

**Celebrating Ned Harkness—A Roast and Toast about the “Harkness Experience”
—David Brunell ’57, Oct. 20, 2001:**

We gather here as a band of brothers to celebrate an embarrassingly long overdue recognition of your unparalleled gift to the game of lacrosse and to the hundreds of us who had the good fortune to play for you. The “Harkness Experience” that we all share has reverberated and multiplied in our lives more powerfully than compound interest—in playing and winning in the Game of Life.

When my wife, who was only 5 years old when I played for you, couldn’t understand why this means so much, and why a 65-year-old man would get on an airplane from Africa to come to this event—I realized that it is not easy to convey the “Harkness Experience” in words to the uninitiated. And so the question: Just how was it that you could take a bunch of unheralded, and yes, somewhat ordinary, ragtag guys—without extensive lacrosse pedigrees, physical stature, athletic department resources and scholarships—and create championship teams? Mere explanation won’t do, because as they say, “If it was that easy, everybody would be doing it.” Only the images, metaphors, and anecdotes living on in the minds of your players can begin to reveal the Harkness magic.

So, what lives on in our memories, glowing undiminished over the decades since we gloried in the sweat and adrenalin of the practice and playing fields? Both roasting and toasting help tell the story.

First the roast:

1. How can we forget the way you yelled? The roaring decibel level, the penetrating sonic booms—with our names always attached like a carrier wave. There was no place to hide. Long before the technology of wireless communications, you had a microphone and speaker in our ears. We always knew you were paying attention—and so we did, too. There was the optical illusion when Ned, all 140 pounds, was chewing out a 240-pound defenseman—and somehow Ned looked bigger, and the big guy looked smaller.
2. And then there was your “eye contact.” You did not just make eye contact, you redefined it. You didn’t just look at us, the fire of your spirit jumped through your eyes like a high-voltage spark leaping and lighting up the gap between us.
3. You violated all the norms of “social distance.” The only thing that kept you from standing any closer was our helmet and face mask. Sometimes you would stand so close that it seemed more like you were wearing our masks and we were on the outside. You were the original “in your face” coach.
4. As for the concepts of “intensity and focus,” which are now the vogue in sports, you invented them. Your level of passion and fervor makes Jimmy Connors seem lethargic and Tom Peters clinically depressed.
5. And then there was your saliva! When you were fired up and exhorting us to higher performance, which was all the time, the saliva would spray from your mouth like holy

water baptizing us into “born-again” lacrosse players. We all thought it was merciful that you did not have bad breath!

6. In terms of spiritual redemption—When I first came to practice, I heard you refer to Jesus and Christ so many times that as the son of a Jewish/Christian Science mother and an atheist father, I could rest assured that my life would be redeemed within the sacred councils of the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

7. Remember the way you would demystify large and intimidating opposition teams? Like in the West Point locker room when you noticed Doc Blanchard had legs like trees, or that Jim Brown at Syracuse looked like a specimen from another planet. You would say, “Jesus, these guys put their jocks on the same way we do!”

8. Long before the research on how exercise produces endorphins—the Harkness credo, when I asked about eating on the day of the game—was “a hungry ballplayer is a good ballplayer.”

9. Everyone today knows the phrase “zero tolerance,” but only we know it derived from your attitude toward giving up loose balls. Nothing was more prodigal and unacceptable than letting the other team get a loose ball. And every loose ball was a chance to turn around or win a game.

And now the toast to Ned:

What is the essence of the Harkness magic that enabled so many ordinary young men to reach extraordinary heights of team performance that defied the odds year in and year out? And what difference does it make anyway?

Every one of us here, and hundreds not here, has his own unique answer to this question—for we have all been truly graced with Ned’s alchemy.

Ned, you passionately believed in us, so we came to fervently believe in ourselves and our teammates. You believed that we were better than we thought we could be—and so we learned to believe the same.

You radiated the desire, the belief, and the will to win—and it was contagious, not outrageous—so we always aspired to win. Your expectations were high and lifted ours. Winning was always possible.

You always knew that the “whole” of the team was bigger than the sum of the parts—so that everybody had an indispensable and unique role to play and could contribute to the team’s excellence. You built team and individual performance around what each person could do best, never doubting that each and every person could be exceptional in some way. So we realized we each could be part of the magic alchemy of team chemistry.

You knew that the “intangibles” make the difference between winning and losing, like heart, spirit, hard work, relentless drive to succeed, giving 150 percent—not physical stature, nor impressive track records, nor raw athletic talent.

But you brought us something more profound, precious, and pervasive than all these attributes, that gave everything else light and meaning and power. And this simply

was—that you truly loved us each as individuals, and all of us as a team. You loved the game, and you loved competing to win, and you loved us playing our best, even if sometimes we didn't win. We learned to love ourselves, our teammates, and the game.

So this ragtag bunch of guys learned it was always possible to outwork, outhustle, outhit, outplay, out “want to win”—no matter who or what we were up against. And together with you, we experienced the sheer fun, zest, and joy of the contest—and the pure and simple exhilaration of winning the loose balls in life.

Lacrosse with Ned Harkness was a gift—and a metaphor for life, for learning, for living life to the fullest. Any quest becomes possible, and possibilities became limitless—one loose ball, one face-off at a time. And today all of us carry this torch with us and pass it on to others every day.

At this stage in our lives we understand that we all stand on the shoulders of a few great people who have gone before, and made a difference in our lives. Ned—no wonder you're in such good shape at 83—there are a lot of us standing on your shoulders!

To paraphrase—You can take the young man away from Ned, but decades of time and distance can't take Ned away from the man. Thanks for coaching us, Ned. What a game, what a gift, what a guy.

—**David Brunell '57, Harare, Zimbabwe**