

Taking Off

Lacrosse is becoming much more than just a city in Wisconsin

BY CARRIE ANTON

Nestled 129 miles northwest of Wisconsin's capital is the city of La Crosse. Known for its richness in culture and history, La Crosse draws in more than a million visitors each year. If you say "lacrosse" within the State limits, naturally, the city's attraction and appeal is reason enough for Wisconsinites to think of it first.

However, lacrosse—the sport, that is—is giving the city a run for its money by increasing in popularity among high school students and youth players—thus, making more of a name for itself. "Lacrosse is the fastest growing sport in the US, and of all the states, it's growing fastest in the State of Wisconsin," says Milwaukee Area Youth Lacrosse Association President Robin Buckley, who also serves as Vice President of the Wisconsin Lacrosse Federation (WLF). "There's more emphasis on growing the sport by creating youth programs; they're the next generation in lacrosse's future."

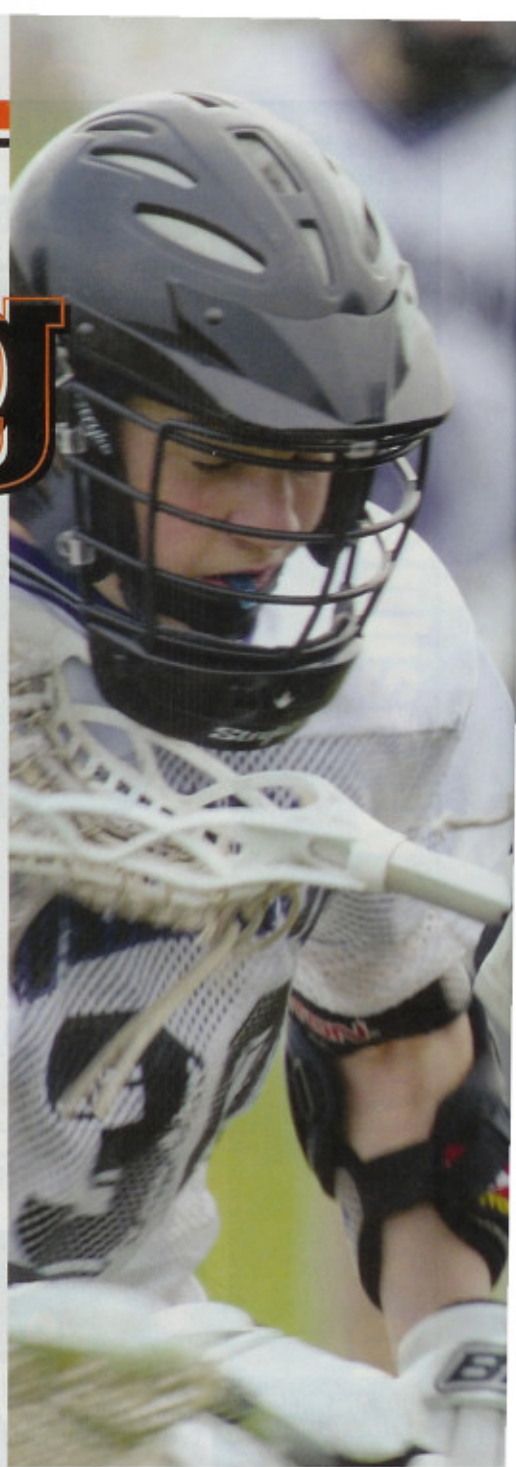
Building the Game

Originating with the Native Americans, lacrosse is considered to be North America's first sport. When the French came to this continent, settlers played the game. Our neighbors to the north modified the sport

before it finally gained US attention in the late 1800s—with a pocket of interest collecting on the east coast.

Despite the century-old history, the sport is still in its infancy in Wisconsin. In fact, it wasn't until the late 1990s that the high school level of lacrosse started taking off. "To build awareness, we initially went around to junior high and high schools in the Madison area to see if students would be interested in playing," explains Coach Mark King of Verona, who is also President of the WLF.

The response was sizable, and to date, there are 23 boys' lacrosse club teams statewide at the high school level, with approximately 25 people per team. "When I heard about lacrosse, I jumped," exclaims Andrew Showers, a junior at Madison LaFollette High School. "Now I am helping to educate younger players as they come in



and hope to coach youth lacrosse. Although the sport isn't as big as I know it will become, the support from friends and the community is very encouraging. We play for the growth of the sport and to keep the tradition alive."

Coach Amanda Brooker, in her fourth year of coaching the Bay Port High School boys' club lacrosse team, is fascinated by the growth. "It seems like all at once lacrosse teams were popping up across the State between 1998 and 1999. For us, it was our indoor lacrosse program that was really the catalyst for outdoor teams developing in this area," explains Coach Brooker, who, with the



Waunakee vs. Oregon

help of her husband, launched the indoor program, donating 20 sets of gear for players to use until they could purchase their own.

