

The 'built-in' unsung heroes

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Somewhere in between a defensive back in football, Penelope Cruz's body guard, a UFC fighter, and the guy who always wins the "hustle" award at camp, lives a position that has evolved in the sport of lacrosse: short stick defensive midfielder.

In an era of specialization - FOGO (face off, get off), long stick middies, riding attackmen, strictly man up players - **the short stick defensive midfield position** has quietly become one of the most important in the game. Every game, teams look to exploit match-ups against short sticks by either calling isolation plays that leave the d-middies on an island or inverting (where an offensive midfielder brings the d-middie behind the cage and dodges like an attackman). As a result, coaches generally rotate 2-3 players during the course of a game who solely play midfield in the defensive end and on the wings for face-offs.

And the best defensive middies can help win championships because they can do it all: grab key ground balls on the wings of face-offs, play within a team concept on defense, push the ball when there are opportunities in transition, and most importantly, neutralize attacking offensive players. The margin for error is slim and the cost of error is great; few players are up to the task.

And yet d-middies receive about as much recognition as Paris Hilton's Chihuahua groomer.

"It's just a position that is never going to get a ton of credit; they're like built-in unsung heroes," remarked Penn head coach Brian Voelker. "They're on the field a ton, and can be a big part of your team's success or a big reason you're not very good."

The position stands as one of the most difficult in lacrosse and it's no coincidence that the top players at the position possess freakish athleticism; speed in transition, ability to cover one-on-one, and strength to hang with a bull dodging midfielder bent on scoring. Coaches require d-middies to do just about everything but wash the uniforms after games.

And Virginia head coach Dom Starsia mentions a laundry list of qualities a d-middie must possess.

"Can they guard people without having to be slid to, can they contribute to the team defense and can they recognize and capitalize on unsettled offensive opportunities?"

And yet no "All-American" defensive midfielder position exists. Until now. In looking at the National Championship teams of the past four years, each group has looked to a defensive midfielder to serve as a catalyst to spark its offense and hold down its defense. In 2003, Billy Glading at UVA; 2004, Jarrett Park at Syracuse; 2005, Benson Erwin at JHU; 2006, JJ Morrissey at UVA.

So who is the top defensive midfielder in 2007? Watch for these players to be scrapping for loose balls, sparking transition and pressuring offenses all over the field this season and into the tourney.

CREAM OF THE CROP

Kevin Unterstein, Hofstra (SWR '04) - The key to winning games is ground balls. Unterstein picked up 85 GBs in 2006. Can cover opposing team's attackman, allowing the Pride to double pole, and is great on the wings. Makes up for lack of size with a motor that runs all day.

Will Barrow, Virginia - Prototypical defensive midfielder. Tough to beat one-on-one, threat to score in transition, one of the fastest players in DI. Fills one of the most important positions in the UVA system.

Mike Ward, Duke - Plays in-your-face, aggressive-style defense. Not afraid to take risks. Throws lots of takeaway checks and pushes the ball on offense.

OTHER PLAYERS TO WATCH

Jimmy Borell, Maryland

Ed Douglas, Duke

Zach Goldberg, Princeton

Andrew Miller, Johns Hopkins (WF '04)

John Carrozza, Syracuse

Ryan Still, Georgetown