



Heather Wood, taking aim after the competition, said pride and tradition fuel Fleur de Lis. Steven Saul and teammates lost. (Geoff Forester for the Boston Globe)

Matchup separates the girls from the boys

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By Joseph P. Kahn, Globe Staff | August 7, 2006

FITZWILLIAM, N.H. -- Brian Petersen wasn't exactly brimming with confidence when his Camp Oatka riflemen pulled into Fleur de Lis Camp last month for a match against the home team. Then again, who would be, knowing your last victory came when gas cost 93 cents a gallon and Ronald Reagan was president?

"This is going to be our first loss this year," Petersen predicted, standing outside the camp dining hall, while the afternoon sunlight sparkled on nearby Laurel Lake. "We can beat everybody else. We just can't beat the girls."

As Petersen spoke, Kate Young, his coaching counterpart at Fleur de Lis, looked nervous. Young hadn't told her girls which seven would be competing against Oatka the next morning, she confessed. Or that a reporter would be at the match.

"I don't want to throw them off," explained Young.

"Well, I do," said Petersen, grinning.

Thus did the games, and gamesmanship, begin.

With summer camp season in full bloom, hundreds of Adams and Annies are engaged in friendly competition across a broad spectrum of sports, from tennis and sailing to soccer and archery. Nowhere is there a rivalry more lopsided, though, than the one between the girls of Fleur de Lis and the boys of two New England camps, who, taking arms against a sea of targets, find themselves battling history and hormones, too.

Records are sketchy, but to the best of anyone's knowledge Fleur de Lis has lost only once to Oatka, an all-boy's camp on Maine's Lake Sebago, since 1979. And that was back in the mid-1980s. Against William Lawrence Camp of Center Tuftonboro, N.H., the girls' record is nearly as impressive, with only one loss in the past 13 years.

"After we beat William Lawrence last weekend, one boy said we take riflery too seriously here," mused Katie Conniff, 15, a senior camper from Melrose in her fourth summer at Fleur de Lis. "But I think we enjoy it more than they do."

Heather Wood, a 14-year-old from Sudbury, cited pride and tradition among the reasons that Fleur de Lis keeps fielding winning teams year after year after year. "We just want it more, I guess," said Wood.

Rosa Heyman, 14, of Providence, whose mother competed in riflery here in the 1960s, offered a bit of pop psychology as well. "They don't expect girls to do it well," Heyman said. "So maybe we're showing off a little."

Patience, concentration, and fine-muscle control are the factors most often cited for the girls' dominance. As shocking as this

may be to some parents, 14- and 15-year-old girls can apparently be as centered as Zen monks when they're trying to put a bullet through a bull's-eye from 50 feet away.

"Boys feel they should be able to do this, whereas girls are more willing to learn how," is how Young, an energetic 26-year-old in her first year as head rifle instructor here, puts it. Young first came to camp as an 8-year-old and developed into one of its star shooters before graduating to staff member.

Liz Young (no relation), who spent 45 years as a Fleur de Lis camper, counselor, camp director, and rifle coach, agrees that teenage girls are plain better at focusing than boys the same age are. But errant aim is not simply a function of surging hormones and short attention spans, according to Young. "Most boys' coaches can't focus any better than the boys can, in my opinion," she says with a laugh.

Petersen's analysis? "Guys this age want to see something explode downrange, not put holes in paper targets," he says.

If so, the guys might as well pack water guns instead of bolt-action .22s in the future, because all they've been exploding lately is their egos and reputations for marksmanship.

In camp competition, shooters fire from a prone position while lying on old mattresses. Two shooters from one team fire away alongside one shooter from the opposing squad. Each has a "loader" handling the ammo and adjusting his or her rifle sight between shots.

Scores are tabulated by deducting points for how far each shot misses the bull's-eye. A perfect score is 100, but any score in the mid-90s is considered excellent. The two lowest scores are eliminated from each team's total.

A cursory survey of camp records shows that Fleur de Lis, which split from Oatka in 1929, was not always so successful in camp-to-camp competition. A 1978 newsletter chronicles a 484-470 loss to Oatka with these song lyrics: "We lost our men and we lost our match/Now we've lost our minds/We are sick, we are sick, we are sick, sick."

Not only are the girls feeling better these days, but the socializing aspect has been upgraded, too. Once only members of the riflery teams made road trips. Now, most senior campers tag along for the barbecue and dance, whether they're shooting or not. "It's become more of a social visit with a competition attached," noted Petersen, whose boys were treated to a raucous version of "Ain't Nothing Like a Dame" the night before the match.

The next morning dawned cool and misty. First up for the home team was Conniff, who relaxed before the match listening to "my calming music" on her iPod. Donning a padded vest, Conniff proceeded to shoot a cool 96. One by one, the remaining shooters trooped through the woods to the range, assumed positions, and quietly fired away. The only audible sounds were the coaches' hushed commands ("Annie, you're a little low," "Nice start, Tim") and the burbling of a nearby waterfall.

Afterward, Young and Petersen collected targets and tallied scores. Not even close. Two boys had scored in the mid-90s, but four more shot 78 or below. The *lowest* girls' scores were a pair of 92s, and they were summarily discarded. Heather Wood wound up leading all shooters with a 99, earning her a standing ovation during the post-match lunch. Final: Fleur de Lis 483, Oatka 428.

Tim Hayes, the top shooter for Oatka, claimed he wasn't bothered by finishing a distant second. Again. "I don't really care about losing to the girls," said Hayes, a lanky all-around athlete. "I came here to have fun."

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