

Copyright 2005 Time Inc.

Sports Illustrated

April 25, 2005

Get On The Stick

A longtime niche sport, lacrosse is the fastest-growing game in the U.S. at every level. The appeal? It's a neat composite of other sports, it's fast, it's easy to learn. And it's cool

BYLINE: ALEXANDER WOLFF, SPECIAL REPORTING BY JULIA MORRILL

BODY:

"I'm not that big, but I can still be good. You don't have to be way tall, like in basketball, or really big, like in football."

--ANDREW SHUMWAY, 17, UTAH

"I love the passing, the getting assists. I think the girls' game is better because there's more teamwork."

--LIZZIE STRAZZA, 10, COLORADO

"The gear is really cool. It's pretty futuristic and looks like robot stuff."

--JUSTIN HARDIN, 17, TEXAS

What these kids are describing isn't North America's first lacrosse boom. That occurred centuries ago, when no other sport existed but the one Native Americans played, sometimes for days at a time, with hundreds of players on fields free of boundary lines. But what's happening today--the surge of interest in lacrosse among boys and girls, the spread of the game westward, the seeping of lacrosse into the culture at large--does share one thing with its ancient forebear: Lacrosse again looks like a game with no boundaries.

Twenty years ago lacrosse--in shorthand, lax--existed as a niche sport, popular in and around Baltimore and parts of New York State and New England, with most of the top players developed on boarding school campuses. Now the number of youth-league players in the U.S. aged 15 and under is estimated to be 186,000, more than twice what it was in 2001. The explosion is similar at the high school level, where no other team sport has anything close to lacrosse's rate of growth (page 65). Two African-American midfielders, Johns Hopkins's Kyle Harrison and Ohio State's Regina Oliver, are among this season's best college players, a striking development in a sport long associated with pedigreed preppies. Equipment sales are rising by at least 10% annually, and a 2004 survey of 400 sports-industry executives identified lacrosse as the pro niche sport most likely to bust out. "There's a drumbeat," says Bob Crowley of Mustang Management, a private equity firm that has sunk millions into the lacrosse equipment company Cascade. "Just go into your community on a Thursday night and look at the number of kids playing lacrosse."

The game is even penetrating the consciousness of Joe Fan. While in 2002 you could have found precisely three nationally televised lacrosse games, all collegiate, on network and cable, this year NBC

has already aired the All-Star Game of the indoor National Lacrosse League and will cover the NLL Champion's Cup final on May 14; the just-launched network ESPNU will add 10 regular-season games to ESPN's NCAA championship coverage; over the summer ESPN2 plans to air a game of the week from Major League Lacrosse, the outdoor pro league, for 12 weeks; and cable newcomer CSTV is airing 22 college games, men's and women's, in all divisions. Nearly 47,000 people turned out in Baltimore last spring for the semifinal matches of the NCAA men's Final Four, and for the final, between Navy and Syracuse, ESPN logged a record 0.7 rating, nearly doubling its figure from 2002.

Notably, lacrosse has broken out of the East and planted its flag all over the country. This season unbeaten Northwestern is ruling the women's game, and the top-ranked Johns Hopkins men just signed a defenseman from Rancho Bernardo, Calif. Since 2000 four state high school athletic associations--in California, Florida, Georgia and Michigan--have sanctioned lacrosse for boys and girls, and the rosters of college powers such as Duke, Navy and Syracuse feature players from Dallas, Denver and San Diego. When Laura Qualey, now 15, took up lacrosse in suburban Salt Lake City four years ago, there were no girls' leagues, and she had to content herself with clinics "taught by a guy who didn't even know that much." Now, she says, "there's a winter league for girls and advanced clinics, and my high school is starting a team."

Five years ago 43 lacrosse teams existed in Washington State at the youth, junior high and high school levels. The number is now up to 99, and last spring more than 12,000 people turned out at Seattle's Qwest Field for a tripleheader: the state boys' and girls' high school championship games and an MLL exhibition.

In four years enrollment has tripled at the girls' lacrosse camp run by Stanford women's coach Michele Uhlfelder, and the Bay Area supports its own lax retailer, Sling It! But the epicenter of California lacrosse may be to the south. A year ago East Coast power Garden City High of Long Island schlepped to the San Diego suburbs and lost 8-7 to Torrey Pines High. Like the 1936 Stanford-LIU basketball game in which Stanford's Hank Luisetti unveiled the one-handed shot in Madison Square Garden, the Garden City--Torrey Pines game bound the two coasts in mutual respect.

