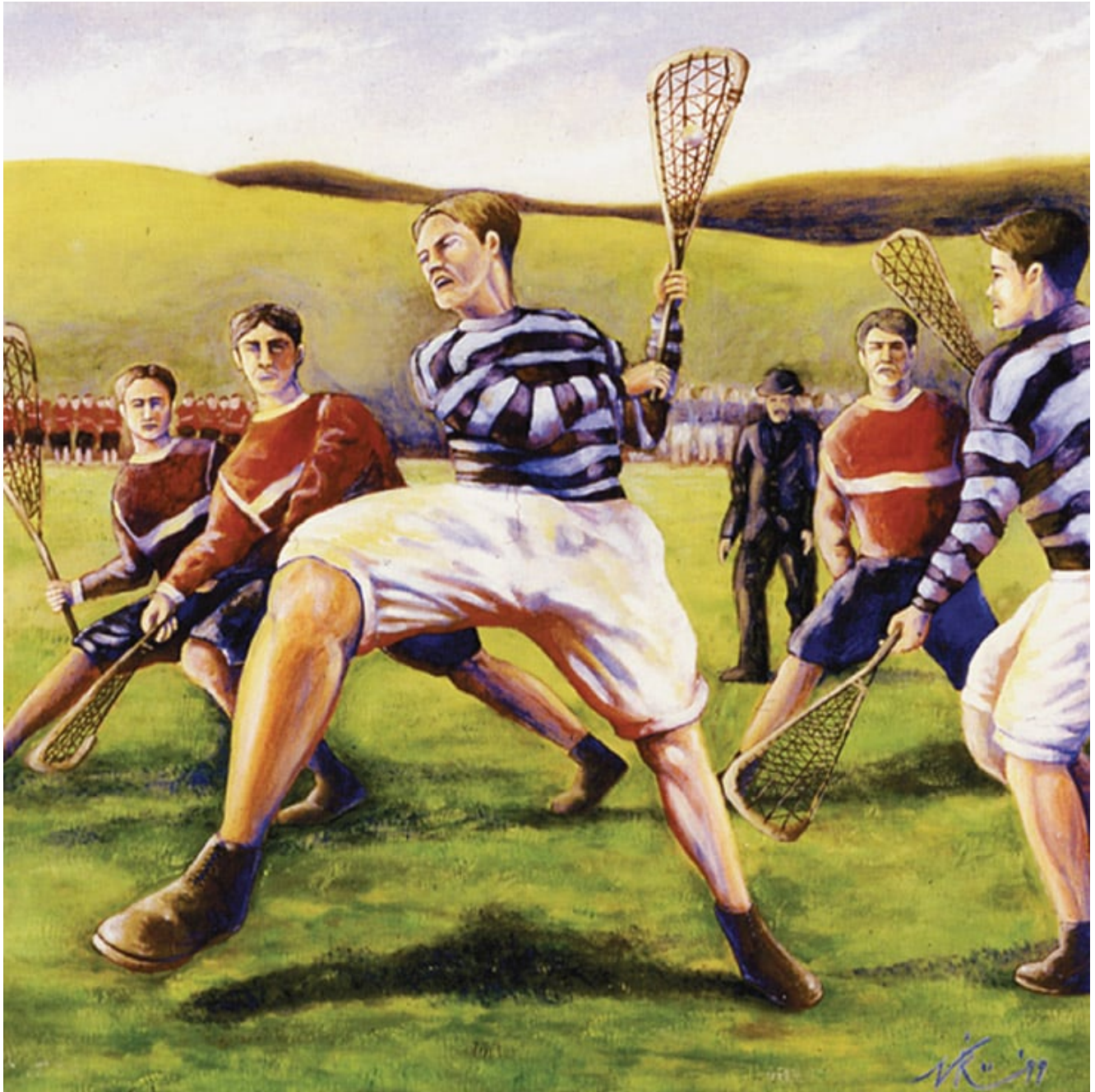


# Our New Religion

by [Mike Mulvey](#) (November 2024)



Part One: "Tryouts"

