the very end of the season because the games conflict with end-of-year academic events and Commencement. I was watching the game at home when the winning goal was scored at Stony Brook, and I leaped up and down in front of the television, shouting my head off. My phone started ringing immediately afterward with congratulatory calls from Hawks fans.

The success of the Hawks lacrosse team is, first and foremost, a tribute to coach Peter Lawrence and his great group of players. Their belief in him and in themselves led them to the kind of success every team dreams about at the start of a season. But it is also—and I am sure that Peter would be the first to acknowledge this—the result of support from Director of Athletics Pat Meiser, her staff, and (here is where I see the real significance) the strong support of parents, friends, and alumni.
Lacrosse is a game founded centuries ago by Native Americans in upstate New York and southern Canada. By the mid-20th century, it was still a largely regional sport, flourishing at prep schools and elite liberal arts colleges in northern New York and Canada, on Long Island, and in the middle Atlantic states. Over the last three decades, its appeal has broadened, and lacrosse is now the fastest-growing sport in America. Increasing numbers of public high schools and universities and colleges, still largely in the East but now expanding rapidly in the Midwest and West, have men’s and women’s teams.

The University’s lacrosse team began in the 1970s, just on the eve of that explosion in popularity, and although they enjoyed periods of success, the Hawks had never won a conference championship. In the last decade, we struggled in one of the most competitive conferences in the country against better financed teams with superior facilities.

Thanks to the generosity of alumni and friends during our Home Field Advantage campaign, we were able to completely rebuild Alumni Stadium, giving our lacrosse and soccer teams an excellent facility more in line with what our competition had previously enjoyed.

Enter Peter Lawrence. When he became coach six years ago, Peter began to recruit talented players who had somehow been overlooked by more powerful programs. Piece by piece, he built a winning program. And with the help of some longtime supporters of lacrosse, he began to receive the voluntary financial support that provided some of the things that the University previously could not afford.

Even with these changes, success did not come easily or quickly. It rarely does. I distinctly remember the experience of Steve Groccia, now a senior, who was in my Discovering America course three years ago as a first-year student. Steve is an excellent and serious student. At the beginning of the course, he explained to Professor Donn Weinholz, with whom I team-teach the course, and me that he would be absent from some classes to travel with the team.

As the semester progressed, we would discuss each game after he returned, a series of close losses and games lost after we had led. Steve, in his own quiet, understated way, always believed that success was ahead. I knew he was working hard to make that happen in any way he could. When I went to games, I would watch him (usually on the sideline that year) cheering his teammates on.
Steve’s (and his teammates’) faith paid off last year. After the thrilling win against Stony Brook, I joined the team and its followers at a local sports restaurant to watch the NCAA tournament selection show. This group of lacrosse players is not prone to wild displays of emotion, but I could tell how proud they were of their success, of what they had achieved together, and of themselves.

Perhaps now you understand why I am so eager to see in this team’s triumph the elements of what makes us a successful university now and what will make us an even more successful one in the years to come. With good leadership, good coaching, good faculty and staff, and students who want to succeed—plus the support of parents, friends, and alumni—we have the ingredients of a formula that gives young people the experience and the knowledge that will allow them to perform their best.

Whether on the lacrosse field, in music practice rooms, in engineering or chemistry labs, or in study carrels in Mortensen Library, we are providing all our students with the same essential knowledge: what they will need to succeed in a growingly competitive world.

Yes, I have broken all my rules by reading symbolism into one season of a team’s success. But I am proud of this University, and in that one glorious moment last spring, I caught a glimpse of what makes this University great.

Go, Hawks!

The 2011 list of donors to the University of Hartford is available at Hartford.edu/donors.