



GAME ON

GRAHAM HARDEN '87

/ by Sarah Zobel



All America

United States Intercollegiate Lacrosse Association

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

Graham Harden II

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

HAS BEEN SELECTED AS A MEMBER OF THE DIVISION I FIRST TEAM

ALL AMERICAN LACROSSE TEAM

IN THE POSITION OF DEFENSE 1991



Sheldon W. Davis
CHAIRMAN OF ALL AMERICA COUNCIL

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PRESIDENT OF U.S.I.L.A.

In August, Graham Harden received a diagnosis that's not for the faint of heart: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). But after a few days of grieving, the Cincinnati resident and former first-team All American lacrosse defenseman was able to embrace it as his Plan B.

"Adversity is just an opportunity disguised as a setback," says Harden. ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease, affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. As it progresses, it weakens the nerves that control muscles throughout the body, eventually rendering them nonfunctioning. Over time, people with ALS become unable to control their limbs, and ultimately lose their ability to speak, eat, and breathe. There is no cure—the average lifespan from the time of diagnosis is two to five years, though Stephen Hawking has famously lived with the disease for over half a century. The only FDA-approved treatment extends life six months at most, and brings with it a host of side effects.

"When you're diagnosed with ALS, you get the same look from everyone," says Harden, in contrast to a cancer diagnosis, which elicits questions about treatment and prognosis. "When they think of ALS, most people think of the end."

Harden was a tri-helmet (lacrosse, football, hockey) captain during his three years at Deerfield. He was so committed to lacrosse that he purportedly woke up his sleeping roommate, Michael Sotirhos '87, in the middle of the night to try out a ball-stripping move he'd just thought up. (It proved successful in stripping not only the ball, but the opponent's stick as well, and Harden used it to full advantage on the field.)

At UNC-Chapel Hill, Harden won the Schmeisser Cup as the National Defenseman of the Year and was named ACC Player of the Year in 1991 while helping lead his team to the NCAA Division I national championship. Last year he was inducted into the Connecticut Lacrosse Hall of Fame. He was gifted—a modestly sized player who used speed and stick-handling skills to his advantage in a position that typically relies on size. He was also careful to leave his ego off the field—"For someone who is so accomplished, so capable, he's very humble," says former teammate Josh Huffard '87—though occasionally his confidence shone through, as when he schooled an opponent who trash talked him by stripping the ball from him during a game and then rolling it back, as though offering him a do-over. So it's perhaps not surprising that he uses sports analogies in discussing his ALS diagnosis.

"It's like when you're in a game and the other team scores a goal. Then what? What do you do from there? Do you prevent them from scoring again? Do you go out and get more aggressive?" he says. "How you react to that adversity is how you live your life. When you get a diagnosis that's pretty ugly, it's easy to go south and say, 'Woe is me,'" he says, pausing with a laugh to correct his grammar: "Woe is I." It's how you function. If you see it as bad, it's going to be bad. But if I can—on some level—help one more person down the road, then this hasn't been a bad thing."

It's a level of resolve his Deerfield classmates say is not new. Sotirhos, Harden's one-time roommate, mentions his "quiet determination;" whether competing in a championship game, warming up in practice, or wrestling a friend in the dorm, "he'd give it 110 percent." Peter Fearey '87, who, along with Harden, was one of three sophomores named to the varsity lacrosse team, says Harden was not fazed by the locker-room taunts of their upperclass teammates.

"He'd say, 'Oh, really? I can't wait for practice.' He had the confidence and he backed it up every time," says Fearey, calling his teammate Deerfield's first modern defenseman. "Historically, the game was a bunch of guys who were physical. [Harden's] position was about hitting guys and body placement, but Graham was so fast with his hand-eye coordination that he could trick people with the stick, and it didn't need to be physical."

Since 1991, Harden has devoted countless hours to coaching lacrosse at levels from college (he served as UNC's defensive coordinator for a period) down to youth programs, even before his own children—Kendall, 21, Lindsey, 18, and Cole, 16—were old enough to hold sticks. He played a significant role in the explosion of interest in the sport in the greater Cincinnati area, helping to develop the Cincy Royals youth program as a program director and coach.

This spring, the Deerfield Boys Varsity Lacrosse Team will dedicate its season to Harden as both a tribute to his time on the field at the Academy and to raise awareness about ALS.

Off the field, Harden, who has volunteered as a firefighter and a first responder, is focused on getting a couple of startups off the ground: a medical device and a youth sports-oriented mobile app. Inspired by a handful of professional athletes with ALS—Steve Gleason, O.J. Brigrance, and Pete Frates—as well as Paralympian and classmate Chris Waddell '87 and Mount St. Joseph basketball player Lauren Hill, who died of a rare brain cancer in 2015, he is using his unsolicited moment in the health spotlight to bring attention to ALS. Although there are some 5000 to 6000 new diagnoses in the United States annually, those numbers barely register in comparison to cancer, and as a result, ALS doesn't receive the kind of research dollars cancer and other major diseases do. Harden gets the math, but he's understandably frustrated. Though he can't necessarily effect change in the scientific community, he hopes to establish an organization that helps children who are indirectly impacted by the so-called "tangle diseases," including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and ALS. Where well-meaning donors might give to help just the children of one person with a tangle disease, he'd like to see a more communal effort, and is working to establish an organization that helps such kids locate scholarship money to help pay for education.

He'll have his own expenses to think about. Most insurers don't cover the costs of the tools that are indispensable to ALS patients, including ventilators and communication technology, or the in-home nursing care that is needed in the disease's later stages. With annual out-of-pocket care expenses eventually hovering close to \$300,000 a year, ALS patients face financial challenges that mirror the physical. But in what Harden, who counts *It's a Wonderful Life* among his favorite movies, calls his "George Bailey moment," many whose lives he has touched have eagerly jumped in to help. A group of locals retrofitted the Hardens' home, installing a downstairs bathroom and bedroom, with 100 percent of the labor and materials donated. Others are offering to cover the cost of trips and other memory-building adventures for Harden and his wife, Dawn, and their children. His sister Shea and brothers Boyd and Holmes—together with support from Harden's lacrosse and academic communities (New Canaan High School, Deerfield, UNC [including Kenan-Flagler Business School], Connecticut, and Cincinnati)—an extensive group that is known collectively as "GForce"—are raising money to help cover expenses through a YouCaring page and an assortment of events that to date have included movie screenings, online raffles, and a bocce ball tournament. Ever the competitor, Harden himself is responsible for the GForce tagline: "Game on, ALS!" //