Part of the game's appeal is its composite nature. If you like basketball, lacrosse offers zone and man-to-man defenses, fast breaks and set plays, and its basic offensive maneuver is that hoops staple, pass and screen away from the ball. If you like soccer, lax has the precision passes and the ability to bring spectators to their feet with a goal--except that fans find themselves on their feet 20 times a game. If you like ice hockey, the action and even the terminology are much the same in lacrosse, from face-offs to man advantages to setups behind the net. And if you're a boy who likes football, you get to put on a helmet and pads and hit somebody. (The difference, says former Syracuse coach Roy Simmons Jr., is that lax "is not 11 guys coming out of a huddle knowing what's about to happen. It's more fanciful, imaginative and open.") The women's game, by contrast, is noncontact, without helmets or pads, and its prohibition of body checking allows for more fluid play.

It's probably no coincidence that one sport lacrosse fails to echo is baseball, whose popularity among kids is stagnant or dropping. And lacrosse is at least partly responsible for that decline, for it goes head-to-head against baseball in the spring. "I introduced my friends to lacrosse," says James VanLangen, 12, of Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. "Probably like 14 people quit [other sports] after they saw us playing ... mostly baseball."

"Field hockey is so slow," says Alexi Sanders, 17, of Cherry Creek, Colo. "So much more adrenaline and energy comes out in lacrosse."

"I like it because it's really fast-paced," says Ethan Shaw, 12, who lives in Dallas. "In football you get to hit people, but it's not as fast [as lacrosse], because you stop after every play."

As parents discover that lacrosse is more exciting than soccer, cheaper than ice hockey and not as dangerous as football, the game is getting a closer look. If they're not careful, lacrosse's promoters risk setting up the sport for an almost impossible task: Scroll down the long list of what ails youth sports, and in most cases lacrosse seems to offer an antidote. Youth lax programs don't hesitate to ban zones and long sticks on defense, switch players from position to position or do whatever else it takes to keep kids engaged without changing the essence of the game. At all-day lax "jamborees" the games are almost incidental to the picnicking and socializing. US Lacrosse, the national governing body for the sport, also holds annual Youth Festivals where 15-and-under and 13-and-under games fill a dozen fields but no one officially keeps score.

A kid today will often turn to extreme sports for the autonomy they bestow: No parent or youth coach knows skateboarding well enough to project his unfulfilled dreams or adult insecurities onto a rider and mess with the kid's fun. In lacrosse, too, "parents aren't yelling as much on the sidelines, because they don't know what's going on," says David Morrow, a former U.S. national team player who founded the equipment company Warrior (page 64). "Kids can really take ownership of the sport."

In fact, while youth baseball coaches expect 10-year-olds to hit the cutoff man and turn double plays, lacrosse makes only modest demands on a beginner. "At its simplest, lacrosse is shoveling," Morrow says. "If you can scoop the ball off the ground and run fast, you don't even need to know how to cradle [the wrist action that enables a player to control the ball in his stickhead]. You can get a shot off before you lose the ball." Moreover, at a time when kids feel pressure from coaches and parents to specialize in one sport, lacrosse has long encouraged the renaissance approach. "I've never heard a soccer coach say, 'I want him to play lacrosse too,'" says Dan Corcoran, a youth coach in Connecticut, "but all the time you'll hear lacrosse coaches say something like, 'You can see his toughness from playing hockey.' We get baseball players by encouraging them to play both sports."

Scan a list of Division I lacrosse All-Americans, men or women, and you'll find that virtually all played several sports in high school. Virginia men's coach Dom Starsia never saw his best defensive midfielder, J.J. Morrissey, play lacrosse before offering him a scholarship; he signed Morrissey based on how he hit the hole as a tailback. Starsia has recruited other athletes who never even played lacrosse before arriving in Charlottesville. "In the U.S. we play enough hand-eye sports that a kid is going to pick up the stickwork," he says. "Basically, I've got a team full of I-AA football guys."

Lacrosse even has an ace up its sleeve: a pilot program that US Lacrosse just launched with the Stanford-based Positive Coaching Alliance, a group dedicated to eliminating abusive and unsportsmanlike behavior by youth coaches, parents and spectators. Under the program lacrosse officials, including a "sideline manager" supplied by each team, can hand out a colored card--inscribed with the words please rethink your actions/this event may be terminated if your conduct does not improve--to put a spectator on notice that his behavior is unacceptable. If the misconduct does not stop, the game could be called and the loss assigned to the team unable to control its supporters.

