Lacrosse bridging the gap in Baltimore

by Dana O'Neil, ESPN.com May 26, 2010

BALTIMORE -- The police squad car zipped down the city streets, sirens on full blast, and sped into the parking lot.



The community has responded positively to the Baltimore Youth Lacrosse League.

The police trainee jumped out and ran into the store.

Five minutes, 10 mouth guards and \$95 later, the police officer trainee zoomed back to the lacrosse field.

Mission accomplished.

Police commissioner Fred Bealefeld pauses for effect and laughs as he retells the story.

"Hey, that's a public emergency. Our kids weren't going to be able to play," he says.

It's been three years since Baltimore hosted the NCAA's men's lacrosse championship weekend. Since then, the game has stretched well beyond its Northeast comfort zone.

A quick glance at the Final Four rosters reveals just how far the tentacles of lacrosse have spread. Mixed in with the traditional Long Island, Maryland, Pennsylvania and New Jersey hometowns are players from Minnesota, California, Florida and Illinois.

But in the shadows of M&T Stadium, where some 50,000 are expected to congregate this weekend to watch Notre Dame face Cornell and Virginia square off against Duke in the NCAA semifinals, there is a lacrosse void.

Here, in this epicenter of the sport, where U.S. Lacrosse long ago chose to house its headquarters, the sport barely exists within the city limits. A handful of high schools have played the sport for years, but there has never been a feeder program, and in the toughest neighborhoods and rec centers the game was rarely, if ever, available.

"I'm from Baltimore and my roots run deep there," said former Princeton All-American Ryan Boyle, who together with two other former players started the Baltimore Youth Lacrosse League. "This is one

of the legitimate hotbeds of lacrosse, yet there is a completely undeveloped market. We talk about growing the game across the country, yet even in our backyard it's not available to a certain demographic."

But Boyle, along with other ex-players and devoted volunteers, is changing that, helping to stretch the wings of lacrosse beyond the leafy suburbs.

And they are getting help from an unexpected source: the Baltimore Police Department. The BPD has partnered with the Baltimore Middle School Lacrosse League, with officers serving as volunteer coaches in some of the most blighted sections of the city and in parts of town where lacrosse is almost as foreign as cricket.

The result: a new, burgeoning lacrosse community and a foundation of trust growing in the inner city.

"The Hippocratic Oath says first do no harm," Bealefeld says. "Everyone wants data, to quantify things. Is it safer? Are test scores going up? Is the absentee rate dropping? Are less kids joining gangs? I don't know the answer to that, but I know this: This doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt."

Patterson Park, a 34-acre expanse near the part of Baltimore known as Butcher's Hill, is quiet on a sunny weekday afternoon. A few people walk their dogs around the perimeter, but otherwise the playing fields are relatively empty.



Monica Logan, Parks and People Foundation Most of the BYLL's players are picking up a stick for the first time.

That will change on Saturday mornings next month, when the city's rec department delivers kids from all over the city for the Baltimore Youth Lacrosse League.

The brainchild of Boyle and his former teammates and friends, Rob Lindsey and David Skeen, the BYLL brings together nearly 200 kids from the inner city for instruction and games through July.

"It's contagious," Boyle said. "Once the kids try it, they love it."

It takes a village, but right now there is a tiny army trying to build lacrosse in Baltimore.

At a lunch recently at the kitschy Café Hon, the leaders of that army got together. David Novak's daughter, Norris, played at Princeton and the one-time financial advisor now serves as the executive director for BYLL and is the executive director for the organization's foundation.

Mike Levin, a former goalie at Brown, is the director of national programs for MetroLacrosse, a Boston-based non-profit that is launching a national initiative this year, and A.C. George, who played at North Carolina, has become a volunteer coach after retiring from a successful career at McCormick Spices.

They, along with a handful of volunteer coaches, are trying to put the city's lacrosse program on firm ground.

"It has to be at a grassroots level," U.S. Lacrosse president and executive director Steve Stenersen said. "A national organization can parachute in with money to help, but it has to start with people who love this game and who want to give back. That's what we're seeing."

Efforts to bring lacrosse to the inner cities long have run into the same brick walls -- cash and coaching.

George figures it costs upward of \$400 to outfit a player -- stick, shoulder pads, helmet, elbow pads, uniform -- compared to \$200 for baseball. For families or schools strapped for cash, that can be prohibitive.

Gear prices have come down with the growth of the sport. National sporting goods chains offer less expensive gloves and sticks as manufacturers try to broaden their price point to attract more buyers -- but it's still a financial commitment when kids outgrow their equipment in a year or two.

MetroLacrosse, with corporate sponsors such as New Balance and Brine, helps. The group, which is stretching its limits as far as Dallas this year, donates equipment and with a plus-\$1 million operating budget, helps pick up some of the financial slack.

Still more needs to be done, particularly at the school level, where administrative turnover often kills the sport before it even gets going.

"We need to get more people interested in helping," George said. "A lot of people are very generous but they aren't always as interested in giving to the city. They'll give \$100,000 to a private school that has a \$90 million endowment instead of the kids in need because that's what they know. We need to change that."

In a lot of ways, solving the finances is easier than finding the teachers.

Coaches are easy to find outside of the city limits but getting them to come into Baltimore has been trickier.

That's what prompted George, who played at North Carolina, to get knee-deep in the city game. Before coaching at the prep school, he was head coach at Walbrook High School, one of the worst performing schools in the city.



Monica Logan, Parks and People Foundation
Getting kids off the street and onto the field is only part of the battle.

But in just one short season, George saw the rewards for his efforts. One of his former players, Jamar Peete, is playing lacrosse at Limestone College in South Carolina.