*"I know you like to pass, but you need to show how many*

*goals you can score."*

*"Make sure you hustle ... that's what sets you apart from those other kids ... your hustle!"*

*"Coaches like kids who pay attention, so make sure you're not goofing around out there."*

*"Remember, don't look weak. If someone's playing too rough, then you show them how it feels to get pushed around!"*

This Sunday morning, minutes before nine a.m., the encouraging words from the many tiger moms and bulldog dads illustrate how much no one really likes each other. Travel youth lacrosse tryouts have arrived. Despite the overt kindness displayed during informational meetings and run-ins at the supermarket, an intense sense of competition that had simmered in anticipation now boils over. Many, if not most, of these children embrace this competitiveness as well, because it brings them praise and goodies. This Sunday, there will be no religious services, no picnics in the park, no waves to catch on the nearby beaches, and no thoughts of taking it easy. For these families, the morning began with protein, water, and just enough juice to provide vitamin C and a little energy. Gear bags were double checked, lacrosse sticks were checked, attitudes were checked, and threats disguised as encouragement continue to be spoken.

*"I don't want you to be nervous ... you need to play your best! Are you listening?"*

*"You are so amazing to watch! Go show those coaches how good you can really play!"*

*"It's all about ground balls ... coaches want to see you scoop with your feet moving. Make sure you keep your feet*

*moving!"*

Young people assemble like warriors readying for battle in a scene that would rival ancient Sparta or the Crusaders leaving Europe to reclaim the Holy Land. While simply echoing the more established sports like baseball, basketball, and soccer, there is a financial difference, as lacrosse's expenses involve the most equipment and travel. However, that is music to many parent's ears in this wealthy Florida enclave where transplants from the northeast and mid-west battle the natives for victories and college scholarships that are more available—or so they are told—than through the other sports.

*"Show your lax IQ out there. When you pass, make sure you cut. Always call for the ball, so you look like a leader. Breakdown on defense and be ready to slide ... that will show the coaches you understand the basics of team defense. Don't forget to catch and shoot ... show them how quickly you can release the ball. Are you ready? You don't look ready to me. I need to see that killer instinct in your eye ... let me see it!"*

This last speech comes from a mother, recently divorced, who played women's lacrosse in college. She considers it a mark of her family's strong lacrosse tradition and DNA that her son makes this team. For the past year, he has participated in box lacrosse training, played in a recreational league, received private instruction, and attended numerous speed and agility sessions. The mother, Sally, does not want her nine-year-old child to appear weaker and less skilled than the 10-year-olds. This is a 10u tryout, and the expectations are much more serious than with the younger ages that focus on recreation and fun.

As many of the parents finish tying their children's shoes and making sure all their gear has been properly put on, Sally strides in front of her son to quicken his pace. She wants both of them to make a strong impression. Even though it is the first Sunday in October, these are tryouts for a yearlong lacrosse program, which functions as a direct point of entry to the lacrosse club and, by extension, the high school program. As far as Sally's concerned, it is 'now or never.' There will be college players and even two college coaches helping evaluate players and run drills. Prepared to make countless allusions to her college playing days, she also dresses for the occasion, wearing clothing best described as 'athletically seductive.' With form fitting, bright colors drawing attention to her more attractive curves, Sally stands tall and throws her shoulders back as walks.

"Sally?" says a woman gasping while trying to keep pace and speak at the same time. "I thought that was you ... what an amazing outfit."

"Oh..." responds Sally as she glances back and tries to place the woman's name, "Oh ... Heather! I'm sorry ... I didn't recognize you."

"This can be overwhelming ... it's your first time, right, with travel lacrosse and all that?"

"I'm more excited than overwhelmed," replies Sally. "I just keep thinking how much I wish this existed when I was nine. I didn't start playing until thirteen."

"Oh ... you played lacrosse?"

"In high school and then in college," states Sally loudly enough so other parents hear her as well. She pauses as a few heads turn her way before exclaiming, "I was an All-American Honorable Mention my senior year."

"Wow ... Really?" Heather slows down and concedes Sally will

reach the field faster. She feels sweat forming on her lower back and worries how it looks.

