Myron Jay Wonders

Myron Jay Wonders, a path-breaking California lacrosse coach and official, died February 4, 2002, after a two-year battle with cancer. He was 51.

Wonders established and coached middle school and high school teams at some of the most challenging urban schools in Los Angeles in the early 1990s. In the latter part of the decade he coached lacrosse at the University of Southern California, a school with a distinguished record of support for revenue-producing athletic teams, but which had long neglected its men's lacrosse program.

He was a pioneer in the movement for a national men's lacrosse officials' organization, serving as West Coast coordinator of officials in the early NILOA period. Wonders officiated at Vail and other national tournaments. Myron's warm relationships with his English counterparts, arising from his work at the 1994 World Games in Manchester, led the UK Lacrosse Referees Association to enroll him as an honorary life member in 2001.

As a sports official, he expected competitors and colleagues to follow the rules of the game and the principles of sportsmanship. As a teacher and coach, he expected his students and athletes to follow team and school rules so that they could take advantage of opportunities provided by their lessons and the sport of lacrosse.

Wonders grew up in south central Los Angeles as the oldest of five children in a church-going family. When he picked up lacrosse at UCLA in the late 1970s, California college lacrosse provided an unusually egalitarian athletic opportunity. With few experienced players on most campuses, college teams welcomed novices. At UCLA Myron played defense on a number of winning teams, but was never a mainstay. Mike Selsted, UCLA's captain in those years, recalled that Myron "was a novice UCLA defenseman when I first saw him on the field, but he took his role very seriously. He was never a very talented player; however, he was always positive, even when we were getting thumped. I was impressed with his unabashed willingness to console and encourage players, even those who were much more experienced than he. You KNEW he was there to support you and your team. As a team member, you had the sense that he was more a part of your family. I don't think I appreciated that enough at the time."

After graduating from UCLA in 1983, Myron worked as a coker in an oil refinery, which involved exposure to a wide assortment of toxic and carcinogenic substances, some specifically associated with the kidney cancer that took his life. At about this period, Myron began lacrosse officiating. He quickly became engaged in efforts to upgrade officiating.

In the late 1980s Myron found his truest calling, as a teacher in the Los Angeles city schools. He amazed the principal at his first substituting assignment when he actually presented lessons to his students, rather than simply acting as a caretaker. That principal hired him at Henry Clay Middle School, then brought him along when she was transferred to David Starr Jordan High School in Watts, a school surrounded by heavy industry and housing projects.

Wonders always asked for the worst "thugs", as he called them, the children in special education classes that nobody else wanted. He was firm and consistent, which often produced positive results. Many of his students had never had a father figure in their lives, and hungered for discipline and structure. He constantly steered young people away from self-destructive activities into scouting, chess, and his number one passion, lacrosse.

Myron's teams at Clay and Jordan played against prep school and suburban opponents. His teams competed vigorously, but did not frequently win, in part because so much of Myron's efforts as a coach were devoted to basic life lessons for his athletes rather than concentrating solely on their lacrosse skills. Myron's teams depended on him for their continued existence—his personal example drew boys to the sport; his hard work kept the teams funded and equipped. Myron's programs did not spread in Los Angeles city schools because few teachers combined his evangelical faith in the redemptive capabilities of sport with his entrepreneurial skill, charisma, charm, and energy.

Myron enjoyed more lasting success recruiting lacrosse officials, bringing men who had refereed other sports into NILOA and its successors. He was also successful in alerting the national officials' movement leaders to the unique circumstances of west coast referees. Arizona coaching legend Mickey-Miles Felton recalled meeting Myron at the 1989 Western States tournament at UC-Davis. Myron was a relatively new official, but wasn't about to back down, even when a veteran coach like Felton disputed a call. "Myron was wearing a pair of mirrored sunglasses and when we were nose to nose, I was stricken by the humor of the situation, because by arguing with him, I was just yelling at my own image."

Wonders hoped that others would also see themselves in his image. To that end he created the "Myron Wonders Fund for the Development of Youth Lacrosse"