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## HIGH SCHOOLS

# 'Insane' growth under way

### Starting to stick

## Lacrosse is the state's most popular emerging sport

**By Brian Hamilton**

Tribune staff reporter

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As the rain trickled down on a dismal Friday, