

# Mr. Unconventional

A lack of conventional experience has never kept Erin Quinn '86 from succeeding.

Why should now be any different?

BY DEVON O'NEIL '01

**O**N THE LAST MONDAY IN AUGUST, coaches, trainers, equipment workers, and support staff—essentially the entire Middlebury athletic department—spilled into a conference room overlooking the Chip Kenyon '85 Arena. Tanned and appearing relaxed, they arrived wearing Middlebury gear—shorts and T-shirts, mostly, with the occasional polo shirt thrown in—and for the next several minutes, while sipping coffee and chewing bagels, they exchanged greetings and hugs, backslaps and wide grins; for some, it was a chance to catch up after being away all summer.

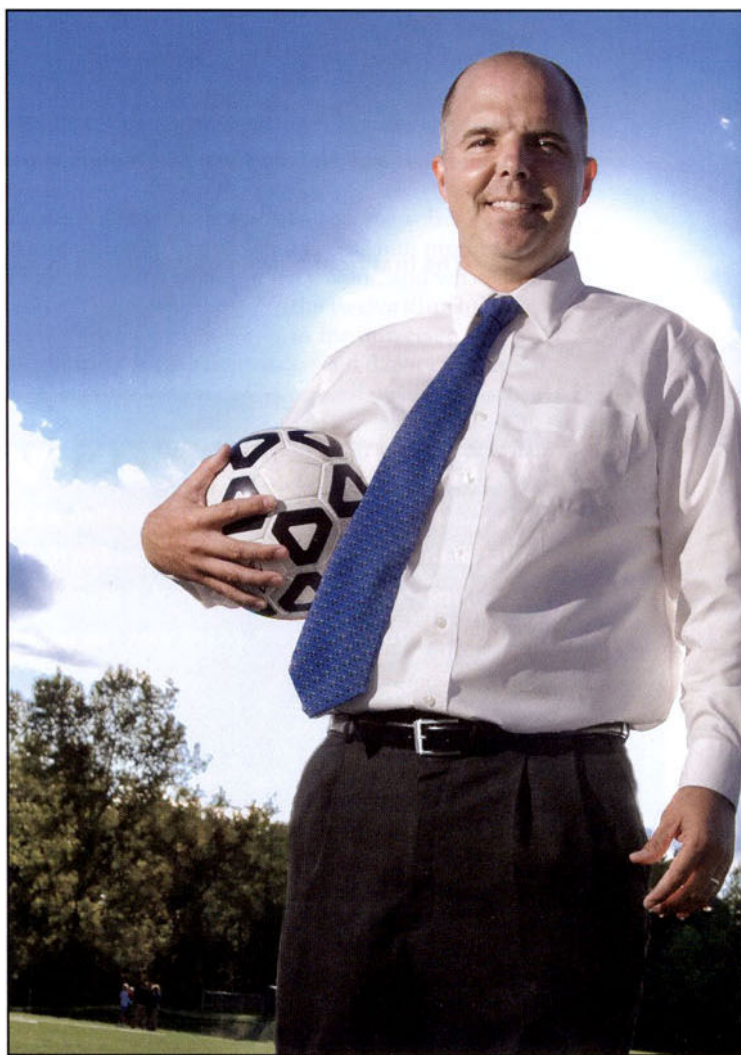
Sitting at the front of the room, quietly jotting down notes on a pad of paper, was Erin Quinn '86. He was wearing khakis, a starched white button-down shirt, and blue tie, and he sat alone in a long row of cushioned chairs. Though early in the morning, it was already hot and steamy outside, and it wasn't much more comfortable in the normally air-conditioned meeting space. The air was warm and somewhat stale, and as more people arrived, the mercury crept upward. A few more minutes passed and then Quinn, 43, began the meeting with a quick apology.

"I was out of town when they told us there was going to be a power outage," Middlebury's second-year athletic director explained. "I'm told that the AC should be back on later today."

Around the room, heads nodded. Quinn then started checking off items on his agenda as efficiently as he once ran his Middlebury lacrosse program. He introduced new coaches, gave details on a new lightning-prediction system for the athletic fields, and explained an NCAA rule change on player physicals. Things were going so smoothly, in fact, that it was surprising when a contentious issue arose. It happened when a guest, a representative from the Career Services Office, asked the coaches to channel all networking between current players and alums through the CSO.

Immediately, some coaches expressed silent disapproval, shaking their heads and averting their eyes from the front of the room. Quinn, sensing the potential for unrest, jumped in.