"We're small enough to introduce these seeds at the grassroots, while other sports are so vast that it's

tough to make changes sportwide," says US Lacrosse executive director Steve Stenersen. "We have an interesting mix of qualities, and at a very interesting time, when people are more and more fed up with sports in general."

In the 1630s, while watching the Huron Indians play their ball game, a French Canadian missionary decided that the stick they used resembled a bishop's crosier. In his journal he called the game le jeu de la crosse. About 230 years later a Montreal dentist, W. George Beers, wrote up a set of rules that adapted the Native American game to Victorian specifications. As old as lacrosse is, the U.S. game has had a unified national governing body for only seven years. Over that time US Lacrosse--which makes rules and policies for most levels of the game, helps develop the game at its grassroots and sanctions youth tournaments, the high school national championships and the college club championships--has increased what it spends to promote the sport from \$ 1.1 million to \$ 9 million. Still, US Lacrosse's operating revenue of \$ 6.2 million in 2003 was less than a third of USA Hockey's \$ 22.5 million.

Upon his death last year Norm Webb, a former goalie at West Point, left virtually his entire \$ 4.5 million estate to US Lacrosse. The organization will use those additional funds to promote the game's character and culture--"to put that stake in the ground that says, 'This is what we are,'" says Stenersen. Lacrosse people take what they are very seriously. It's a bromide within the sport that no one merely likes the game; rather, people are divided into those who love it and the benighted masses who haven't yet been introduced to it. The love is perhaps most evident in the nearly 300 men's and women's club teams at colleges, where players pay to play, up to \$ 3,000 a year. Many club squads are so-called virtual varsities, with dazzling uniforms and national schedules. For years the main lacrosse fund-raiser at Cal--a laxathon at which players take turns keeping a ball going on the quad for 100 hours--doubles as a pageant of the players' devotion.

"Final Four weekend really is a pilgrimage," says Middlebury (Vt.) College coach Erin Quinn, whose teams have won three Division III men's titles. "The last time we qualified, about half our team had to cancel reservations because they had planned on going anyway."

Laxheads celebrate any sighting of their game in the larger culture--as Oz's sport in American Pie, in the background on Friends and on John Kerry's tie on the cover of Newsweek. Fans kite off to jamborees in Lake Placid, N.Y.; Las Vegas; Oahu; even Amsterdam. (The Netherlands is one of 30 countries besides the U.S. where lacrosse is played.) Simmons calls the jamborees "parties where a lacrosse game breaks out. You've got your girlfriend and your Lab with a scarf around its neck. You line up and shake hands when it's over and roll out a barrel of beer."

Maybe this dedication follows from lacrosse's many years of confinement to the East Coast. For all that time the sport touched every social stratum, from Baltimore blue blood to public-school Long Islander to Indian on the reservation. Most of the purists share a fraternal bond that evokes a line from an Akwesasne Mohawk history of the game: "When lacrosse was played for the enjoyment of the Great Spirit, everyone was important, no matter how strong or how weak."

The speed and spontaneity of lacrosse may initially draw kids in, but many become more absorbed after they learn of its Native American provenance: that it was considered a gift of the Creator, whom you played to please; that it was used to settle disputes between tribes and to help assure a good harvest; that to give a player the ability to strike suddenly, an elder might scratch him with rattlesnake fangs or smear him with ash from a tree struck by lightning; that even today, when an Iroquois player dies, he is

buried with his stick. "That wasn't originally in my consciousness," says Tom Ryan, a former pro who grew up playing on the Akwesasne reservation near his hometown of Canton, N.Y., and runs camps and clinics. "But after college I was looking for something spiritual and found that lacrosse is a way to connect to the Creator."

A young player today may be wearing XXL shorts and eye black instead of a breech cloth and war paint, but people like Ryan, who has dreadlocks down to his coccyx and is known on the camp circuit as the Dude, use the game's roots to connect to young people. "Kids are hungry for story and myth," says John Yeager, who teaches and coaches at the Culver Academies in Indiana. "I had a team where the players wound up calling our fastest kid Deer."

That fuddy-duddy Montreal rules maker may have "divested [lacrosse] of its radical rudeness," as he put it, and a 19th-century account in Harper's may have declared the game to be "too exciting, too nervous" for American spectators of the time. But lacrosse today seems bent on scaring up as much excitement, nervousness and radical rudeness as possible as "the alternative team sport."

A lacrosse player is more likely than other U.S. athletes to rock climb, surf or snowboard. Thus lacrosse is gaining a reputation as a lifestyle sport and attracting young obsessives the way surfing and skateboarding do. The sport's preppy origins only make it more tempting for counterculturalists to coopt, in the way that the just-off-the-yacht Tommy Hilfiger look became hot in the hood. And next to the lacrosse gear turned out by Warrior, a baseball uniform looks like a pair of pajamas.