As the humidity rises with the outgoing tide of the nearby beach, a quick puff of a breeze floats across the expansive athletic complex as coaches position goals increases and finish lining the fields. Arriving parents find a check-in tent with alphabetized lists. Following check-in, another coach hands each parent a numbered jersey. The player is then instructed to a specific field based on their position. There, yet another coach will write the jersey number on a piece of blue tape and affix the tape to the player's helmet. This way, the player is easy to differentiate during the tryouts by the numerous evaluators who patrol the sidelines with clipboards and red pens. This is a well-oiled machine, churning with friction-free gears.

While the players are led through warm-up stretches and drills, the parents are herded to an informational meeting designed to explain the Frond's Bay Travel Lacrosse program. Sally quickly side-steps and 'excuses-me' her way to the front, so the director of the program will notice her. She makes sure to stare at him until he catches her eye before smiling slightly and licking her lips.

"Good morning!" booms the voice of the program director, who also serves as head varsity coach of the area high school. A late 40-something man named Victor who found the corporate sales environment too competitive and frustrating, he hoped to apply his knowledge to sports. Having played lacrosse more than any other sport, he began his career switch by looking for a new high school program in need of a head coach, and quickly established himself as an effective program builder. He accomplished this in the Baltimore area, considered the Nation's true "hotbed" of lacrosse, which gave him tremendous clout when he moved to Frond's Bay. At this point in his career, he feels more like a salesman than a coach. Finding this ironic because he started coaching to escape the madness

of high-pressure sales, he wonders which environment is more cut-throat: corporate America or youth sports. As more and more other lacrosse clubs enter the arena, he applies every technique and strategy he knows to maintain market share and ward off opponents. It is war, plain and simple, and Victor will do what it takes to keep winning. Like a preacher guarding his flock from straying to rival places of worship, he spreads his arms and begins the sermon.

“I first want to thank you all,” Victor pauses so everyone can snap to attention. “Without your support, and your love of your children, this program would not enjoy the reputation it currently enjoys.”

Victor smiles and waves at the parents he recognizes; there are numerous parents who have older children playing as well. Many of his players played or play in college, with quite a few receiving some sort of athletic scholarship. He understands better than most how desperate every parent is to say their child received a scholarship offer, whether their children actually plan to play in college or not. Lacrosse, with its status, provides upper-class families even more leverage to do this.

“I am thrilled to see so many familiar faces. This reflects the trust we have in each other and the benefit of our lacrosse organization over the many other lacrosse clubs that have appeared recently. And that’s where I want to begin, with what makes us so different and so much better. The other clubs, and let’s be honest about this, they are professional organizations. They represent a corporate model and come from places like Atlanta, Baltimore, and even New York. We are a grass roots lacrosse organization. We started nine years ago with a vision to make this area a new hot bed of lacrosse. After nine years, our results speak for themselves. Accolades adorn our website and you see Frond’s Bay hats and shirts everywhere. We should be proud of all the kids playing in college, and especially in our elite groups which compete all

over the country. I think we all deserve a round of applause for our great work over the years.”

Victor pauses to catch his breath. He raises his hands skyward and claps loudly as the hundred or so parents imitate him. Sally tries to clap louder than every other parent. She fears families that have older children playing. These children are like legacies in the college admission process, benefitting from accomplishments of others. Her smile tenses but she maintains the same, pseudo-authentic look of excitement everyone else expresses.

“What makes this club so powerful are its values,” Victor begins again, “and I hope you all took a moment to look at the jerseys we gave the players. These jerseys embody who we are. First, they are red, white, and blue, because I dare to say that no one loves this country as much as we do.” He pauses while applause erupts spontaneously from the crowd, then he continues. “Second, on the back of each jersey is a virtue embodying one of our values. Some players wear ‘character,’ some wear ‘valor,’ some wear ‘freedom.’ All these players are united by a common bond, what we like to call a brotherhood, and they are truly a band of brothers on the lacrosse field. That is why we began practice this morning at exactly 9:11. We wanted to begin at the time that matters the most to us. We don’t just play to win. We play for our future. We play for this country.”

