

TITLE: Lacrosse Takes the Field in Oregon: Soccer Too Soft? Baseball Too Boring?
by Bridget Barton
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Get ready for rough play-contact is allowed, hitting each other with sticks (in certain areas) is allowed. Get ready for fast play-the ball is small and hard like a baseball, and players chase up and down field as fast and far as the ball can be thrown.

If sometime this spring you're tempted to stop and check out a lacrosse game, there are two reasons you should stand a few yards clear of the sidelines. Those accustomed to the polite play of soccer stand a chance of getting blown off their feet when a player slams into the ball carrier running down the sidelines, knocking him off his feet, out of bounds, and scattering spectators like bowling pins. Yup, that's legal—the game is fast and furious.

Considered the fastest growing sport in the country, lacrosse is growing by leaps and bounds in the Northwest. Nationally, the number of kids signing up in the spring for Little League and T-ball is declining. And yet as high school sports specialize and professionalize, parents complain that fewer kids really get a chance to play team sports, like soccer, baseball, basketball or football. Lacrosse is filling that springtime void-that team sports void. Youth and high school lacrosse teams have increased 65 percent in the last ten years, and here's why.

The Call to Action

“Picture this,” says Jim Hammon, who heads up the Oregon High School Lacrosse Association (OHSLA). “This kid is playing baseball and he's standing out in the outfield. And while he's standing out there waiting for a ball to come his way, he's watching the kids on the next field over. They're running, pushing each other, and hitting each other with sticks. What do you think a 15-year-old boy is going to be drawn to?”

And it's the kids, kids who just want to play, who have built the sport here in Oregon from the ground up. Kids like Aaron Baker who started the first Lincoln High School team with help from his parents Larry and Elaine Baker.

And kids like Pat Jones, a junior defender on Oregon City High School's brand new lacrosse team. Pat, a committed athlete, suffered a serious broken leg playing football. He spent four months bedridden, nine months in a cast. But four operations later the full contact intensity of football practice was just too much, say his parents Dave and Nancy Jones. Pat began to study and research. He read about lacrosse and developed a passion about it. “Now,” say his parents, “that's his life ambition—to play lacrosse.”

Problem was, Oregon City didn't have a team. Not a problem for Pat. Pat wanted to play. After all, says Pat, “You get to hit people with a stick.”

First Pat asked Mr. Les Sitton to coach the fledgling team. Straight out of a Mighty Ducks-type screenplay, Sitton is, you guessed it, the bookish physics and math teacher at the Senior Campus for Oregon City High. And, you guessed again, he'd never even seen the game played. But thinking that chances were slim it would all come together, Sitton said yes.

"Bless his heart," says Nancy Jones, "he stuck with it." Playing on Sitton's first year team in 2001 was senior defenseman Brett Meyer, National Student Athlete and Three Rivers Student Athlete of the Year for football (co-winner with Aaron Davis). Meyer loves the contact of lacrosse and he's planning to play at Willamette if his football coach allows it.

"But," adds Coach Sitton, "half of my players have never played an organized high school sport. I've got a couple of varsity football, soccer, basketball and wrestling, but this really is kind of an even playing field. Those varsity players haven't ever played lacrosse either. Those that haven't played a sport at all don't feel so inferior."

"Lacrosse isn't terribly expensive to run for a high school sport," says Sitton. "But the schools don't give any financial support. This year it was almost \$5,000 to start up." That's where Pat Jones and his parents came in. The Jones family pitched in \$2,500 for the first year so that their son could realize his dream to play lacrosse. "It started out with \$500 for uniforms, then another \$500, and it kind of grew," says Nancy Jones.

"We had a great year," says Sitton. "They're all learning. I'm even thinking about getting out to play. At the first informational meeting we had about 50 guys and we started the team with 35." Sitton is expecting to be swamped with kids for the 2002 program and is ready to field a varsity and junior varsity team.

Muscling into the Competition

Lacrosse, played from the third Monday in February until the championship game in late spring, may be drawing some players from spring baseball and track, but Hammon, OHSLA commissioner, says the upstart lacrosse association has made every effort not to hurt other sports.

Hammon remembers hearing some time back about an Athletic Directors(A.D.s) conference in Bend where "dean of football" and Roseburg A.D. Thurman Bell warned others there about the rising enthusiasm for lacrosse. Hammon says, "I heard that Bell said, 'I don't know what you guys are hearing about lacrosse, but it's come here to my school...it's come on strong. I suggest you pay attention, because they're organized.'"

