H ARVARD hadn’t beaten Princeton in 22 years. But last October, in Tjerk van Herwaarden’s fifth season as the Crimson field-hockey coach, his team had a chance to break the curse.

The Crimson traveled to Princeton on a six-game winning streak, with a 4-0 record against Ivy League rivals. With the Tigers also 4-0 in conference play, the game would determine the Ivy title. Senior co-captains Kyla Cordrey and Sarah Finnemore, veterans of van Herwaarden’s system, rallied the team. “You know that question, ‘How bad do you want it?’” van Herwaarden recalls. “We wanted it bad.”

The coach smiles. It’s a sly, confident smile. It reveals the edge he’s brought to Harvard’s field-hockey program. He really likes winning—and he knows how to win.

Van Herwaarden, the Ivy League and Northeast coach of the year in 2016, has rebuilt Harvard’s program after a long streak of losing seasons. He’s done it by mixing American grit and energy with the technical discipline of field hockey in the Netherlands, where he was born.

The Dutch are the world’s deepest field-hockey devotees. It’s the most popular sport among Dutch women and girls, and among men and boys it’s second only to soccer. “I’m from a typical hockey family,” van Herwaarden says. In his baby book there’s a picture of him on a hockey field when he was a year and a half old. “My dad played, my mom played, my brother played.” At 16, van Herwaarden would spend Saturdays refereeing a game at 9:30 a.m., coaching at noon, and playing in his own game at 3 p.m. On Sundays, he’d watch his dad at his matches.

After playing nearly every position, from forward to defense, van Herwaarden shifted to coaching at 20. While moving up through Dutch hockey leagues as a coach, he worked a day job at a bank. “I knew my true passion was with the sport and coaching,” he says. But “I always felt hockey should be something I do on the side. It’s my hobby, it’s something I enjoy doing. I never wanted to become financially dependent on it.” Few people make a full-time living at field
hockey in the Netherlands; it takes a lot of hustle, a lot of part-time jobs.

But van Herwaarden wasn’t willing to give up hockey, and the sport rewarded his persistence. By 28, “I was the youngest assistant coach at the highest level,” he says—for a women’s team in the elite Hoofdklasse league. He felt he had to choose: less hockey and a career in finance, or the other way around.

That’s when Missy Meharg, head coach of the University of Maryland field-hockey team, offered him an assistant coaching job. He took it, moving to the United States in 2005. “I’ll be back in two years—that’s what I told friends and family in the Netherlands,” he recalls.

But Maryland won two national championships in those two years. The team, including van Herwaarden, visited the White House. He decided to stay longer.

Then he fell in love with an American and they married. The U.S. National Field Hockey program asked him to join the coaching staff of the men’s team during its tournaments. Two years became seven. Two national championships with Maryland became five.

In 2012, Van Herwaarden decided it was time to run his own program. Harvard, after a long streak of field-hockey mediocrity, was hiring a new head coach. The job was his chance to work for an elite university, in one of America’s best cities, he says. But it meant a long rebuilding effort. “There was not a winning culture,” he explains. “There was no confidence with the athletes of being able to accomplish anything.”

To turn that around, he increased the intensity of practices. “We had to improve our skill level, improve our overall fitness level,” he recalls. “I knew that once we’d do those things in the areas you can control—confidence and ability to enjoy your sport—there would be a result.”

Van Herwaarden also stepped up recruiting. “Harvard had a system in place where they would recruit whoever wanted to come to Harvard,” he says. “I recruit whoever I want at Harvard. That’s the difference.” He flashes that sly smile again.

About 20 percent of his players, he says, are students he found and recruited, while the rest reached out to Harvard personally or through coaches. Though Harvard always had international students on its team, its roster under van Herwaarden has become more global, including two teammates from the Netherlands last year. “If they have a coach who speaks their own language,” he says, “it creates a level of comfort for them to me, me to them, and their parents.”

Van Herwaarden’s coaching style blends a Dutch focus on technical skill with an American focus on teamwork and conditioning. “We play more structured, more organized, more with a plan than a majority of our opponents,” he says. “Typically a lot of the field hockey in the NCAA is based on energy and intensity.” Harvard’s style, he says, is to bring that energy “whenever we feel we want to and can, and have a structure to fall back on.”

The Crimson improved steadily during his first three years: 3-14 in 2012, 8-9 in 2013, and 10-7 in 2014. A 9-8 record in 2015 gave the team its first back-to-back winning seasons since 2003 and 2004.

Last year, after a slow 2-4 start against non-conference opponents, Harvard took off on that six-game winning streak. Four of those wins were against Ivy opponents, including a 3-2 double-overtime victory over Penn. The Crimson traveled to Princeton on October 22.

“There was a lot of mental buildup to the game,” van Herwaarden says. “We approached the game the same as any other—though we might’ve looked at one or two more videos of Princeton, and we might’ve thought twice about which corner to play at what time.” Because of an injury to starting center back Olivia Allin ’19, van Herwaarden substituted Bente van Vlijmen, a talented freshman from the Netherlands. “That was new, and also might’ve surprised a few of Princeton’s defense. “I think Princeton was overconfident, and we took advantage of the mistakes they made,” van Herwaarden says.

But in the second half, the Crimson couldn’t finish their scoring chances, and Princeton, with time running out, began to push further. “You could sense some reservation, some ‘What now?’ moments from my players, while we were in control,” van Herwaarden remembers.

Just before regulation time ended, Princeton came back with two goals to force a sudden-death overtime. “You don’t know how the team is going to persevere,” he says. But the Crimson had already played four overtimes that season and won three, so they came out with confidence. They took possession and sent the ball up the right side with van Vlijmen, who fired a long pass to speedy sophomore Kathleen Young. She took the defender to the outside, then cut back to the inside to confront the goalkeeper.

“We’re still under pressure from the defender,” recalls van Herwaarden. “[Young] stays very, very calm on the ball, sees what the goalkeeper does, sees maybe two inches between the goal keeper and the end line. And those two inches were enough for her to push the ball alongside and get the goal.” Game over.

Van Herwaarden and Harvard’s assistant coaches jumped into each others’ arms, then congratulated the team on the victory that broke the 22-year-old curse. “On the bus, people started to tweet, ‘The last time Harvard did this, I was not even alive yet!’” van Herwaarden recalls. “It was a glorious moment for Harvard field hockey.”

The Crimson finished 12-6 overall and 7-0 in Ivy League play, winning their first title since 2004. Van Herwaarden finished one shy of the most wins in the first five seasons by a Harvard field-hockey coach. The Crimson made the NCAA championship tournament, losing in the first round to defending national champions Syracuse. Van Herwaarden has built the winning program he aimed for five years ago, and he’s not finished. The team graduated several seniors after last season (forward Marissa Balleza, a top scorer, was among them), but a strong core will return, to be joined by new recruits from the Netherlands, South Africa, and England. Their coach hopes his players repeat as Ivy champs and go at least one round farther in the NCAA tournament. He expects at least to compete for the title and return to the post-season. “We strive for excellence,” he says. “We should compete for an Ivy League championship on a yearly basis.”

—Erick Trickey

The 2017 season begins on September 1 with three road games in California; the Crimson will play its first home game September 10, against the University of Connecticut.