Applause erupts again as Victor smiles widely, extending his arms like an evangelical preacher on Sunday morning television, using the allure of patriotism and college scholarships instead of heavenly salvation. He thrusts his chest forward so the American Flag and ‘Support the Troops’ emblazoned on his shirt is visible to all. And, like an evangelical preacher, Victor plans on asking his audience for money. And like churches, Victor created a 501c non-profit organization called ‘Frond’s Bay Lax’ to avoid paying excessive taxes and keep his profit margins as secretive as

possible. Today, these parents will be paying toward a fruit-bearing lacrosse career, culminating in a college scholarship offer. Parents view the coveted 'college scholarship' like the devout perceive heaven, and Victor understands the power this gives him.

"I saw many of you look at me when I said 'practice' rather than 'tryouts.' I have some very serious news about this and need everyone's close attention. Many programs have begun cutting players in hopes of only fielding the best. Let's be honest, who can really tell which nine or ten-year old will be the next great lacrosse superstar? I'll be honest with you, I'm not that talented, but I think it may be your child." Victor stops briefly to point in the direction of several parents. "That's why it is so important that all these players have the travel experience. How else will they learn to compete? How else can they become college players? I've never seen such a dedicated group of families in the history of this program. You all want the best for your kids, and I am here to give it to you. So, in a few moments, you will all be able to register for our 10u spring travel lacrosse program. As you know, we are founding members of the 'Florida Elite Travel Association.' The travel season begins in February, but we don't want to waste a moment. When you consider the number of practices, the number of tournaments, and the number of connections we have to college coaching staffs, we offer the best value in the area. And, we've made it even easier for you to participate. Instead of charging for separate seasons like those other programs, we're letting families pay one price for the entire year. And, once your child is in our system, they will always be a Frond's Bay lacrosse player." Victor pauses to catch his breath as he watches several parents turn and look toward the registration tent. "I can see everyone getting excited, and believe me, so am I. Registration's open!"

The parents clap while chanting 'Frond's Bay Lax' and 'USA-USA' as they follow each other toward the registration line.



Not one parent questions the statistical probability of their child receiving a scholarship because everyone believes that their child is 'number one.' The parents do not even consider the impossibility of all their children being 'number one' at the same time. No one questions how the teams will be divided, because every parent believes their child will make the "A team" rather than the "D team." No parent even asks how much the year-round option costs, because who can place a price tag on an experience like this? Their children will be travelling all around Florida, all around the Southeast, and all around the country. Like youth sports missionaries, they will be promoting patriotic values while watching their children play the sport they chose as best for them. If only colleges offered such value! If only education and life were as easy to purchase as a chance at athletic greatness combined with moral superiority!

"This is such a great thing for our boys. Just think of the advantages." Sally maintains her slightly raised volume as she welcomes the eyes of the other parents. "I was a recruited collegiate lacrosse player, and this is awesome." Sally's confidence rises as she perceives their jealousy.

"My oldest is a sophomore at the high school, where Victor is the coach. We've had the best experience." Heather matches Sally's volume, hoping to 'one-up' Sally because her son plays at the high school. "It's more than the lacrosse, you know? We all travel together to hotels, eat team dinners, we're like one big family. And, where else can our kids learn how to handle adversity and overcome challenges in such a safe environment? We're preparing them for life."

Sally and Heather exchange a few more barbs while waiting in line. Sally reinforces her connection to the college game, and Heather regurgitates how great Victor is as a high school coach. In addition to registering, parents also purchase gear. There are shorts, shirts, jerseys, hoodies, and every piece of lacrosse gear imaginable for sale with the Frond's Bay logo

emblazoned upon them. While the costs seem high, no one voices any questions about prices for fear of looking like an outsider or a naysayer.

Sally loves spending her ex-husband's alimony checks this way. Heather, however, chooses her credit card wisely, making sure not to use the one with the already high balance. Sally observes Heather's hesitation and senses Heather's position may not be as strong as she boasts. Regardless, the sounds of swiping credit cards and "SALE APPROVED" noises conclude this year's tryouts for the 10u Frond's Bay Lax program.