"No need to get protective of your turf," the former coach calmly said. "We can make this a win-win. Send your kids to CSO on their own so that they'll get the professional training they need. Then they'll have a bet-



ter profile when your former players contact you."

Later, Bob Ritter '82, Middlebury's head football coach and one of Quinn's longtime friends, said, "Erin has a way of getting you to

#### TRADING PLACES

Now a fixture at every Middlebury athletic event, it's no longer unusual to see Quinn with sporting equipment other than a lacrosse stick.

go where he wants you to go, and he makes you want to go there also—even though that might not have been your inclination.”

And it was true. Whatever grumbling there was had stopped; many (again) were nodding their heads in approval.

A few minutes later the meeting was adjourned. By that point, it had to have been 85 degrees in the room, and people, now visibly sweating,

and the sudden pressure of the meeting, Quinn had not broken a sweat.

FROM THE TIME the Middlebury athletic director job was posted in January 2006 until Quinn was named AD five months later, a search committee, made up of two coaches, two professors, two deans, and a student, pored over more than 60 applications from

By his own admission, Quinn was nothing exceptional on the field, but he captained the team as a senior and, despite missing all but three games that fall due to injury, won the squad's leadership award.

The year after he graduated, he remained at Middlebury and became “Coach Quinn,” a label that even now greets him in his e-mail inbox on a regular basis.

In fact, until he took the

daughter, Pam '88, the previous summer. Eyebrows were raised.

“I took a lot of shots for that,” Lawson acknowledges. “[Some cried] nepotism, people from outside who were saying he wasn't qualified. But that was falling on deaf ears because I had fairly decent success in soccer (Lawson was once named New England coach of the year at Middlebury), and I never played soccer. He's a teacher first, and an excellent teacher at that.”

And then Quinn's teams won. A lot of games. His career record of 202–38 equates to him winning 84.2 percent of his games, second in the history of Division-III lacrosse. His teams won all six NESCAC titles (the conference began holding postseason tournaments in 2001) and, from 2000–2002, captured three straight national championships.

Not surprisingly, athletic directors at larger schools noticed. Quinn took calls from no fewer than five nationally ranked D-I lacrosse programs about their head coaching vacancies, although the end result was always the same. “It never really got past the phone call stage,” he explains, “because I would say, ‘Well, let me think about it, let me talk to my wife.’ And then I'd call them back and say, ‘No, thanks. I'm not leaving Middlebury.’”

Many also thought he'd never leave coaching, either, but if you listen to those who have known Quinn the longest, you start to believe he was destined for this job. Middlebury baseball coach Bob Smith, who recruited Quinn to play football for the Panthers in 1981, recalls Lawson asking him in 1995 if there was anyone in the

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across America. The stack of résumés was whittled down to a group of eight finalists, including an assistant athletic director at a Division I school and three current ADs at well-regarded D-III institutions. And then there was Quinn, the coaching wizard labeled by committee chair Tim Spears as “something of a Renaissance guy,” who had exactly zero years of administrative experience.

Yet for all he lacked in prerequisites, Quinn had pedigree and persona. The pedigree began early, when an 18-year-old Quinn arrived at Middlebury in the fall of 1982. Mickey Heineken, the Panthers' legendary football coach from 1973–2000—and Quinn's future mentor—recalls Quinn as being “special” from day one. “And it wasn't just me,” Heineken says. “Everyone saw his leadership abilities.”

AD job, Quinn had never done anything but coach. At 25, he was the head lacrosse coach and football defensive coordinator at Lake Forest College in Illinois, where he used to walk across his office parking lot to the Chicago Bears' practice facility and talk defense for hours with Mike Ditka's staff. It's a legitimate question to ask where he'd be if he'd dedicated himself to the gridiron. “They don't get any brighter in the world of football coaching,” Heineken allows, but Quinn decided early on that lacrosse was the show he wanted to run.

In 1991, after serving as Jim Grube's apprentice for a year back at Middlebury, Quinn, then 27, was named the head men's lacrosse coach by athletic director Tom Lawson. This was significant, because not only had Quinn never played the game, but he'd also married Lawson's



practically rushed for the door and cooler locales.

Quinn remained behind for a few minutes, gathering his things. It wasn't until he stood to leave that an observer noticed that, despite the heat

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department he could see running it someday.

"Erin Quinn," Smith answered.

"Me too," Lawson replied.

Heineken, also recognized the potential, pulling Quinn aside about six years ago and urging him to consider the greater impact he'd have as an administrator.