But Hammon counters, "We make it very clear to the A.D.s that we're not interested in ruining any other sports. We hope that soccer and football coaches tell their kids-instead of playing Nintendo, play lacrosse in the spring." Hammon does know of one school

where the team had a negative impact. At Oregon Episcopal School the newly formed lacrosse team significantly hurt the track program. “But the lacrosse coach is the athletic director,” smiles Hammon.

Then there’s the case of West Linn High School. Coach Mark Flood, referred to by many as the “father of high school lacrosse in Oregon,” fielded one of the first two high school lacrosse teams in the state in 1995. Says Hammon, “He didn’t have one kid who had played any other sport. He got the kids in the chess club, the kids in the band. Josh Parker (who graduated in 2000 and now plays for OSU) was one of the best goalies around. He was in the band. West Linn is still known for drawing kids who don’t participate in other varsity sports, but Coach Flood’s successful team (West Linn took the state championship in 2000 and was second to Lakeridge in 2001) is now starting to draw some top athletes.

On the flip side, schools such as defending lacrosse champion Lakeridge are known for the number of kids who cross over and play a combination of varsity sports, mostly football and lacrosse. The fall/spring crossover keeps kids in top shape and on the field year-round. “What I hear,” says Hammon, “is that at Lakeridge lacrosse is popular with the athletic crowd, the ‘in’ crowd.”

And after just one season of lacrosse in his community of Roseburg, Thurman Bell expresses nothing but enthusiasm for the game that he says keeps his kids agile and in better shape, and he doesn’t seem too worried about the competition with other school sports. The well-known A.D. of football powerhouse Roseburg, asks, “Where in the world was this sport when I was a kid?”

The Umpqua Indians Get Underway

Getting started however, wasn’t so easy. Once again it took kids like Chris Bilder of Roseburg, who had the vision and just last season coaxed his dad Paul Bilder into making it happen. Paul, a local physician, along with Greg Stanko, a registered nurse, gave their free time (and ponied up \$800) to coach the Umpqua Indians of Roseburg last year in their first-ever season. Both men are longtime lacrosse enthusiasts. Stanko played on the East Coastin high school and in college.

Stanko remembers, “When I got out here to Oregon in 1981 it was a lacrosse void. One day I was behind a car in traffic and saw it had a lacrosse bumpersticker. I waited till the stop sign and I jumped out and ran up and said, “Where can you play?” It was Paul’s wife and she told me about the club team in Eugene. We kept in touch and eventually talked about forming a high school team.”

The two, prompted by Chris Bilder, put out flyers at the high school for a meeting at a local pizza parlor. “Thirty kids came,” says Stanko. “They’d never seen it played or been

to a game. But we thought we could take a shot. We had throw-arounds and people would come out and we'd teach basic skills."

"The kids that came out to play for Roseburg," says Stanko, "were guys who played soccer, track, hockey, basketball, football, fencing and some guys who've never played organized sports at all. They got sticks in their hands, and they got the rules and we scrimmaged."

"It's really fast-paced and when you start achieving it's a really good feeling...when you're able to get it, it's so beautiful," says one new tenth-grade player. "I play midfield. I kinda like the fact that it's contact. Sometimes I'll get pretty bruised but it's alright. The last guy that laid me out didn't know I was a girl. When he saw, he said he was sorry." Shary Dake, now sidelined with an injury from too much running (she also plays soccer), smiles at the recollection.

Yes, they all love it-girls too. Shary Dake is the lone female on the Roseburg squad, but several other teams in the Northwest list girls on their rosters and a number of Oregon high schools have fielded girls teams. Girls play an altered version of the game, with less contact, but using sticks with more finesse, similar to those originally used by the Native Americans who designed the game.

Sheryl Walter understands the commitment needed to start the new team in Roseburg. She remembers the day, early in his first season, that her son, junior midfielder Colby Walter, broke his leg in a game with Lake Oswego. "He was going in to score a goal and two boys hit him on opposite sides at the same time. In the hospital room he said, 'Did the goal count?' It didn't. He had to be tough. He still comes to every practice, every game, and we go to Portland or Eugene for most games."

"We came from Chicago, and my kid was the only one with experience," says parent Susan Tipton, a newcomer to Roseburg, but not to lacrosse. "Tyler (a junior attack/midfielder) came with his lacrosse stick and his ball wondering where he was going to play."

"I just like being competitive," says Tyler Tipton. "We opened up a lot of eyes-there's a lot of talk about us being good."

In their first season the Roseburg team went 5-5. According to Stanko, the kids say it was really fun, more fun than football.