Not surprisingly, the gnarliness factor is highest where the game is newest. "Out west the sport has a different image," says Gary Gait, star attackman with the NLL's Colorado Mammoth, whose from-behind-the-net Air Gait slam dunk for Syracuse during the 1988 NCAA tournament remains the most famous shot in lacrosse. "A kid will walk around with a stick the way he might walk around with his skateboard, and he'll be the cool kid at school."

The extreme aesthetic infuses the glossy oversized pages of the monthly *Inside Lacrosse*, whose designers study snowboarding and surfing magazines for inspiration. That look is especially popular in California, where several years ago someone started a three-on-three lacrosse league on the beach. An adolescent who's trying to define himself has a lot of choices in a game that's "Thunderdome meets Braveheart," as Peter Lasagna, the men's coach at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, puts it. Even the sport's growth among girls owes something to lacrosse's ability to anticipate how young people want to express themselves. "The sticks are a novelty; Harrow makes hot pinks," says Kate Dresher, president of the US Lacrosse Youth Council. "Plus, not everybody is doing it. When I buy clothing, I don't want to look like everybody else." Dresher's company, Colorado-based Gal.lax.y, stages events like Halloween Scream, in which middle school girls go seven-on-seven in costume. If you're a witch, your stick is a broom; if you're a fairy, it's a magic wand. Youth lacrosse isn't just part team sport, part extreme sport; it's part folk art too.

One of the men responsible for putting the X in lax is Michael Powell, the third Powell brother to star at Syracuse and the one easily identified by the triangles of eye black he wore for each game. Before his senior season, in 2004, Powell promised to pull off a move that no one had ever seen before, and when he did (it turned out to be a full flip, in the flow of a regular-season game, without dropping the ball), it made SportsCenter. Even without that move--and his repertoire of behind-the-back and between-the-legs shots--Powell would be the favorite of any angry young laxman if only because a year

ago, after MLL's Baltimore Bayhawks made him their top draft pick, he refused to sign, choosing instead to hang out with his dog, Bodhi, and play his guitar. (He has decided he will play for the Bayhawks this summer and recently signed a deal with Brine that includes his own line of "lifestyle apparel" and calls for him to work with Denver Broncos linebacker Trevor Pryce's Outlook Music to compile a CD of lacrosse-appropriate tunes.)

Nothing allows lacrosse to tap into the hearts of extreme-sport males more than the stick. A player can customize the depth of the pocket and the cant of the head to suit his style of play. A shallow-pocket guy plays fundamental, team-oriented lacrosse. His webbing is taut, and he cradles next to his ear. He can flick quick, accurate passes and shots, the kind favored by conservative, set-play coaches such as Princeton's Bill Tierney. But the rage in the men's game today is the deep pocket. The deeper the pocket, the harder it is for an opponent to dislodge the ball and the easier it is to break a defender's ankles with a one-on-one dodge. The Powell brothers were deep-pocket guys par excellence, and the evolution in equipment helped them push the stylistic envelope.

"The biggest challenge in lacrosse was playing with a shallow pocket," says Bob Carpenter, the founder of Inside Lacrosse and a former player at Duke. "You had to have great wrists and incredible coordination. Now that challenge is gone. Give a stick to Allen Iverson, and with a week or two of practice he'd be much more effective than a lot of guys back in, say, 1980."

Purists howl at such changes. "People on message boards call the National Lacrosse League a pro wrestling version of lacrosse," Carpenter says, "and some don't want to see the game commercialized. But the walls are coming down. Kids are playing in droves. The game is reaching the gearhead. It's not a couch-potato sport, and it's definitely not a marry-my-high-school-sweetheart, play-football-and-baseball-my-whole-life sport."

When Quinn, the Middlebury coach, surveys the future of his sport, he wrestles with an enigma. "To a person, everyone who plays lacrosse falls in love with it," he says. "Yet now the sport is a pyramid with an enormous base [of youth players] and a little pinprick at the top [college and adults]. The big football schools are adding club teams, but there are still only some 50-odd Division I men's programs. So to me the question isn't, Why is lacrosse booming? The question is, Why hasn't it grown more?"