Part Two: April 1, Elite Lacrosse Championships, Silver Division

Many Sundays later, numerous families attend religious services, shop, engage in recreational activities, or simply relax together. The families who descend in the hundreds upon 'The Ranch' Athletic Complex in Southwestern Florida, however, have far better things to do. The child crusaders again assemble, with the privileged few battling the over-privileged fewer for even higher rungs on the socio-economic ladder.

The complex's name, 'The Ranch,' comes from the cow pasture that occupied this space before several visionaries converted it to a facility large enough to meet the needs of the growing professional youth sports tournament scene. The sellers joked that this would be the most fertilized soil of any field complex in Florida because they were so lax in picking up manure. That aroma hangs heavy on this unusually hot Spring Day with little breeze.

"He won't play well if he hears us argue," Heather declares into her phone with a stressed yet quiet tone and volume. She always feels foolish talking to her husband this way, like he's a child and she's the all-knowing adult, because she feels too confused to think straight these days.

“I am not trying to argue,” her husband retorts; he never does, “but what’s the point in paying all this money to have our son on varsity if he barely plays?” He remained home for the older son’s high school game, and he’s providing what’s become a familiar update.

“I’m sure it’s not that bad– ”

“IT IS!” His volume causes Heather to move the phone away from her ear.

“Look,” Heather speaks quietly and sternly, “you know how this works. We complain and he never plays again. But don’t forget about our younger son; we can discuss high school lacrosse politics later. Remember last weekend, when he overheard us talking about expenses? We’re at the field, and he’s looking right at me.” She exaggerates a forced smile to confuse her younger son in case he overhears anything.

There is a lengthy silence, then, “I can’t bill any more hours, Heather. We can’t keep paying for this. The private instruction on Sundays, the tournaments this winter ... there’s another ten thousand to spend this summer. We can’t sustain this.” He always returns to the finances. That is the core of the issue for him; everything else is a distraction or a panacea, like the older son playing more will somehow erase debt.

“We paid for today, hon,” replies Heather in what has become her go to retort when arguing about money. “Just let us finish the tournament in peace.”

“Of course. I’ll see you when you come home.” He also feels too confused to think straight and hates the constant arguing.

They disconnect without a ‘Love you – Love you, too’ exchange. Those words are not spoken in person much anymore as the stresses and separation steadily squeeze the joy, empathy, and tenderness out of their marriage.

Sally has no husband to worry about. Instead, a part-time job with flexible hours, a steady alimony check, and only one child to focus on gives her tremendous leverage. She lives the professional youth sports dream. Walking past the parents to the team sideline, she revels in their jealous stares. Her athletic body and impressive attire, when combined with her lacrosse background, makes her the darling of the Frond's Bay Lax coaching staff. The coaches like to stare, and Sally likes to let them. She quickly becomes 'team mom' for the team. Thanks to Sally's antics and creative statistic keeping, her son leads the team in ground balls and receives preferential playing time.

"How are you feeling, Heather?" Sally asks disingenuously while walking by. Heather wears her frustration on her sleeve, and Sally prods and prods whenever possible.

"Great!" Heather forces herself to say. "What a beautiful morning. And the boys played so well yesterday. I hope they win the championship!"

"I haven't been this excited for a championship game since I played in one myself!" Responds Sally, "and I felt all the boys got to play a lot—pretty much the same amount of time yesterday, didn't you, Heather? The coaches do such a great job." Sally speaks quickly and sharply.

Heather stares toward her son and the other players as they warm up. Sure, Heather's son did score three goals and have two assists yesterday, but that was only in the second halves against some very weak, inexperienced, and downright immature 10u teams. And Sally's son always seems to get more playing time at the same position, which Heather does not understand because she thinks her own son is a smarter player and a bit more athletic.

"Heather?" Sally says loudly to grab the attention of other parents who maybe half-listening.

"Huh? Oh ... right," Heather smiles and softly replies, "I just love the coaches, too."