Even though Coach Brooker is largely responsible for the start of the indoor team, it was one player's enthusiasm for the sport that led to the current Bay Port High School club team. "One of the kids on the indoor team was a real go-getter and wanted to get a lacrosse team started," she says. "In a relatively short period of time, he rounded up a group of friends to not only play, but also to help fundraise in support of the team."

Coach King says he's witnessed the same intensity from Madison-area students and

attributes the explosion of interest not to the adults and parents, but instead the students who get involved to a level beyond just playing the game.

A Sport for the Masses


The great thing about lacrosse is that just about anyone can play. "Lacrosse accommodates a nice cross section of athletes," comments Coach Brooker. "Once students discover the sport, they typically become interested—especially if they haven't found a fit with another sport."

It doesn't matter if you're an endurance athlete, a strength athlete or an agility athlete—



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Stoughton vs. Verona

lacrosse has a team position. That's because the sport really melds a variety of skills sets into one sport. Buckley further points out that different strategies from different sports apply to lacrosse, saying, "We use the same field as soccer, the same pick and roll from basketball and the same hand-eye coordination as hockey."

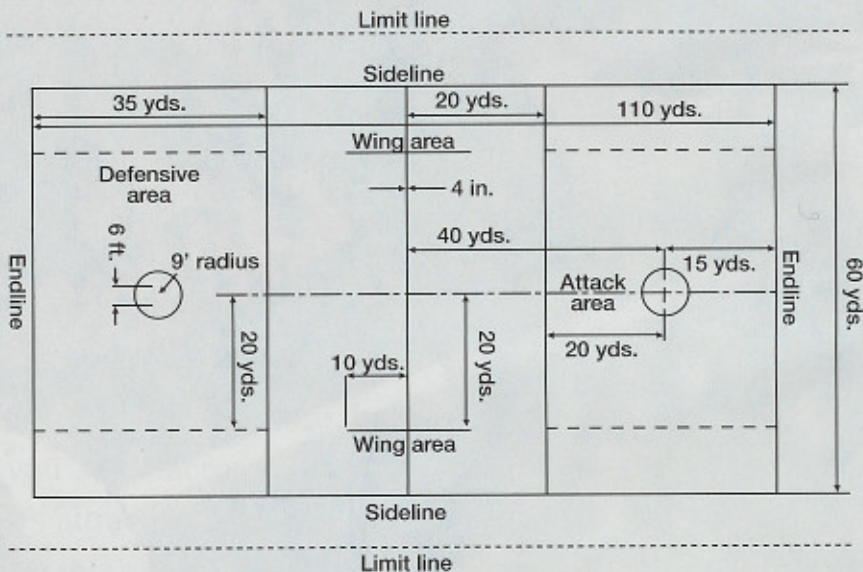
"As a longtime hockey coach, I was watching an interview with Red Wings player Brendan Shanahan when he was asked what was his favorite sport," says Dan Heldt, President of Lacrosse in Superior. "Despite being a professional hockey player, he answered 'lacrosse.' It was then that I became interested in the sport and found it was a great off-season activity for my hockey players."

In addition to players coming together from all athletic walks of life, the rich tradition and history of the sport lends itself well to a strong sense of community. The sport of lacrosse was even once considered excellent training for war. "Lacrosse goes beyond being just a fun and active sport," states Coach King. "It also teaches sportsmanship and respect because of its great historical roots to war. Lacrosse has a way of bonding players, even among competing teams."

body US Lacrosse, is responsible for promoting and regulating the game at the high school level. This is different from other—more traditional—sports that are school-supported as well as governed by the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA).

That's not to say that at some point lacrosse won't be welcomed in by the WIAA; now just isn't the time. "In the long run, I could very

Lacrosse field dimensions



The Long Road Ahead

The current lacrosse teams are all club teams, meaning that they are community-sponsored and self-funded. In its second year of existence, the WLF, under the governing

easily see lacrosse becoming a part of the WIAA if the sport maintains its momentum," says Coach King. "We're close to having the number of boys' teams needed, but the WIAA won't consider it unless the same opportunities can be extended to girls, who currently only have two teams in the State playing under the girls' rules."

To go from two teams to 23 teams may seem like an insurmountable feat, but Minnesota has proven there is hope. Upon establishing its boys' programs, the Minnesota girls' teams caught up in a two- to three-year period. And today, they have a varsity program, while the boys still remain purely on club teams.

Lacrosse is growing leaps and bounds across the Dairy State. It seems only a matter of time before we'll be forced to specify the city or the sport when making future references to "lacrosse."

Did You Know?

- The name for the city of La Crosse is derived from the sport. When the first Europeans came to what is now La Crosse, they witnessed the native people of the area playing a sport they knew as lacrosse.
- The sport's name comes from the French settlers, who felt the stick resembled a bishop's crozier—in French, "la crosse." Prior to this, Native Americans referred to the sport as "baggataway" or "teewaraathon."
- Lacrosse was considered by many Native Americans to be excellent training for war. The Cherokees even called it the "little brother of war."
- The world's first official lacrosse game was played in 1867 at Upper Canada College, an all-male school in Toronto, Ontario.