

A Brotherhood of Three

(This Now and Then essay was compiled by Bob Watkins and Stanley Startzell, using newspaper articles, personal recollections and interviews with teammates from the Penn soccer teams of 1968-72.)



1971 UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA SOCCER TEAM

Ivy League Champions, 3rd ranked in Nation, NCAA Soccer Tournament

First Row (left to right): Nick Altmeyer; Joe Bilello; Bob Watkins, tri-capt.; Stan Startzell, tri-capt.; Lieberman, tri-capt.; Tony Mastrodonato; John Burke.

Second Row (left to right): Norm Stepanow; Joe Regele; Dave Naughton; Jeff Winokur; Jim Miller; Steve Crum; Bill Straub; Don Pritchard; John Gribbin.

Back Row (left to right): Bob Seddon, head coach; Jerry Mayall, asst. coach; Larry Houston; Irv Brookstein; Gary Jones; Al Channell; Steve Baumann; Don Ries; John Robinson, trainer; Bill Herman, asst. coach.

A game with a ball brought together three 1972 Penn classmates who otherwise might never have crossed paths.

On the surface, these soccer tri-captains — Stanley Startzell, Tom Liebermann and Bob Watkins — couldn't be more different.

Startzell was a suburban Philly kid from a working-class family out of Woodrow Wilson High School in Levittown. Liebermann was a Romanian-born Israeli immigrant most recently out of Brookline, Mass. Watkins came to Penn from a blueblood Connecticut family after graduating from an Episcopal boarding school.

Different backgrounds. Different body types. Different playing styles.

Yet these three bonded on the soccer field in their freshman year and were the offensive stalwarts and leaders of their teams in three victorious varsity seasons.

Jeff Rothbard, writing in the Daily Pennsylvanian in Fall 1968, immediately recognized the chemistry between these classmates. In a DP story about one game freshman year, the Bard (appropriately utilizing a Macbeth analogy) wrote: “West Chester committed 23 fouls on the way to eliminating Duncan, played by Captain Stanley Startzell. Duncan’s loyalists, Tom Liebermann and Bob Watkins, were also stymied by West Chester’s tenacious defense.”

But not many teams could stymie this trio, and their varsity stats speak volumes. Three winning seasons. Three NCAA tournament appearances. Undefeated Ivy champs and ranked third in the nation in senior year. Together, they scored 70 goals and added 42 assists for 112 points in 43 games.

On the field, they were contrasting but complementary.

Tom was not fast but quick. He was never in traditional “soccer shape” but is remembered as efficient, inventive, and opportunistic. One of his strengths was ball possession and he was the go-to guy on free kicks. As teammate Joe Regele (Class of 1973) remembered, “Tom’s path was hardly a straight line, and this was reflected on the field. Everything he did was curvaceous, from his slicing right foot to his energy evasive motto: ‘Let the ball do the running.’ ”

Tony Mastrodonato, a ’72 classmate and reserve goalkeeper, concurred. “Tom was a no-bullshit guy,” Tony said. “He thought all that high-speed movement was unnecessary. His motto likely was ‘Don’t confuse efficiency with laziness.’ He was all about efficiency on the field, and that matched his personality in life.”

Teammates remembered Stanley for his remarkable field vision, ball control and superb technical skills. He was athletic and energetic. Among his many skills was getting the ball to teammates in such a way to accentuate their specific talents.

Regele said, “Often overlooked in assessing Stanley was how hard he worked. He was not particularly fast, not particularly tall, not particularly quick. So how does one turn that bevy of qualities into a captaincy, as well as All-Ivy and three-time All-American honors? He was always working. He worked on the field. He worked to be in the right position at the right time. He worked to maximize his contributions.”

Mastrodonato put it simply: “I was in awe of Stanley’s ability.”

Jeff Winokur, a defender from the Class of 1973, added, “When I tried to cover Stanley and Tom in practice, I felt as if I was playing a sport I had not recognized until that point. When I tried to predict where they might be any moment, they’d surprise me.”

Bob wasn't as technically skilled as his fellow captains, but Winokur suggested he was "other-skilled, fast, and explosive on the field. He was strong on head balls and knew how to score goals." Tom was often amused by Bob's "other" style of play and contributions but was happy to play alongside someone who could light up the scoreboard.

Winokur said, "I could recognize Bob's moves. He was a speedster. But while I had some speed, too, I couldn't always keep up."

Regele said, "Bob had no need for feints or fancy footwork. He had a singular mission on the field and that was to put the ball into the net. If you were in his way, you were, in effect, questioning his right to go by, over or through you. To Bob, you were just a speedbump."

Although their playing styles were different, Coach Bob Seddon knew what he had and did not mess with the chemistry. The three were part of his first recruiting class and, after installing them as the varsity's forward line sophomore year, he allowed them to mix and match as they chose. Strict positioning did not matter as much as results, and Seddon was happy with the result as they "wandered" purposely about the field. (It is worth noting that this fluid style of soccer was being championed by the great Dutch sides of the early 1970s and was known as "total football.")

