Photography by Steve Parker

Published by SURFACE, 1998

Thamel: Lacrosse Legend

the lessons of a legend

BY PETE THAMEL
DURING HIS STORIED CAREER, SU LACROSSE COACH ROY SIMMONS JR. DID MUCH MORE THAN TEACH HIS PLAYERS ABOUT THE GAME HE REVOLUTIONIZED

In his 28 years as a head coach at Syracuse University, Roy Simmons Jr. saw hundreds of players pass through his lacrosse program. They comprised undefeated squads littered with All-Americans, scrappy teams that overachieved, and forgettable clubs in the mid-seventies that struggled to reach mediocrity. But to the countless athletes who donned an orange jersey in Simmons’s reign, he consistently spoke about a solitary Big Game.

"Is it the one coming up this Saturday?" players would ask. "Is it the playoffs?" they wondered.

"No, no," Simmons would respond.

This game, he explained, is dramatically more complicated. It has no timeouts, substitutions, or referees. It lasts 24 hours every day, as opposed to 60 minutes once a week, and the opponents are much tougher than Johns Hopkins or Cornell. It was the game of life for which Simmons prepared his players, using lacrosse as bait to hook them on an academic lure and cast them into society with tools for success.

"We hope lacrosse leads them here and then the academics catch fire and they see a bigger picture," says Simmons, who served as an adjunct fine arts professor in the College of Visual and Performing Arts in the eighties. "We hope the lacrosse memories are good ones, but with a degree they don’t have to dwell in the past."

Simmons announced his retirement on May 23 following the Orangemen’s 11-10 loss to Princeton in the NCAA tournament semifinals. Now that his days as SU lacrosse coach have ended, he has been prodded to dwell a bit upon his career. The gentle coach with the soft raspy voice and ivory hair will be remembered as much for his sharp wit and worldly knowledge as for revolutionizing the sport of lacrosse.

“He’s probably the smartest person I ever met in my life,” says Casey Powell ’98, a four-time All-American under Simmons. “He’s my hero.”

But when Simmons recalls his 40-year coaching tenure at Syracuse, which began in 1959 as an assistant to his father, Roy Simmons Sr., there is only a brief mention of on-field accomplishment.

Sure, Simmons does not hide his NCAA-record 16 consecutive Final Fours and six national titles. He does not hesitate when he tabulates his coaching record of 290-96, or mentions that he and his father served a combined total of 67 straight years as SU’s head lacrosse coach. He also joyfully recalls the tears watering the eyes of his father, his hero, after his first national championship in 1983. But it’s when “his boys” win in the Big Game, not a big game, that Simmons truly boasts.

He fondly recalls a player in the late seventies, Jim Neville, who went to Spain through the Division of International Programs Abroad in the fall of his junior year and was expected to return the next spring and start for the Orange. But a call came to Simmons’s office in December—the player was not leaving Spain, deciding instead to continue studying overseas. “And I never saw him again,” says Simmons, with an almost proud chuckle. “He stayed over there and got his degree in Spanish literature.”

Such Big Game success stories are countless in Simmons’s era. None is more telling, though, than what his team accomplished in December 1989. This lacrosse club, which marched on to a 13-0 season and national championship, is commonly regarded as the “greatest in the history of the game.” But an off-field action by this team was equally memorable. Simmons vividly recalls sitting in the Carrier Dome during a January 1989 memorial service following the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103. The tragedy of less than a month before killed 35 Syracuse University students on their way home from a semester abroad. At the service were visitors from Lockerbie, Scotland, a peaceful hamlet where the parts of the 747 crashed, claiming more lives and wreaking havoc.
Simmons’s prolific run as a lacrosse coach included six NCAA titles.

Surrounded by students and watching the victims’ families, one thought dominated Simmons’s mind: “I have to go to Lockerbie.” Later in 1989, through privately raised funds, Simmons took his team to Scotland as part of the healing process. “One year after the tragedy,” Simmons recalls in a low voice, “the village was still reeling from disaster. The people of Lockerbie had to pick up the carnage.”

Simmons and the Orangemen visited various sites where the plane crashed and the coach placed a lacrosse stick on the Wall of Remembrance, one of the many memorials dedicated to the victims. The team also ran lacrosse clinics with the youth of Lockerbie and the nearby town of Dumfries, giving the kids donated equipment that Simmons had gathered from American sporting goods companies.

The only problem with the clinics, remembers Paul Gait ’90, was that the participants had no clue what they were doing. Since women played the only organized lacrosse in Scotland, the players had a lot to teach. “I remember going there and watching these kids who had never played before, and it certainly was interesting for us trying to teach them,” says Gait, a three-time first-team All-American at SU. For players like Gait, traveling off the continent for the first time in his life, the experience was unmatched, but the bond between Lockerbie and Syracuse lacrosse did not end when the Orangemen returned home. Simmons got a call from Lockerbie nine months later and was alerted to a problem in the Scottish village. The visit by the SU team had created a phenomenon—the kids of Lockerbie and Dumfries could not stop playing lacrosse. Four or five kids were sharing a stick, and equipment was virtually impossible to find in Scottish sporting goods stores.

