

God Squad Upsets Turtles

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory... throughout all generations, for ever and ever!...”

Ephesians 3:20-21

On the two-and-a-half-hour drive from the Denver airport to Vail, we were all blown away by the majesty of the Rocky Mountains. When we arrived in Vail, we had a light practice to acclimate to the thin air. We were all exhausted, gasping for breath, and drinking a lot of water.

The next day we played our first game against an all-star team from North Carolina. We had no idea what to expect. We had a handful of talented and experienced players, but our last five guys had just finished high school or their freshman year at college and we were playing in the Open Division, where most players were in their mid to late twenties. There was no professional outdoor lacrosse in existence so many players at the Shootout were considered the best in the world at that time.

The whistle blew and we got off to a slow start. We fell behind early and looked like a team that had never played together before. I began to doubt if we would ever score.

My dad—“Big Frank” we call him—joined us on the trip. He wanted to see his four sons all play together—this was the first and only time that had ever happened—and, by God’s grace, we broke the ice and scored. And before you knew it, all four of us scored in that game, including Bryan, a defenseman. We won the game, 12-6. After the game, we knelt in a huddle to thank God for bringing us to such a beautiful place, and for allowing us to come away with at least one victory on the field.

Our reward was a matchup the next day against the two-time defending champions, the Greene Turtle team. The local newspapers called them “the greatest team ever assembled in the 20-year history of the tournament.” They



The first and only time all four Kelly brothers played together on the same team. (L to R) John, me, David, Bryan

university, summed up his team's reaction to playing us in a documentary that was later produced about the game: "Who is this team? What are they? Why are they here?"

My brothers, David and Bryan, and I flashed back three weeks. We had played together for Maryland Lacrosse Club (MLC) that year and faced Mt. Washington Lacrosse Club—with Dave Pietramala and Gary Gait, who was known as "the Michael Jordan of lacrosse"—in the United States Club Lacrosse Association (USCLA) South Division Championship game. We fell way behind but staged a fourth-quarter comeback and closed to within a goal. With seconds left, David scored to tie the game. We beat Mt. Washington in overtime and went on to win the USCLA Championship a week later on Long Island against Brine Lacrosse Club out of New England.

But this game against the Greene Turtle team was very different. Our FCA team had neither the talent nor depth of our MLC team, and the Greene Turtle had all-stars from Mt. Washington Lacrosse Club and other clubs.

Against the Greene Turtle, "The only thing we had going for us," my brother Bryan said, "was that maybe the Greene Turtle guys would not take us seriously and get caught up in the evening activities the night before the game, and maybe we could keep it close."

Here we are playing Greene Turtle in primetime on July 4th weekend on Ford Field, the main stadium field (named after former President Gerald Ford), packed with thousands of fans.

As we gather on the field, before the opening whistle, I tell the team, "Here's the deal, let's not worry about the score. The only question we're going to ask ourselves at the end of the game is, did we play as hard as we could with the gifts God gave us? This game is going to be all about effort.

had no idea what to call us since it was our first year there. All we knew was that the Greene Turtle was going to destroy us.

Dave Pietramala, a future Hall of Fame defenseman on the Greene Turtle and future head coach at Johns Hopkins Uni-

“The Lord tells us in His Game Plan (the Bible), that ‘whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as if for the Lord, not man.’” Guys, today we play for the Creator, our Lord, not for our wives, girlfriends, parents, the fans, or anyone else. Look up at the mountains. Imagine the Creator, who we believe is Jesus, sitting on the top of that mountain enjoying us. Let’s play as hard as we can for Him!”

Forty-five seconds into the game, we are already behind 2-0, and we know we’re in trouble. I call a timeout, bring us together, and remind the guys, “We can’t play for the scoreboard. We have to keep our eyes on the Lord and we have to stay together and cover for each other. We know we’re underdogs. We need to play with all our hearts as if for the Lord and we can’t quit or give up no matter what happens.”

After my rousing pep talk, we fall behind 3-0, then 4-0. We finally score to make it 4-1, then 4-2, then 5-2, then 5-3, and the butterflies and nerves begin to settle a bit and we even hear some of the fans starting to cheer for us, the underdog; like cheering for the Washington Generals against the Harlem Globetrotters; or for David to take down Goliath. The score at halftime is 5-5. I violate my own rule—the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak—and ask Gayle to take a picture of the scoreboard. (I think that is the only time someone has ever taken a picture of a scoreboard at halftime.)

To start the second half, Greene Turtle scores early and we fall behind 7-5 but come back to tie it 7-7 at the end of the third quarter.

Greene Turtle retakes the lead 8-7, but with about three minutes left, we score to send the game into overtime. I ask Gayle to take another picture of the scoreboard, showing 8-8 at the end of four quarters.

The game is still tied toward the end of overtime when Greene Turtle’s Gary Gait—the legend out of Syracuse whom most regard as the greatest to ever play the game—has the ball. Gait, a 6’2”, 210-pound stud, barrels toward the goal, covered by a guy on our team named Tucker Bailey, who had just graduated from high school.

I’m watching from the sideline. I turn to a teammate next to me and say, “This game’s over.”

I don’t know how it happened, but the next thing I see is Gait’s stick helicopter checked and knocked loose from his hands, spinning in the air, and the ball rolling on the ground. Tucker somehow de-twiggged Gary Gait, and we’re heading to double overtime.

I win the ensuing faceoff and pass the ball to Mike O’Keefe, a Penn State graduate who had a short stick covering him. My defender leaves me to double-team the ball, and I get the ball back, ten yards from the goal, dead center,

wide open. I fire a bullet toward the upper right corner of the net.

Greene Turtle's goalie, Jim "Beardy" Beardmore, who had been the NCAA Goalie of the Year at the University of Maryland, with his quick reflexes blocks my shot with his left elbow, but the ball deflects off Beardy to one of our top players on the crease, Tim Spears, who catches it and shoots toward an empty goal.

Greene Turtle's Dave Pietramala, whom ESPN's Leif Elsmo called "the world's best defenseman," dives into the cage. The ball deflects off his helmet, right to Dan Britton who scoops it up behind the goal. Dan spots my brother, David, on the backside of the crease and feeds him the ball. David's middle name is Eugene, and his teammates at the University of North Carolina called him "Eugene the Scoring Machine." David shoots. He scores, and FCA beats the Greene Turtle team in double overtime.

It was like a shot heard around the lacrosse world. Half of the fans erupted in pandemonium; the other half sat in stunned silence. Big Frank ran out onto the field to join in the celebration. After mobbing David and then shaking hands with the shocked and angry Greene Turtle players, who would now be relegated to the losers' bracket (which had never happened before or since), we quietly dropped to our knees in a huddle to give thanks and praise to God, who showed us how a little faith could become a "Miracle in the Mountains."

The local newspaper, the *Vail Daily*, now had a new name for us. "God Squad Upsets Turtles" read their headline.



This picture of our team after the Greene Turtle game has been labeled "The Power of Prayer" and is a symbol of FCA Lacrosse to this day.