As captains, the three offered leadership as diverse as their personalities, playing styles and backgrounds.

Tom was the most vocal, often exhorting the team to heightened performance. Winokur remembered his fiery personality on the field that helped charge up the troops. Additionally, he was adept at creating phrases to describe developing situations, phrases that were sometimes illuminating and often head-holding humorous.

Winokur remembers Tom parroting the coach with what were called Seddonisms. "I can still hear Tom's voice and accent. He would entertain the team with his impersonations, crying out, 'You're gonna looooooose! This team is going to open some eyebrows!' It was all in an Israeli or Eastern European accent that was impossible to replicate."

Mastrodonato said Stanley was more understated than Tom but led by example. He supported all, knew how to bring out the best in his teammates and served as a model to emulate. To borrow a time-honored sports cliché, he made everyone around him better.

Bob, Winokur recalled, was a positive presence and particularly encouraging of younger players, offering camaraderie and a sense of humor. He said Bob was respectful of each player and “just self-deprecating enough about his so-called ‘unskilled’ abilities to let us know he knew exactly what he brought to the table.”

Mastrodonato said, “Bob was more consistent with the traditional view of how a captain operated. Positive, welcoming, inclusive. A very natural way of treating teammates . . . and people.”

Winokur also observed that each captain had been informed by how they grew up and brought three different perspectives to a similarly diverse group of teammates.

Mastrodonato agreed, saying the inclusivity the captains fostered helped create the perfect example of what college athletics are all about: teamwork, trust, freedom to grow and close personal relationships.

Winokur said the tri-captains were each strong players, each in his own way, “so we naturally looked up to them. They expressed their leadership in different ways. They kept us loose with strong and much-appreciated senses of humor.” He said the camaraderie and emphasis on teamwork helped bring the Fall 1971 team together to achieve lofty results.

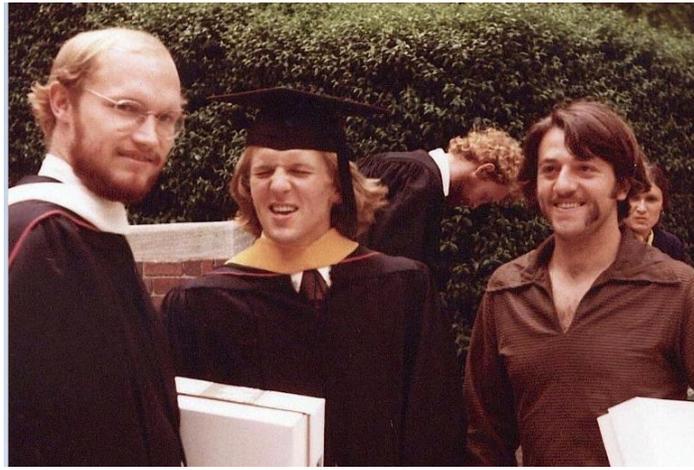
Tom Liebermann died on March 11, 2014, after a sustained battle with pancreatic cancer.

Stanley, at the time of Tom’s death, wrote, “We will always remember Tom for our shared personal experiences and the difference he made in our lives. We have a thousand special moments to recall. There will be only one ‘The Lieb.’ ”

Joe Bilello, a Class of ’72 teammate, said, “Tom’s manner of speaking touched our sense of delight, his irreverent ways touched our imagination, and his daring to defy convention resonated with something deep inside each of us.”

Bilello also said the three captains “were good people, not selfish or extreme personalities,” whose play on the field and spirit off the field brought the team together. “We were fortunate to have them.”

“I believe we were soccer comrades-in-arms,” Bilello said, “in ways that were generative and fulfilled some of the best of our college lives. It made our lives so much fuller then, and in ways that have echoes even now.”



Senior captains -- Bob Watkins, Stanley Startzell, Tom Lieberman



*Reunion soccer 5:
Stanley Startzell, Joe Bilello, Bob Watkins, Tony Mastrodonato, and Tom Liebermann*



*Soccer players at 1972 Reunion:
Doug Trump, Bob Watkins, Tony Mastrodonato, Stanley Startzell and Tom Liebermann*

The Coda (life after soccer)

About the captains after Penn

- After four years of professional soccer, Stanley worked for Special Olympics International and The Kennedy Foundation and continues as a financial planning professional.
- Tom played three years of professional soccer and then launched a career as a turnaround executive - a “serial re-entrepreneur” to use his words -- and was CEO, president, or chairman of more than a dozen firms.
- Bob worked as a reporter and/or editor on three newspapers and spent 30 years as director/teacher at a community college journalism program. He has watched more than 50 years of professional soccer on television.

They each were blessed with long, loving marriages and each had the privilege of raising two children. They have shared a common belief that parenting was the best job they ever had.