

## **“Changing the Face of the Game”**

Bruce Nelson  
Thetford Center, VT

Lacrosse has long had a reputation as a “white sport.” From the standpoint of the present, some of us would take issue with that image; and BRIDGE people, from coast to coast, are working hard to create an image – and a reality – that is more reflective of the racial and ethnic diversity that increasingly characterizes our nation.

But when we look at the game’s past, facts are facts. I will focus mainly on Division 1 men’s college lacrosse and assess the record there. The truth is that at the D1 level, lacrosse has been, overwhelmingly, a “white sport.” In the forty years from 1957 to 1996, only five African-American players were named first team All-American in D1 lacrosse. The first was the legendary Jim Brown, at Syracuse, in 1957. After Brown, there were no black All-Americans for the next twenty-three years. Then, in 1981, Syd Abernathy, an attackman at the Naval Academy, was named first-team All-American. He was followed a year later by Albert Ray, a midfielder from Rutgers. (Ray was also the starting tailback on the Rutgers football team.) In 1987, Brian Jackson, a defenseman from the University of Maryland, earned first-team All America recognition; and he was followed, in 1996, by Tommy Smith, a defenseman from the University of Virginia.

I remember reading an online newspaper article in the late 1990s which said that in the year in question there were only seven African American players on the rosters of D1 men’s teams. Seven! Could that assertion have been true? I wasn’t “keeping score” then, but I have no reason to doubt its validity.

And yet since then there have been real changes – less in terms of absolute numbers, which remain small, than in terms of impact and visibility, which is becoming significant. Last season (2003), Damien Davis, a senior at Princeton, was named first-team All-American at defense; and two African-American players, both of them only sophomores, earned second-team All America recognition: John Christmas, an attackman at Virginia; and Kyle Harrison, a midfielder at Johns Hopkins. In 2004, Harrison moved up to first-team All-American, was named Midfielder of the Year, and (for the second year a row) was one of five nominees for the Tewaaron Trophy, awarded to the nation’s outstanding player.

Christmas and Harrison are members of the class of 2005, which includes several other outstanding African-American players, notably Will Jones, a

midfielder at Penn State, Chazz Woodson, an attackman at Brown, and Benson Erwin, an award-winning defensive middle at Johns Hopkins.

If we combine the classes of '05, '06, and '07, I know of at least twenty-three black players at the D1 level. This group includes John Walker ('06), an attackman at Army, who scored 34 goals last year to break the Army plebe scoring record and earned Honorable Mention All-America recognition in 2004; and Harry Alford ('07), a goalie at the University of Maryland who played for the US national team that won the world Under-19 championship in Baltimore last summer.

Tracking current high school players is more difficult, and I hasten to acknowledge that all of my information is unofficial, and no doubt incomplete. But there is good news there too. I am aware of at least fifteen African-American players in the high school class of 2004 who are considered Division 1 "prospects." As far as I know, this is the largest single group ever. For various reasons, not all of these young men will end up playing D1 lacrosse. Some are planning to attend Division 2 or D3 schools; some will concentrate on other sports in college. But outstanding members of the high school class of '04 have committed to a number of top programs, including Virginia, Notre Dame, Maryland, Hobart, Denver, and Dartmouth. In addition, two African-American high school seniors have committed to attend St. John's, which has made a major investment in men's lacrosse and has hired Rick Sowell to field a varsity team, beginning in 2005.

So the news seems to be getting better and better, year by year. Will it continue to do so? It is easy enough to predict that as the game continues to expand, it will attract more "minorities." But it will take a concentrated effort by the lacrosse community to turn a slow, and "accidental," process into a more focused, and fruitful, program to accelerate the rate of change and to make the "All-American" sport into a sport for all Americans. Here is where the BRIDGE programs enter the picture, of course. They are vital to the game's present and future. I hope the lacrosse community as a whole is prepared to offer the BRIDGE initiative the recognition and support that it so richly deserves.

**First-team All Americans, 1957-2004:**

- 1957: Jim Brown (Manhasset, LI), M, Syracuse
- 1981: Syd Abernathy (Annapolis, MD), A, Navy
- 1982: Albert Ray (Copiague, LI), M, Rutgers
- 1987: Brian Jackson, D, Maryland
- 1996: Tommy Smith (Fayetteville-Manlius, NY), D, Virginia

2003: Damien Davis (Gilman, MD), D, Princeton

2004: Kyle Harrison (Friends, MD) M, Johns Hopkins

**Among the outstanding players (and prospects) in the college ranks now:**

**Class of 2005:**

John Christmas (Lower Merion, PA), A, Virginia

Benson Erwin (Friends, MD), DM, Johns Hopkins

Kyle Harrison (Friends, MD), M, Johns Hopkins

Will Jones (DeMatha, MD), M, Penn State

Chazz Woodson (Blue Ridge Academy, VA), A, Brown

**Class of 2006:**

John Walker (Half Hollow Hills West, LI), A, Army

**Class of 2007:**

Harry Alford (St. Alban's, DC), G, Maryland

Daren Ohiokpehai (McDonogh, MD), LSM, Rutgers