

The Birth of USAFA Lacrosse

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Did you know that the Lacrosse program at USAFA dates back more than 40 years?

In 1967, the first Academy varsity lacrosse team completed a successful evolution from club status to a varsity level program. Head Coach Bob Kelley, Lt-Gen USAF (Ret) developed the original club team and led the transition process.

In 1967, Coach Jim Keating, Lt Col USAF (Ret) and the late Coach Tony Cillo, Lt Col USAF (Ret) had led the freshman lacrosse team to an undefeated season. The following year Coach Kelley transferred the varsity team to Keating and Cillo; they would serve as the varsity lacrosse coaches from 1968 to 1974.

Coach Cillo was a multi-sport athlete at Rutgers University in New Jersey, winning 5 varsity letters; 3 of those as a varsity lacrosse player in 1950, '51 and '52. He played against all the major lacrosse powers along the east coast. He received an officer commission in the US Air Force and served for over 20 years. He was instrumental in the development of the initial Academy physical education program.

Coach Keating was a four year letterman at the University of Maryland. He was a two time All-American midfielder and was recently recognized as one of the four exceptional players who led the University of Maryland to undefeated seasons in 1955 and 1956. Coach Keating played in the North-South All Star game against a fellow All-American named Bob Kelley. Coach Keating was inducted into the U.S. Lacrosse Hall of Fame in 1981. He received an officer commission in the US Air Force and served for over 20 years. After tours in Viet Nam, he joined the Academy athletic department.

The personal achievements of these two coaches on the lacrosse field, and the model of excellence they exhibited as career Air Force Officers provided credibility, leadership and inspiration for their players to achieve the highest levels of success on the field and in the classroom.

During the coaching tenure of these two men, the Academy lacrosse program became the best lacrosse program in the West, capturing the Rocky Mountain Lacrosse league titles (in both Collegiate and Open divisions) from 1968 through 1974. Also, during their tenure: the undefeated 1971 team played in the quarterfinals of the first NCAA lacrosse tournament; 24 Academy lacrosse players were selected as All-Rocky Mountain League players; four Academy players participated in the North-South All Star lacrosse games; two players received the AFA Top Six

Award; one player was designated a Rhodes Scholar, and Bill Markham, Russ Voris, Rick Taylor, Ray Niemiec and Dan Ulmer were recognized as Lacrosse All-Americans.

The coaching efforts and examples provided by Coach Keating and Coach Cillo carried over into the everyday life of cadets. The lessons of tenacity and perseverance served all their players well as they completed their cadet duties. As future officers, they would take the examples of teamwork, sacrifice and commitment to their active duty assignments, and throughout their careers, serving their country, families and communities. The leadership provided continues today for all their players who are grateful for the rewards received from victory and the lessons learned in defeat. These have carried them through their lives and gave true meaning to General Douglas MacArthur's quote ...“On the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that on other days and other fields will bear the fruits of victory...”

As Coach Keating reminds us to this day, the lacrosse experience becomes a permanent part of your personal fabric for the rest of your life. Academy lacrosse players have demonstrated that fact by continuing their lacrosse careers as club players, as Vail tournament players, as well as coaches for high school and collegiate lacrosse programs around the country. Bill Markham '68 and Phil Pignataro '68, Dan Ulmer '71, Cat Stevens '74, and Rich Long '76 returned to the Academy lacrosse program as coaches. Many Academy lacrosse players have contributed to the growth of “the fastest sport on two feet....”

More than 40 years later, it continues to be a privilege to be called an Air Force Academy varsity lacrosse player.

Thanks to John Emilio Verardo Jr., who was part of this original USAFA team, for [this history](#). John is the author of *Confessions of a 2nd String Middie* and now offers us his latest work, *The Alumni Game*