Lax Roots in Oregon

From 1995 when West Linn first hit the lacrosse field to play a handful of games against the only other organized team, Glencoe High School, the league has grown to 19 teams. The most new teams per year was two until 2001, when eight teams were added, including teams in Hermiston, Oregon City and Roseburg. This year, Hammon says that

eight more new teams are on board, including additions in Beaverton, Tigard, Aloha, Salem and several in the Eugene area.

The roots of it go back to the day that Hammon saw a tiny ad in the paper that said, “If you want to play lacrosse, call Mark Flood.” Hammon, born and raised in Michigan, had played ice hockey all his life. But on a whim he moved to Oregon in 1990. “The Canadians play lacrosse all summer to keep their hockey skills intact,” says Hammon. So he called the number in the ad and it led to six seasons of men’s club lacrosse in Portland.

Eventually team members started to marry and raise families, leading to thoughts of the future and the young lacrosse players who would someday fill their cleats. When Mark Flood (West Linn) and Bill Rexford (Glencoe) first began high school teams, Hammon and other Portland club team members officiated.

“In ’96 two more teams were added and everyone knew more league structure was needed. Six guys raised their hands at our first organizational meeting, and I was kind of put in charge of running it,” says Hammon. “We crowned our first league champion in 1997-Lakeridge beat Oregon Episcopal School.”

Growing Pains; Growing Gains

Growing the league today is a whole new game. Hammon’s goal for Oregon lacrosse is to be sanctioned by the Oregon Scholastic Activities Association (OSAA). In other words, to become a regular high school sport. To achieve that level the sport must have teams in 50 percent of the high schools in the level they are sanctioned. In 2001, lacrosse had teams in 19 of the 78 4-A high schools in Oregon. For 2002 the number stands at 27, but they’ll need to grow to 39 or 40 before applying for recognition.

In order to be ready, says Hammon, “we’re following OSAA guidelines. We ask our student athletes to complete the same requirements as any varsity sport-academics, attendance, etc. Every team in our league has suspended players for attendance or grades.

“And we honor an Academic All-American,” says Hammon. In 2001 that honor went to Matt Collier of Lakeridge High School.

“If you look at water polo, it’s kind of capped at 32 (high school teams), or skiing is sort of the same,” says Hammon. “Realistically we could cap out and just never get to 40. Would that disappoint me? No, because we’re a part of U.S. Lacrosse. (U.S. Lacrosse is an umbrella organization for amateur lacrosse players across the country that provides official rules, regulations, and assistance on coaching, officiating, etc.) And when you get down to brass tacks what OSAA gives you is a structure—they put on playoffs, set up requirements for officials, etc.

“But because of our national recognition from U.S. Lacrosse, we’re here to stay. We have national rulebooks and guidelines. We awarded three All-Americans in 2001-J. Alex

Meinhard-West Linn, Kevin Bass- Southridge High School, and Ben Sadler-Oregon Episcopal School, and one Academic All-American-Matt Collier-Lakeridge. And we sent one representative to play in the 2001 Senior All-Star game-David Huet.”

Both Bass and Meinhard epitomize the appeal of high school lacrosse. Neither student had played another sport in high school; Bass played no sport until his junior year, 2000, when Southridge formed its team, yet both went on to become Oregon’s All-Americans in 2001. Hammon guesses that only about 25 percent of players are on other varsity sports teams.

Time to Play

Lacrosse is fast, hard-hitting, athletic AND lacrosse offers lots of kids the chance to play-to play and enjoy a varsity team sport in high school when other sports demand year-round, total focus.

It comes down to this, says Hammon: “Kids love the game. They like the unique combination of skills. Basketball players know the picks; soccer players know the movement and the plays, football players know the contact.”

But mostly they all get to play. “The fact that you can carry 25 kids on your roster; you can have 75-100 kids in your program (Freshman, JVI, JVII, and Varsity)—what an opportunity.” The speed of the game also requires frequent substitution and rotation of entire squads. Ten kids take the field but many more sub in-lots of kids get in the game for lots of minutes. Says one Oregon City lacrosse player, “You get out there and run till you drop, and then you go out, and then the next guy goes in.”

The College Connection

Even more, lots of graduates go on to play lacrosse at the college level, both on club teams and on NCAA teams, the two types of college lacrosse. Oregon colleges such as Oregon State (where All-American Meinhard now plays), Univ. of Oregon, PSU, Lewis & Clark and Willamette offer club programs. Some of these also offer women’s programs. Players can usually just sign up and enjoy four years of college team sports with an ever-increasing level of competition thrown in to keep it interesting.