Heather lies. She fears the coaches and worries that her son will not play very much today. Watching Sally walk away triggers a replay of the phone call with her husband. These conversations recur so frequently that she can no longer differentiate which argument happens at which tournament. Her husband is right. The spring brought six weekends worth of hotels, excessive driving, team dinners on Friday and Saturday nights, and purchases of the latest and greatest lacrosse gear. This adds to the already expensive process with the oldest son who, according to the high school coaches, is college material. It's important, she's been told, that he attends every event he can. Many players are already talking to college coaches, and Heather's son needs to showcase his talents more. She ignores the math, but knows it is more than they can afford. *Why isn't he playing more now if he's supposed to be college material?* Heather hides the trepidations as best she can. She knows that any sign of frustration over cost, playing time, or the tournament schedule will get them excommunicated from Frond's Bay lax at both the youth and high school levels.

*"WATCH THE GAME, REF!"*

*"HIT HIM!"*

*"GET THE BALL!"*

Heather watches intently as these screams from various parents bounce between her ears, reaching pitches typically heard in evangelical services, delivery rooms, or horror films.

As the Silver Division Championship game moves into the second

half, Heather stares in disbelief as her son continues to play considerable minutes. Like one who doubts then sees the light, she feels her belief in humanity returning. A smile accompanies optimistic thoughts. *The coach knows, he knows the unique value my son brings to this team. He's the one who will guide them to victory.* Somehow, all the expenses seem more than worth it.

Heather's positivity ends quickly. Sally sidles herself close to the coach and mouths a few words. *She can't be!* The coach nods and appears to wink at Sally before she turns and lowers herself to refill a few water bottles. The extra second or two the coach spends watching Sally suggestively bend over passes by like an hour. *How dare she!*

The coach replaces Heather's son with Sally's. Heather wants to race across the field, tackle Sally, and hit her repeatedly with her son's lacrosse stick, but she fights the impulse, internalizing the injustice. She watches the remainder of the game as if in a coma. With roughly one-minute left, there is a loose ball in the middle of the field. One of the Frond's Bay Lax players scoops the ball and runs toward the goal. In the confusion, the opposing team commits too many defenders to him, and the player passes to an open teammate. This player sprints toward the goal, again drawing too many defenders. He tosses the ball toward Sally's son, who stands close to the goal, not really doing anything. He scores the game winning goal as time expires. Parents jump, scream, and document the moment for future social media posts.

Heather feels nauseous and worries that vomit will fly from her mouth rather than fake cheers. She displays a tight-lipped grin while clapping, trying to emulate exuberance and not frustration. As Heather watches the team high five and chest-bump Sally's son, Heather also sees Sally and the coach high fiving; Sally even hugs him while making a little jump. Heather manages to not vomit, but she does take a step backward and begins to feel light-headed.

"Are you okay, Heather?" asks a fellow parent.

"Yes," Heather responds. "I'm fine. The excitement of the game must have gotten to me."

"I know! How awesome to win the championship with a buzzer beater! Sally's son sure knows how to score."

"Yes," concludes Heather before the parents storm the field to celebrate with their children. "He gets himself in the right place at the right time."

Heather sees shapes floating in front of her and worries she will pass out after all, but they are visions of herself and Sally. She is one type of parent, unable to pay for all the extras and naively trusting the process to give their child a fair shot. *Is it just me?* Sally is another, the one able to manipulate the team in their child's favor using some combination of money and looks. *How many teams out here have a Sally?* As the shapes blend into the cloudy sky and the thick aroma of swampy grass fills her nose, she remembers today's date. *April Fool's Day—how appropriate.*

Part Three: July 7, Pain, pride, and poor judgement

On yet another Sunday morning at 'the Ranch,' the Frond's Bay boys teams compete to be champions of the 'Sweat-n-Sizzle' lacrosse tournament. The tournament is aptly named, as temperatures hover in the mid-90's and jokes of 'child abuse' for making children play in this kind of weather are exchanged amongst parents. The smell of manure continues to waft, aided by the excessive humidity and the line of port-o-potties in between a few of the fields. Parents subdue their children's frustrations with shaved ice treats, sports drinks, and layers of sunscreen. At this point in the professional youth lacrosse year-round season, even the most enthusiastic parents are ready for some time off. These parents will have to wait,

though, as a final push is made to attend a showcase tournament in Rhode Island occurring in a few weeks.

