

## **John Feinstein: Win Or Lose, Academy Players Already Heroes (9/25/2018)**

Apollo 13, one of the great movies of all time, popped up on my television Sunday morning, and—as I always do—I watched it until the end.

Perhaps because I'm old enough to remember those terrifying days in 1970 when the whole world watched, hoped and prayed for the astronauts on the damaged space ship to make it home safely, I still tear up every single time I hear Tom Hanks, playing Jim Lovell, say, "Hello, Houston, this is Odyssey. It's good to see you all again."

I had the chance to meet Captain Lovell ten years ago when I was doing color on the Navy radio network. A Naval Academy graduate, he was our halftime guest during a game. Often, when the halftime guest was a bowl representative in an ugly jacket or a non-revenue sports coach or a sponsor, I'd leave the booth and let Bob Socci, the play-by-play man, conduct the interview.

No way was I going to miss the chance to talk to Jim Lovell. He was friendly and unassuming, clearly not the least bit impressed with himself—remarkable for someone who flew in space four times and was one the first three men to orbit the moon in 1968 aboard Apollo 8.

When we shook hands after the interview was over, I said, "Captain Lovell, this was an honor. I don't get to meet real heroes very often."

He smiled, thanked me and said, "Call me Jim."

Like I said, real heroes are very rarely impressed with themselves.

I think about that day every time I watch Apollo 13. But I also thought about it last Saturday night when Army almost pulled off one of the great upsets in college football history, taking Oklahoma into overtime—in Norman, of course—before losing, 28-21.

The game stirred emotions in me for two reasons—one football-related, one not. I've said this for years about the annual game between Navy and Notre Dame and I'll say the same thing about Army-Oklahoma. There is NO WAY a bunch of kids whose future is going to be serving their country should be able to compete with or beat Notre Dame, Oklahoma, Alabama, Clemson, Ohio State or any of the other college football powers.

In fact, they shouldn't be able to beat any of the power schools in the Power 5 or, for that matter, be nearly as competitive as Navy has been since joining the American Athletic Conference four seasons ago.

Almost everyone who plays at Army, Navy or Air Force does so—at least in part—because none of the power schools recruit them. They're not as big or strong as those who will go onto play on Sundays, and they're almost never anywhere near as fast.

They don't live in athletic dorms and they get a handful of privileges—like being able to use their lunch periods to meet with coaches—that aren't even close to what the privileged stars of the superpowers take for granted.

I often repeat Jim Cantelupe, Army's defensive captain in 1995, who described those who play for the academies. "We're the guys who couldn't play for Notre Dame," he once said to me. "So we did the next best thing and went to a school where we'd have a chance to play AGAINST Notre Dame."

And against Oklahoma, Ohio State and other power schools. During Cantelupe's senior season, I was researching for my book, "A Civil War," which chronicled the Army-Navy rivalry and the young men who play in that game every year.

Army played Notre Dame that season in the Meadowlands. Down 28-7, Army rallied and scored in the final minute to make the score 28-27. That was the last college football season without overtime. Army Coach Bob Sutton was in the final year of his contract, and there were serious questions about whether he would be renewed.

A tie against Notre Dame—a team Army hadn't beaten since 1958 when Earl Blaik was coach (10 games at that point) probably would have guaranteed him an extension.

Sutton never thought about kicking the extra point. "We weren't there to tie Notre Dame, we were there to beat them," he said later. "My players never would have spoken to me again if we hadn't tried to win."

They came within a foot. Army quarterback Ronnie McAda found tight end Ron Leshinski in the right flat but he was pushed out-of-bounds a foot short of the goal line.

Army beat Navy 14-13 that year, driving 99 yards to win the game, saved by a McAda-to-John Graves pass on 4th-and-24 that set up the winning score. Twenty years later, Graves and his family came to a team reunion at Army. I asked John's three kids if they'd ever heard the story about their dad's catch in the Army-Navy game.

"Are you kidding?" the oldest boy said. "It's our bedtime story every night."

I don't know players from Air Force the way I know players from Army or Navy, but I'd guess they're similar. I'm still close to many of the players I wrote about in "A Civil War," and I can tell you they're smart, they're funny (just like their kids), they're successful and they're brave.

They are all one other thing: heroes.

None of them have orbited the moon. Some of them deployed overseas. One of them—Kevin Norman—who was Cantelupe's roommate, died overseas.

When Jim called to tell me that Kevin had died, I made the clichéd comment that Kevin was a hero because he'd died for his country. Cantelupe corrected me.

"Kevin was a hero," he said, "because he was WILLING to die for his country."

I think about that every year at Army-Navy, especially when they play the national anthem and 8,000 hands in the sections that hold the corps of cadets and the brigade of midshipmen, snap to salute position while 200 players on the sidelines stand at attention. You see, every one of those young men and women is a hero: they have all said they are willing to die for their country.

Which is why when Navy finally ended its 43-game losing streak to Notre Dame in 2007, I cried for joy. It wasn't just that I knew how much the win meant to everyone at the academy and to everyone in the military, it was because I knew what the players went through to play Division-1 football; the academics; the military obligations; the early wakeups EVERY morning—except on mornings when they woke up even earlier, before the rest of the academy, to get to the weight room.

Navy has beaten Notre Dame four times since that game, and boy do I get tired of hearing the whining about cut blocks or how hard it is to play against the option. Oh please. You'd think Navy was putting 13 players on the field.

To the credit of Oklahoma's fans on Saturday, they seemed to get how amazing it was that Army scared the hell out of them. They gave the players a standing ovation as they left the field.

Maybe they understood that every one of those players wearing an Army uniform is already a hero. Whether they go on to be recognized as such the way Jim Lovell was or the way—tragically—Kevin Norman was, they're all heroes.

That's why I get a chill during the anthem at Army-Navy, and it's why I choke up when the teams stand together during the alma maters after the game.

During the 14 years that I did Navy radio, I was in the booth when they played the alma maters. I missed being on the field, standing among the players. Now, I go to the game to write for The Washington Post and I do pre-game and halftime hits on the Army radio network. I think I'm the only person who has ever worked for both the Army and Navy radio networks. That makes me very proud.

But because I'm not in the booth anymore I'm back on the field for the end of the game and for the playing of the alma maters. Last year, after Bennett Moehring's last second field goal JUST sailed wide left at the buzzer giving Army a 14-13 victory and the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy for the first time since 1996, I stood in the snow as they played the alma maters, choking up just as I always do.

As the last notes died away, my phone buzzed. It was my wife: "Are you crying?" she texted.

"Damn right I am," I texted back.

And why not? I was surrounded by heroes.