A year after his first trip, Simmons returned for the second of his four trips to Scotland. This time he brought his son, Roy Simmons III, and two players who graduated from the SU program. They traveled up and down Scotland, giving clinics and talking to school physical education directors about adding lacrosse to the curriculum. In 1995, the next time Simmons brought his team to Scotland, the Orangemen did not have to travel to London to take on a national opponent like they did in 1989. The Orangemen squared off with the Scottish national team.

And this July, eight-and-a-half years after Simmons and his team brought the male version of the game to the country, the Scottish team competed at the World Games—lacrosse’s World Cup—in Baltimore. The Scots were one of four teams in the emerging nations bracket and competed against Wales because “once Scotland got a team, the Welsh had to get one too,” Simmons says.

While Simmons had a profound impact as an ambassador of lacrosse, he had an even greater impact on the American game. Simmons’s run-and-gun, in-your-face, who-can-score-more style bolstered the game not only for players, but for fans. What Simmons did for lacrosse would be analogous to lighting a chess board on fire to make the contest a little more interesting. Much like Jim Boeheim let Dwayne “Pearl” Washington run an up-tempo fast-break game in the mid-eighties for the SU basketball team, Simmons let his players act spontaneously on the lacrosse field.

“He allowed a game that was formerly defensive to become offensive,” Gait says, referring to the methodical and often boring style played by current three-time national champion Princeton. “Princeton is a well-coached team, but they’re playing in a system and told exactly what to do. They might not win, but they would have a lot more fun if they played for Coach Simmons. If they had a lot of talent, they would win and enjoy the game.”

For Simmons, the influx of an offensive mindset resulted in more scoring, more fans, and more championships for Syracuse. Paul Gait and his twin brother, Gary, epitomized this style in their careers from 1987-90. The year before their arrival, the Orangemen averaged 15.2 goals per game, considered fairly high. By the time the Gaits left—four years, three national championships, and 319 goals (just between the two of them) later—the Orangemen were racking up an astounding 20.8 goals per game. “Roy has become an institution of college lacrosse and his university in the last 40 years,” says SU Director of Athletics Jake...
It was the game of life for which Simmons prepared his players, using lacrosse as bait to hook them on an academic lure and cast them into society with tools for success.

It would be virtually impossible for Simmons to distance himself wholly from the University after all these years. He has already volunteered to help the athletic department in any way he can during his retirement, assuring his lifelong dedication to the University will continue. He grew up two blocks from SU, with the Quad as his childhood playground, and academic buildings for backstops to bounce balls off of. With his father as the head lacrosse coach, boxing coach, and an assistant football coach, he was the envy of the neighborhood kids, who used to gather at his house because of the preponderance of athletic equipment.

Simmons did everything fathomable in his youth to help his father's teams. He served as ball boy and mascot, and even dressed boxers' cuts between rounds of boxing matches. The exposure to the University gave Simmons a wealth of background in athletics, a learning experience that helped him launch his coaching career. "I grew up in the shadows of an institution," Simmons says. "I've been blessed. I've led a great life."

After attending Kimball Union Academy in New Hampshire, Simmons returned to Syracuse, where he was a two-time All-American and combined with football legend Jim Brown '57 for a potent offensive attack. After graduating with a degree in sculpture in 1959, Simmons took a job as coach of the freshman lacrosse team (freshmen were not eligible to play at the time under NCAA rules).

That began 40 years of what is regarded as the most prolific run by a lacrosse coach in NCAA history. In that time, hundreds of players played hundreds of games against dozens of different teams. And it all culminated on a sparkling early summer day at Rutgers Stadium, with Princeton spoiling a potential storybook ending with a comeback win in the national semifinals. After the horn sounded and his distraught players picked themselves off the field and huddled around their old coach, Simmons bluntly told them, "I'm passing the torch."

He made the decision nearly a year before, but kept it secret, so his boys didn't feel they had to "win one for the Gipper." Tears of disbelief began flowing from the players, fading their eye black and leaving streaks down their sun-burnt faces. Simmons dispersed hugs and whispered words of reassurance in their ears. Then, in a final tribute, the team swarmed Simmons and two players hoisted him on their shoulders. And as Simmons took off his typically stiff-brimmed hat and waved goodbye to the crowd of 20,000, he received roaring applause in return.

It was not a cheer for Syracuse's performance that day or even his stellar coaching career, but a final tribute to his own victory in the Big Game. "I don't think anyone will be able to match what he's done," Paul Gait says. "There's only one Roy Simmons Jr. No one will ever forget him."