“I’ve been asked to remind everyone about our next tournament.” Sally says to the other parents. As one of the dominant parents in Frond’s Bay lax, she speaks with an authority that disgusts Heather. “We want to send two, 10u teams,” Sally continues, “but cannot unless we get a full commitment from everyone. We need to have deposits paid by the end of today through our team website, or we simply can’t do it. It’s a great way to get the boys exposure against strong competition. This gets them on the radar screens for a lot of colleges.”

For the first time in a while, Heather thinks about other families, those that don’t play lacrosse. *Are they at the beach? Are they taking a real vacation? Is it cheaper?* The harsh realization that, based on the criteria of success she’s created for her children, the past year has been a complete failure as well as an unbelievable waste of money sends her soul in search of meaning. She recalls the Sunday morning religious services of her childhood. Maybe, in some divine way, the almighty punishes her as the burning sun shines upon her tormented soul. The “seed-money,” paid in the form of program fees and many, many pieces of apparel, have produced no fruit.

“Heather?” says Sally in a loud enough voice so numerous families turn and await her response. “I know you have a high schooler that travels, but we’d love to have you join us in Rhode Island.”

Heather’s right eye begins to twitch. Not the eyelash, but the skin immediately below pulses uncontrollably and, if not for her over-sized sunglasses, she would look like someone performing a party trick. Sally’s use of possessive pronouns serves as a further reminder of Heather’s massive failure. Sally’s son, of course, will be playing on the A level 10u



team. Heather's son has been asked to play on the B team. Many of the other players will be from the third-tier team. *Why travel to Rhode Island to lose badly with inferior players?* Her older son is supposed to play at a showcase in Philadelphia, and they will spend a fortune with separate hotel rooms, plane tickets, and meals out. Her older son, after beginning the summer playing well, has been losing playing time to other players. *If he doesn't go to Philly, then he may lose his spot on the team.* Rumors have spread that 16-year-old twins are moving to their area from upstate New York, and everyone assumes they will be amazing lacrosse players. Of course, they both play her oldest son's position. Perhaps, the divine creator of Heather's youth is sending signs that it is time to cut their losses and move on, but Heather fails to read the omens.

"Five minutes," says the voice of Heather's husband behind her. "I timed him ... five minutes in that last game." He had been watching the older son's game. "I think we need to say something." He shows his phone to his wife with the exact number of minutes and seconds on the screen.

"Are you crazy?" Heather whispers to remind her husband not to speak so loudly. "We start complaining and he may play even less in Philadelphia! And you know the rule: players need to communicate directly with their team's coach first. He has not wanted to say a word about his lack of playing time, which means we can't say anything."

They realize everyone is watching them, waiting to hear what Heather will say about Rhode Island. Neither Heather nor her husband can compute how much everyone heard, but the stares bore into them more powerfully than the rays of sunshine.

"How'd this game go?" Heather's husband tries to change the subject in hopes he can reset the conversation.

"We won," interjects Sally with a tooth flashing, wide grin,

“but the real issue is the Rhode Island tournament in a few weeks. We need to make a deposit by the end of today, so we’re soliciting interest.” Sally tilts her chin and jostles her shoulders; Heather’s husband has been a fun one to tease this summer.

“How much is it again?” blurts Heather’s husband instinctively before realizing that he stares at and speaks to Sally and not his wife.

“Give us a minute,” Heather says through a strained smile, “We need to check our travel plans for the Philadelphia showcase.”

Heather grabs her husband, moving him safely away from the pack. She bites her lip as he looks toward Sally, but he is no different than many of the other husbands.

“All these things cost about the same.” Heather says to her husband.

Heather feels her eye pulsing at a much faster pace as she and her husband stare at each other. It is a look of fear, desperation, and confusion; the most authentic look they exchange these days. After all the car trips to and from practices, games, and tournaments, after all the hotel rooms and credit card charges, after all the time apart and focused exclusively on their children, the two have completely lost sight of each other.