Answers can be found at the bottom, middle and top of that pyramid. At the bottom is a pool of coaches and officials overwhelmed by the hordes of eager youth players. (In response US Lacrosse offers \$ 25 online courses to train coaches and hopes the colored card program will attract and retain out-of-season soccer, basketball and hockey officials and former lacrosse players who've been out of the game for a while.) In the middle, tight budgets discourage more state high school associations from sanctioning lacrosse. And at the top, football schools eager to stay on the good side of Title IX have stunted the expansion of men's varsity teams.

Meanwhile lacrosse's many stakeholders don't necessarily agree on where the game ought to be going. "All these companies are trying to sell looking cool and having chicks around," says University of Denver men's coach Jamie Munro. "But that whole X appeal is countercultural, and there's a lot more character to the game. The lacrosse sucks in those areas where it's just counterculture."

A turbocharged, forward-hurling vision of the game was onstage in the vendors' hall at US Lacrosse's national convention in Philadelphia in January. Competition among the gear companies all

but crackled. One manufacturer peddled 18 colors of pocket webbing, including Day-Glo versions. Another firm billed a protective-cup-and-compression-shorts system with the slogan "Performs like Iron Maiden. Feels like Velvet Underground." Gary Gait talked up the National Development Program, the circuit he's launching for elite high schoolers that will culminate in national championships in July and August. And a rep for Lax Scout, a service that lists young players who want to catch the eyes of college recruiters, explained that the service's top categories, Gold and Titanium, were now "by invitation only."

"As the lacrosse market grows, people are trying to leverage it, and many aren't as concerned with the game as with getting their pound of flesh," says Stenersen of US Lacrosse. "The good news is the Johnny Appleseed principle--the volunteers who have served as the conscience and torchbearers of the sport. The tightrope we walk is to make sure we're preserving our ideals. We have to develop as a sport for all."

If you think of lacrosse as that Labrador retriever Roy Simmons Jr. referred to, half the family wants to leave a bandanna around its neck and half wants to crown the dog's head with a do-rag. Manufacturers try to develop gear that will give a customer an advantage; rules makers want to give defensemen a chance by keeping pockets from getting too deep. Promoters know that kids now swap digital files of Michael Powell's coolest moves; purists scoff that "the flip" was all show, and no serious player would ever consider quitting at 22 to play the friggin' guitar. Marketers trick up pro lacrosse with two-point lines and shot clocks and stagecraft like Gait's entrance at a Mammoth game on a Harley; men who prepped at Baltimore's Gilman School and played at Johns Hopkins are appalled that NLL players admit to the existence of goons. Some parents see the sport as a path to a college scholarship; others fear that Gait's National Development Program will bring to youth lacrosse the travel-team lunacy of soccer and basketball.

"For a long time we all drank from the same fountain," says Lasagna. "Now people are drinking from different cups. How will the traditions be passed down? Not just the right way to shoot or pass the ball, but the deeper philosophical traditions? I've been at camps and watched 250 kids listen to [Bucknell coach and Native American] Sid Jamieson bring greetings from the People of the Long House and talk about honoring your environment and playing for the Creator. We can't lose that, yet Sid is about to retire. Camps serve a different function now. They're all about recruiting exposure."

In his book *Lacrosse: A History of the Game*, Donald Fisher argues that the sport's overarching theme has always been one of contested ground. But the game has also found comfort in all that knocks around within it. It's a reassuring clatter. As lacrosse enthusiasts fashion a hybrid from these competing strains, they might take inspiration from a Mohawk legend that is often retold, about a game of lacrosse played long ago between the birds and the land animals.

A rodent wanted to join his fellow quadrupeds for the big match, but they rebuffed him because he was small and scrawny. So he scaled a tree and pleaded with the eagles and hawks to be permitted to play with them. The birds agreed and fashioned a pair of wings for him from the skin of a ceremonial drum. Whereupon the rodent joined the winged creatures and, with speed and agility, confounded the deer and the bears and the wolves to help win the game for the birds. Which is how something new--the bat--came to be. ?

BOX STORY:

Lax Days In College

Over the last two decades the number of male and female undergraduates playing lacrosse has risen by at least 75%

Scan a list of lacrosse All-Americans, and you'll find that virtually all of them played several sports in high school.

BOX STORY:

Prom Date In Cleats?

As more and more state high school associations sanction lacrosse, the sport is growing dramatically--and the girls are keeping pace

The gnarliness factor is highest where the game is newest. "Out west," says Gait, "a kid with a stick is the cool kid."

BOX STORY:

A Game of Their Own

Young kids flock to lacrosse because it's fast and exciting--and their parents rarely know the first thing about it

Scroll down the long litany of what ails youth sports, and in most cases lacrosse seems to offer an antidote.