NCAA teams, like Syracuse, Princeton, Maryland and Stanford are a different matter. Getting attention from the big East Coast recruiters is difficult for any West Coast high school team according to Hammon. The East Coast high schools and colleges take their lacrosse very seriously and the competition for top-rated players is fierce. “But a San Diego player was picked up by Syracuse,” Hammon says. “Five years ago that would have been unheard of.”

And because of the clout of nationally known coaches like Mark Flood of West Linn High School, “people are beginning to take notice.”

“Flood brought three-time national champion Gary Gait of Syracuse to a training camp for players from around the state,” says Hammon. “He can call and get people here. Scholarships coming out of the East Coast were unheard of before, but things are changing,” he says.

One lacrosse parent says that her son is changing his college application process to include schools that offer club or NCAA lacrosse. Tired of being overlooked for overly competitive varsity sports, her solid three-sport athlete son found a berth within one season on the state champion West Linn team. Now he's hooked, she says, and sees lacrosse in his future through college and beyond. If scholarship money can be part of that plan, great. If not, he'll still play.

“We've had some kids move up,” says Hammon, “but that's another challenge—to get our kids exposure to those NCAA powerhouse coaches.”

Simple Job Yields Big Rewards

For now Hammon still sees his job as pretty simple. “When your son shells out that first \$300 for his stick, gloves and pads, it's my job to give them four years of high school lacrosse.”

He gets lots of help from volunteers who have already built Oregon lacrosse into a program that offers organized team play almost year-round. Pick-up games can be found on fields after school and on weekends. An indoor winter league in Beaverton draws kids from around the region, where they mix it up so that kids play on teams with players who, come spring season, will be their arch-rivals. Summer and winter leagues are open to a wide range of ages.

Asked if he minds not getting paid for what has turned out to be nearly another full time job, Hammon says, “I am getting paid today. Kids, parents will walk up and thank me. Last year (2000) my wife came to the state championship game and she looked up at the crowd of 1,000 West Linn kids and parents cheering-she said it was like a high school football game. To see that level of enthusiasm, the flow of energy, to see those kids-I love this game.

“This league is truly based on community. There's incredible commitment that parents, coaches and players put in. This game's infectious-they can't get enough of it. I just kind of corral it all in.”

And that, by the way, is the second reason to stand clear of the sidelines should you stop to watch a bit of this surging new sport—because it's very, very contagious. So how do you explain why lacrosse is the hottest new sport in Oregon?

Says Hammon, “When it comes right down to it-our kids want to do it. We just give them a structure. They are testosterone-driven boys with titanium sticks in their hands.”

SIDEBAR: The Lacrosse Story

Don’t let the flowery French or the feminine gender of the name “Lacrosse” fool you—this is no sissy sport. Invented by Native Americans as an alternative to outright tribal warfare, this contact field game, played today with sticks and minimal padding, can leave a slew of bruises and injuries.

The US Lacrosse website gives this account of the sport’s history: “The evolution of the Native American game into modern lacrosse began in 1636 when Jean de Brebeuf, a Jesuit missionary, documented a Huron contest in what is now southeast Ontario, Canada. At that time, some type of lacrosse was played by at least 48 Native American tribes scattered throughout what is now southern Canada and all parts of the United States. French pioneers began playing the game avidly in the 1800s.

“Legend tells of as many as 1,000 players per side, from the same or different tribes, who took turns engaging in a violent contest. Contestants played on a field from one to 15 miles in length, and games sometimes lasted for days. Some tribes used a single pole, tree or rock for a goal, while other tribes had two goalposts through which the ball had to pass. Balls were made out of wood, deerskin, baked clay or stone.”

By the end of the 19th century, lacrosse was a popular game in East Coast cities, drawing crowds as big as 40,000, making it a popular sport, but not as popular as baseball, the national pastime.

Today, lacrosse is played in middle schools, high schools, colleges and clubs across the country by both men and women, with players numbering well over 200,000.

Lacrosse is probably the fastest growing team sport in the country. US Lacrosse reports, “In the last decade, the number of high school and youth teams has increased by 65 percent and the number of college and club teams has risen by 62 percent.”

The game is played with ten players per team on a field roughly 330 ft. x 180 ft. The lacrosse stick, or “cross,” is considered an extension of the player’s arm.

WEBSITES TO VISIT FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.northwestlacrosse.com

www.lacrosse.org

www.e-lacrosse.com