"We need the right people in the right places," George said.

Noel Ghee is one of them. Ghee played lacrosse at Northern High School -- "B Conference Champs in 1984," he will tell you gladly. He now heads up the J.D. Gross Rec Center, a quick drive away from Pimlico Racetrack. He's been coaching lacrosse there for three years and has watched his players grow from complete novices to eager athletes.

On this day, in fact, a sudden thunderstorm has canceled practice and the kids aren't happy about it.

"When we first started, they couldn't even cradle," Ghee said. "Now they love it. Not everyone wants to play but at least they can choose."

That they are even given the choice is a success story.

Along with cost and coaching, lacrosse often is fighting its own image.

"We hear a lot -- 'basketball is what we do here," Levin said. "That's the mentality of some of the rec centers. They aren't always open to new ideas."

But the blame goes more at the feet of lacrosse than at the city rec department.

The game long has been tagged as a suburban prep school game reserved for the rarefied country club air.

And the reason is simple -- that's where it's been played and that's who's been given access to it. Boyle admits that, while growing up in Baltimore, he was aware that the city high schools played the game but rarely -- if ever -- played against those schools.

Last year he intentionally partnered teams from the MIAA and the city for one of his clinics.

"The image is what it is because that's how it's been and that's not going to change overnight," Stenersen said. "But what we need to make clear is that athletes are athletes. Kids are kids. There are no racial or social barriers, no zip codes involved. They want to play and they can play. They just need the

opportunity and it's our responsibility to make sure this game isn't just reserved for a certain group of people."

The drive to the big rivalry game between Bluford Drew Jemison Charter East and West winds through some of the toughest neighborhoods Baltimore has to offer. People loiter on street corners or in front of bars at 3 p.m. on a Wednesday, and row upon row of houses are covered in boards where windows ought to be.



Monica Logan, Parks and People Foundation

The city's improving stats are only one way the players and coaches are measuring the program's success.

Two empty vodka bottles litter the street alongside the playground and fields where the two schools will play, and unlike most suburban playing fields, the sidelines are practically devoid of spectators or parents.

Leonard Couplin is there to watch his nephew, Kenneth, play. Kenneth's dad was working, so Couplin drove in from nearby Columbia to give his nephew some support.

Otherwise the only spectator is Calvin Williams, the former wide receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles who now serves as the school's athletic director.

The players, who will tell you they love -- in order -- the gear, the hitting and the scoring in lacrosse, are an amusingly ramshackle bunch.

One wears gray pajama pants under his shorts and another wears shorts so long they practically skim his ankles. No one wears cleats and most sneakers go untied.

But with a laundry list of bad choices at their disposal, the kids have opted to come to the lacrosse field.

It's a small victory and a huge one all at once.

"In an ideal world, one of these kids goes to Johns Hopkins and wins a national championship and comes back and tells all about it," Bealefeld said. "But our goal is to keep them out of trouble."

Bealefeld grew up in nearby Anne Arundel County. He played lacrosse through junior college, until a broken collarbone stopped his career prematurely.

Since he became commissioner in 2007, Bealefeld's goal has been to "get the bad guys with guns," and has asked his department to adhere to four simple principles -- to be no worse enemy, no better friend, no better diplomat and no better role model.

It was the last he was having a hard time getting his arms around. When he met George through the city's Outward Bound program, he found his solution, partnering the rec centers with the police training center and asking current and future officers to volunteer as coaches.

With the city's budget cuts taking a whack at the PAL program, the lacrosse partnership is even more crucial.

Bealfeld said gangs target recruits between the ages of 6 and 12 and gang violence is rampant in his city. In rapid-fire he lists the gangs within Baltimore's city limits -- Bloods, Crips, Tre Top Piru (TTP), Purple City Dip Set -- and said he intentionally picked some of the worst neighborhoods and most beleaguered schools to start his plan.

"This is the age we need to make an impact," Bealefeld said. "We know where the bodies are dropping. We knew where the Bloods get their increased enrollment."

At a recent game, a gang member heckled the kids from the sidelines, chiding them for playing lacrosse instead of basketball.

When the gang member was escorted from the field and the kids kept right on playing, the small victory didn't go unnoticed.

The officers are helping to bring lacrosse to the kids but the sport is helping them right back. It is a conduit to breaking down barriers, for humanizing policemen and women too often viewed as the enemy in a "don't snitch" society.

Bealefeld coaches clinics in full uniform, right down to his patent leather shoes, and his officers run around in T-shirts and shorts, giving as many checks as they get.

Mothers have pulled Lieutenant Parker Elliott aside, explaining how happy they are that their middle-school son is on the right path and the kids, rather than balk when they are disciplined for forgetting their equipment, rush home to make it right.

On a recent Friday evening, Deal Palmere, a colonel in the Violent Crimes Impact Section and the fifth-highest ranking officer in the city, was patrolling on the west side when one of his players flagged him down.

"His friends were with him and he didn't care," Palmere said. "He just wanted to say hello. That never would have happened before."

The numbers say things are improving in Baltimore. The arrest numbers are down and as of early May, the city had recorded just 64 murders -- which if it stays on pace would equate to 179 for the year, the lowest since 1977, according to a report in the Huffington Post.

But the victory, as Bealefeld said, isn't in the numbers.

It is on the lacrosse field where, thanks to the efforts of a few, a sport is opening eyes, opportunities and most important, removing boundaries.

"The season isn't long enough," Elliott said. "This is the first time I really feel like I'm giving back. You can help a kid who gets shot. You can help save a guy, but when I go on the lacrosse field, I look around and think, 'I'm really doing something here."

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