“Hey there!” interrupts Sally’s loud voice from several yards away, “just send me a text when you make a decision. This has been such an amazing summer; I keep telling the coaches that they need to find more tournaments to play in!” She inflects her voice flirtatiously, to further entice the dads and intimidate the moms.

“We’re just deciding who goes to Philadelphia and who goes to Rhode Island,” smiles Heather’s husband as he attempts to chuckle while speaking loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“That’s what I figured ... I keep telling the coaches not to worry about you guys.” Sally smiles and winks before walking away.

Heather and her husband again lock eyes and stare into the pain of each other’s soul. They wonder why they cannot simply let all this go. Their children, like the vast majority of children playing on this Sunday morning, are not going to be elite college recruits. The money would be much better invested in a college tuition fund, and they would enjoy wasting it much more at Disney or Universal Studios. The Sallys of the world, who have the time, resources, and looks, will always manipulate the system in favor of their children. Even without Sally, there are plenty of dads manipulating their child’s team placement and playing time. It may provide joy for some families, but Heather’s isn’t one of them.

These honest emotions and insights never enter Heather or her husband’s minds. Instead, they only see charges: room rates, meals out, plane tickets. These numbers float in space as they scramble to keep justifying them, to keep keeping up with the Jones. For them, peer pressure increased as they aged. Social media weakened their self-esteem, linking their self-importance with their children’s successes.

The numbers never add up, and the dollar signs blink red before their eyes until a huge, florescent red minus sign materializes between them. It pulsates, growing brighter and brighter until Heather and her husband close their eyes to make it disappear. Beads of sweat anoint their foreheads like holy water, but a rapture never occurs. Instead, they scan the other’s face, looking for signs of weakness or wavering. Rather than discourage them, the red warning sign sparked some sort of revival. The pursuit of false idols must continue.

“We can make this work,” asserts Heather, suppressing the belief that they can’t.

“Absolutely!” exclaims her husband, imitating his wife’s repression. “I just received a no interest loan offer. We can move some debt around and pay it later,” he confuses his desperation for courage.

“And I can tutor more this fall, that will help pay for whatever else comes up.”

“We have great kids,” they say in unison. “They deserve these opportunities.”

Even though the year round paying and playing will only lead to more debt and more frustration, they will blindly pursue this path as fully committed devotees until the bitter end.

While they make this decision, something quite different happens elsewhere. A few miles away, to the west, a family gathers near the shore. As the tide recedes, the mother splashes in the water with one of their children. The father stands farther off, down the beach a little, fishing with their other child. With an almost programmed efficiency the children alternate between mother and father while smiling and laughing.

Far more miles away, near the Frond’s Bay fields, clouds part and yield to glorious sunshine; the air loses the crispness from the slight morning chill and reveals aromas of vegetation amidst the salt air. Surfers of all ages glide effortlessly over the crests, survey the beach from the water, and wait for the perfect wave. A certain peaceful feeling wraps around all of them as they wonder why in God’s name anyone would want more from life.

While Heather is too numb to experience this peaceful feeling, Sally does not desire it. She probably would label it ‘soft’ if she could. Her emotions are charged by her son’s progress that summer. Due to Sally’s skills as team mom, he leads the 10u, A team in groundballs in the Rhode Island tournament as well as finds himself in the right spot to score several

goals. Sally is so inspired by his play that she decides he will repeat fifth grade. That will give him an even better chance at fulfilling all the dreams she has planned for him because he will enter middle and then high school a full year older than the other children. Her looks and wealth, when combined with her son's extra year of maturity, will make them a force to be reckoned with in the years to come.

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Michael Mulvey, originally from Fairfield, Connecticut, is a happily married father of four living in Jacksonville, Florida. His short story, "Replacement Theory," appeared in the winter 2023 issue of *TheBeZine*, "Town Centers aren't Shopping Malls" was published by Dumbo Press in March of 2024, and "Safeharbour No More" appeared in the December 2023 edition of *Portrait of New England*.

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