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## St. Charles lacrosse team in no rush to attain IHSA status

ST. CHARLES – If there is a let-down in the lacrosse community about not yet being an IHSA sport, the sting has largely steered clear of St. Charles.

As members of the highly successful St. Charles club lacrosse program prepare for the new season, relief is a prevailing sentiment about the status quo remaining intact for one more year. The IHSA originally planned to sanction the sport for the first time this spring, but organizers fell a little short of securing the 10 percent of IHSA membership needed to commit in time for this spring.

St. Charles senior defender Trace Evans likes the current setup just fine, especially the arrangement of being part of a co-op club program between St. Charles East and North. That will change beginning next year as the program splits, even if there is another delay in securing IHSA sanctioning.

"Honestly, I think it's for the better for us, at least for this season," Evans said. "I've been playing with the kids from East since seventh grade, and I consider them like my brothers on this team. It'd be weird playing with just North guys.

"But I think it'll be good once they do eventually split for the growth of the game."

St. Charles goalkeeper Pat McGushin, a Division I Stony Brook recruit, said after the uncertainty-driven anxiety wore off, he and many of his teammates were happy with the end result.

"When it all comes down to it, it's all the same, the trophy's a little different and everything, but I guess we're all trying to work for a state championship," McGushin said. "I don't really think it makes a difference for whether it's IHSA or just a club."

St. Charles currently competes under the Illinois High School Lacrosse Association, where coach Andy Thompson's program has made the Final Four of the state tournament for four consecutive seasons. Each time, St. Charles has been eliminated by New Trier of the more traditionally lacrosse-friendly north suburbs.

Thompson had a more even-handed reaction to the IHSA back-tracking than the players, citing benefits of IHSA affiliation such as a likely decrease in cost for players, a well-organized postseason state series and increased attention and publicity for the sport.

Thompson, though, said the present set-up has served the sport well.

"There is a fear with coaches like myself 'Hey, you have a good thing, why do you want to fix a good thing when it's not broke,'" Thompson said. "... For a lot of coaches like myself, it's kind of the fear of the unknown, and 'Am I still going to have a job?', or are schools going to look within the school from their teachers for the job first."

With the season set to start soon – St. Charles plays a preseason tournament this weekend in Wheaton – Thompson said the IHSA affiliation drive is quiet, but he expects it to be rekindled immediately after the season ends.

While St. Charles is the unofficial lacrosse capital of Kane County, the sport has also gained heavy traction in Geneva. Geneva athletic director Jim Kafer said about 70 boys lacrosse athletes came out for the sport this spring, and considers the sport's breakthrough into the mainstream apparent.

"I see a real parallel with lacrosse to what happened with soccer in this country about 30 years ago," Kafer said. "There got to be kind of a building level of interest and support, and it got to the point where now it's a sport that is fully integrated into the schools, and I think lacrosse is headed that way."

Thompson said "it won't be long" before Geneva is capable of playing tight games with the St. Charles schools, and he also expects Batavia's club program to eventually blossom.

For now, the St. Charles team is content to live in the present, which McGushin hopes includes another banner season – this year, ideally, with a win against New Trier to boot.

"Last year we had a lot of superstars who really knew what to do and how to take care of the team on the field and off, but this year I think we have a lot of depth, a lot more than we've usually had the past few years," McGushin said. "I think a lot of kids are starting to take leadership and figure out what to do."

The future of the 30-year-old Thompson, in his eighth season with the co-op and fifth as head coach, has been a popular point of speculation in the local lacrosse community. His own roots are at East, but North has traditionally produced more of the lacrosse talent, though Thompson said the breakdown is much more even this spring.

With the sport's landscape shifting, he knows the time to choose is fast approaching, provided both schools are interested in hiring him.

"I don't look forward to making that decision because I feel like I'm going to let some people down, but what can you do," Thompson said. "All I know is I'm going to make sure that there's a good rivalry between St. Charles North and St. Charles East."

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