When Quinn did decide to pursue the job after Russ Reilly announced his intention to retire, the lacrosse coach did something odd. He asked his father-in-law two favors: to sit down once and answer his questions about the position, and then to stay completely out of whatever process might follow—no references, no input, nothing.

"Obviously I was impressed with what his wishes were, and obviously I honored them," Lawson says, making it clear that it was nonetheless difficult, considering he still maintained close ties to the College (he hired a number of the coaches Quinn now oversees) and that he knew Quinn made the ideal candidate.

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MANY THINGS ABOUT QUINN—notorious for both his tireless work ethic and even-keel demeanor—haven't changed since he took the reins of the department. Most days, he still gets to work at 6 A.M. and stays until well after most people have gone home. And despite the added pressure of his new position, few things overwhelm him. "The one trait he has that unfortunately I never had," Lawson says, "is he's probably the calmest, most under control person I've ever seen."

And he still finds time to listen—really listen—to anyone about anything, a quality that has always amazed Heineken.

A conversation with Quinn can be an experience.

He's an expressive talker—he talks with his hands a lot—but he's an even more active listener. Each problem is met with a well-conceived solution grounded in sharp, rational thought. But it's his ability to zero in on whatever anyone is saying that impresses people the most. (It can also catch you off-guard, especially if you've just met Quinn. Think about it: In your everyday life, how many people *really* listen

Quinn decided to get out of coaching, there were plenty who wondered how he'd do leaving the games behind, specifically lacrosse. That his former team struggled to a 4–5 NESCAC record and the No. 6 seed (out of seven teams) in the 2007 conference tournament raised the level of speculation. Yet Quinn never interfered with, or lost confidence in, new coach Dave Campbell '00, and the

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to everything you say?)

In his first year overseeing the 65-person, \$4 million department, Quinn installed a collaborative system in which he invites criticism of himself if there is a better way to do things. Even little things: this summer he moderated a discussion among coaches on how to best handle the box-lunch plan for road games.

Quinn also smiles a lot, and his coaches tend to smile, too. Smith, who has coached at Middlebury for nearly 30 years, calls it "a breath of fresh air" to have a conversation with Quinn, 14 years his junior. "It's funny," Smith says. "I'm 57, so I've got to at least be thinking about retirement and how much longer I'm going to work at Middlebury. The ages of 60 and 65 make you think about that stuff." He pauses. "Working for him makes me feel like I could work here 10 more years if I need to—or 15 if I need to." Understandably, when

Panthers subsequently launched a dramatic run to win the NESCAC title and keep Middlebury's seven-year streak of NESCAC championships alive. The postseason success took a little heat off Campbell, who played goalie for Quinn and later coached under him. Campbell was chosen to succeed Quinn at age 27 despite a 17–28 career record in three years at Connecticut College. Some call Campbell "a clone" of Quinn, thanks to his 70-hour work weeks, and almost on cue the apprentice admits unabashedly: "With everything I do, I'd be lying if I said I didn't look at it as, 'How would Erin do this?'"

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ON A DAZZLING SUMMER MORNING IN VAIL, Colorado, last July, Quinn, in town for the annual Shootout lacrosse tournament, sat by the hotel pool sipping coffee. It had

been a year and a day since he started his job, and a couple of months since Middlebury finished second in the Sears Directors' Cup standings, which measure a school's overall athletic power. Quinn was dressed in an untucked button-down shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops. He was tan and fit, and, well, typical Quinn—doing four things at once, pleasing everyone. In the course of an hour, he answered a reporter's questions, needled alumni who walked by, and toyed with his Blackberry as his kids played nearby.

He then explained the newest implementation of his big-picture, "don't look at the scoreboard" rule, which he imposed so effectively during his coaching career.

"We won national championships," he said, "and the players who played for me know that we never really talked about it." As for running the department, he employs the same philosophy: "We're gonna do what we do, do it as well as we can, and at the end of the year whether the Sears Cup says we're No. 1, No. 2, or No. 10, that's okay."

He took a sip of coffee, then added, almost in passing, "Not everyone feels that way." It seems like that would be his biggest challenge, but then you realize that you've heard all you needed to hear. It's the secret to Erin Quinn: he's the master of making the obvious so mysteriously difficult to duplicate. Be it as a coach, an athlete, or an athletic director, he has always cultivated the ultimate winning mentality with the same sublime approach: by focusing on everything except winning itself. 🐾

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