

Lacrosse becoming more popular in Philadelphia area

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IT WAS once considered a novelty fringe sport, played by rich kids at elitist prep schools or at public schools in well-to-do socio-economic areas. Until recently, it was perceived as a haven for high school spring athletes who couldn't catch up to a fastball or catch up to anyone running on a track.

Drive by a high school field anywhere during the spring, whether you're in Delaware County, the Main Line, Northeast Philadelphia, Bucks or Montgomery counties, and there's a good chance you'll see kids - boys and girls - with lacrosse sticks in their hands, either involved in games, practicing or participating in a clinic or camp.



Tony McDevitt (left) is a Penn Charter grad who makes a point of returning home to hold lacrosse clinics for youngsters.

Check out the number of players from the Philadelphia region who have committed to Division I schools for lacrosse. The scholarship figures for basketball and football, the next nearest sports, pale in comparison. There is a message that's being sent by Lacrosse Nation that's landed square down in this area, and it's a powerful one: If you want to get your kid into a quality college, get a stick in his or her hands.

Lacrosse has blossomed in the Philadelphia region to the point where it's no longer considered the little brother of the Baltimore area, a traditional hotbed for the game nationally, and no longer the redheaded stepchild of the New York area, also long in lacrosse tradition.

Consider the following:

Lacrosse was sanctioned by the PIAA for the first time last spring and crowned two state champions - La Salle's boys and Radnor's girls. It is not coincidental that both are from the Delaware Valley.

The road map to this year's championship has been drawn as the District 1 playoff seedings have been released. The top four boys' seeds are Springfield (Delco), Abington, Conestoga and Central Bucks East. The top four girls' seeds are Radnor, Great Valley, Springfield (Delco) and Strath Haven.

In 2001, 103 Pennsylvania schools fielded lacrosse teams. That number has grown to 192, according to LaxPower.com. Another study, by US Lacrosse, has 21 states sanctioning the sport, as opposed to 13 in 2001.

In 2001, according to US Lacrosse, there were 100,925 high school students (boys and girls) who played the game. That number more than doubled to 227,624 last year.

On the collegiate level, both Division I men's and women's lacrosse is booming. There are all-time highs in the number of schools with varsity programs (91 women and 60 men), which includes BCS schools like Florida, Louisville, Oregon and Cincinnati adding women's programs. A decade ago, there were three games shown on national TV, the NCAA Final Four and the national championship game. This year, there will be 75, including the national title game, according to US Lacrosse. Another sign of growth is that, for the first time, ESPN will be showing the Final Four in prime time on Memorial Day weekend.

The Big East made a major step this spring in introducing its inaugural lacrosse league. Locally, it's been a major boon for Villanova, which used to play in the highly competitive Colonial Athletic Association. But the CAA doesn't carry the hefty sway of a name brand like the Big East.

A crowd of close to 2,000 people showed up on May 5 in blustery conditions at Villanova Stadium when the Wildcats played Georgetown for the first time in 11 years in lacrosse (hard to fathom those two Big East rivals going that long without playing each other in any sport; more signs of growth).

And the area has closed the gap considerably between Baltimore and New York.

Haverford School, under long-time coach John Nostrant, has had a top-10 team nationally most of the season, with victories over Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association schools like St. Paul's and Gilman; La Salle owns a win over Washington, D.C., power Georgetown Prep; and St. Joseph's Prep, under the guidance of coach Eric Gregg, scored possibly the biggest victory in program history May 10 by beating St. Anthony's, a nationally ranked team from Long Island, N.Y., 8-7.

"It's crazy how much the sport has grown; I remember when there were 60 to 70 schools that had lacrosse," said Nostrant, who has 12 juniors on his team who already have committed to Division I schools. "I think where the big impact has been is now it seems every township has a youth program, especially with the number of young kids playing the game. There are just so many opportunities with these kids and parents see it."

Tony McDevitt, the former Penn Charter two-sport standout who became an All-America defenseman at Duke, sees it, too. McDevitt is one of many former collegiate players who has come back to his home turf to introduce the sport to young kids who might not have known the difference between a lacrosse stick and a tree branch 10 years ago.

After just closing the third year of his camp, Philly's Finest, McDevitt has seen his group grow from 28 kids the first year to over 70 this year.

"The game opened a lot of doors for me and I want to give back to kids, and there are a lot of guys like me doing this," said McDevitt, a 2003 Penn Charter graduate and successful Wall Street broker who comes back to run his camp each spring. "The game has really grown in leaps and bounds in 10 years, even at Penn Charter. We had somewhat of a freshman team and J.V. teams there. Those teams are fully loaded now.

"I'm trying to grow the sport in the Northeast; trying to get people backing it. I want to see lacrosse sticks. The thing that stands out to me is kids really have fun playing it. Say you're a football player, you're able to check and hit in lacrosse. If you're a soccer player, and don't like contact, there are areas of the game where you can be a finesse player. It's so transferable from other sports. It's something high-octane kids enjoy. I wanted to get more action as a freshman at Penn Charter. Look where it led. I obviously fell in love with the game. For me, then, it was another option. It's becoming a first option for many kids now."

But there is still a large, looming stigma attached: Is lacrosse a white-flight sport, where African-American youth can't compete and succeed? It's a harsh question, but a question lacrosse still needs to address.

Locally, that issue is being tackled by Gregg, Prep's coach and the son of former major league umpire Eric Gregg, and former Virginia All-America and current Penn assistant coach John Christmas, who together run LEAPS (Lacrosse, Education, Attitude, Perseverance and Success), targeting not just African-Americans, but urban kids of all races to whom lacrosse may be cost prohibitive. It costs about \$250 to \$300 to equip a boy; and for girls, equipment can run anywhere from \$150 to \$200.

US Lacrosse doesn't possess any empirical evidence that more inner-city kids are playing lacrosse, but there are signs that it is growing. There were one or two urban programs like LEAPS a decade ago, and that's grown to roughly 20, according to US Lacrosse.

But there is still an invisible threshold that needs to be breached. Prominent collegiate African-American players like Virginia twins Rhamel and Shamel Bratton and Syracuse's Jovan Miller are helping to change that. So are Gregg, who played at Episcopal Academy and Gettysburg College, and Christmas locally.

"Ten years ago, I was often the only person of color who played," said Gregg, who began playing lacrosse at age 10 and is one of only a few African-American high school lacrosse coaches in the area.

"I found it was a great game. To teach an athlete the sport, you can do that in 5 or 10 minutes. You need the hand-eye coordination of baseball, the stamina of hockey, it has the contact of football and schemes of basketball. Kids

love playing the game. To a degree, I still see it as a white-flight sport. That can change. All kids one day might be able to play it. Inner-city kids can see the Brattons and Miller play on ESPN. They'd have something to shoot for. My goal is to get every inner-city kid a stick and a ball. There are a lot of big, great brick walls in Philadelphia. My dream is to see some kid with a lacrosse stick playing against it."

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