

By Martha Maddi - genevarepublican@shawmedia.com

Loving lacrosse

America's 'first sport' explodes in Tri-Cities

Invented by Native Americans, lacrosse is considered to be America's first sport. But today it has exploded back onto the playing field. It is one of the fastest growing team sports in the United States, according to US Lacrosse, the sport's national governing body. Between 2001 and 2010, the number of players tripled.

Lacrosse is a combination of basketball, soccer and hockey. It's played with a netted stick which players use to throw, catch and scoop the ball. Once played predominantly by privileged young men at East Coast prep schools and private universities, today's lacrosse players are found across the nation, include both males and females and range in age from elementary school students to adults, nearly 300,000 players strong.

This trend is evident in the Tri-Cities, according to Mike Black, director of River City Lacrosse, the organization that provides the lacrosse park district programs in Batavia, Geneva and St. Charles. It caters to students from second grade through high school. Participation among boys is growing steadily at 20 percent every year.

"We have a lot more boys in our leagues but the girls' program is growing fast," he said. "It's more than doubled in the last year."

For the first time, there were enough girls from the tri-cities to form a junior high girls' team.

Maddie Watson, an eighth-grader at Rotolo Middle School in Batavia is on this team. When she signed up for lacrosse through the Batavia Park District five years ago, Maddie thought she would be playing with a team of boys.

"I had only seen boys playing it; there were no other girls," she said. "But now, I've met so many girls on my team and they're all great."

According to Sean McCaffrey, head varsity coach at St. Charles North, the high schools in the Fox Valley area, including Batavia, have added more lacrosse club teams than any other region in the state of Illinois in the last few years. Because of the sport's soaring popularity, St. Charles North added a freshman squad this year, he said.

Those involved say the sport is growing fast, because it is fast.

"With lacrosse, I think kids enjoy practice more than any other sport because it's more fast-paced," McCaffrey said. "That's a common theme I hear."

Quinn Erdman, eighth-grader at Geneva Middle School South, loves the sport for this reason.

"There are no boring parts playing lacrosse," he said. "I'm always on offensive or defensive so I'm constantly moving."

Another reason for its quick growth in popularity is that it's similar to other sports with which players already are familiar.

"It has the contact like football, the running like soccer, the offense and defense like basketball and the arm motion of hockey and baseball," Erdman explained.. When he picked up lacrosse three years ago, he used the skills he'd honed in these other sports.

Watson said she found her background in track and cross-country helped her run up and down the lacrosse field.

Riley Martin, senior varsity lacrosse captain at St. Charles North, found that his years of playing basketball benefitted his lacrosse game.

"The hand-eye coordination and dodging and footwork I used in basketball helped me transition over to lacrosse," he said.

The sport is unique in that its players don't have to have a certain body type. Size and shape don't matter in lacrosse.

"You don't have to be the strongest, the fastest or the biggest player to be good at lacrosse," Black said. "There's a spot for everybody on the team."

As long as you have good eye-hand coordination, you are valuable in a game, Black added.

Spring is the big season for lacrosse. Younger players like Erdman and Watson, practice two to three days during the week and have games once or twice a week. Watson said the closest games are in St. Charles while the farthest are in Barrington.

High school players, like Martin, practice every day but Sunday. And even then, the team gets together for film sessions to review past games or to evaluate other teams on the schedule. They have two games a week for a season total of 16 against conference rivals, such as St. Charles East, Waubensee Valley, Geneva and Batavia.

During the off-season, players have plenty of opportunities to stay in the game. River City Lacrosse offers in-house leagues, camps, travel teams, clinics and player development programs.

Martin plays in the off-season at True Lacrosse Club in Elmhurst. McCaffrey said his players attend excellent lacrosse camps in the summer, including those at Ohio State University and University of Notre Dame in Indiana, as well as several universities on the East Coast, such as Hofstra University in New York.

Martin will be attending these camps for three weeks this summer. Watson will attend camps at North Central College in Naperville and Notre Dame.

Erdman will participate in Ohio State's camp where, he said, there will be college scouts on the lookout. Even though he has yet to start high school, Erdman already has his sights set on Wisconsin's Marquette University or New York's Syracuse University for college, because they both have good lacrosse teams.

For Watson, she doesn't yet know if college lacrosse is possible for her. She currently is the only girl from Batavia who plays in the River City program, and Batavia High School does not yet have a girls' lacrosse team.

But for Martin, a future in lacrosse looks like a definite. He said he has been offered two college scholarships, one at Seton Hill in Pennsylvania and the other at University of Tampa in Florida. Now he just has to choose.

For more information on the game of lacrosse, visit US Lacrosse's website at www.uslacrosse.org. For more information on River City Lacrosse, go to www.rivercitylax.com. For park district lacrosse programs, visit your specific district's online catalog. True Lacrosse Club's website address is <http://il.truelacrosse.com>. Illinois Girls Lacrosse Association can be found at iglac.org.

Copyright © 2013 Suburban Life Media. All rights reserved.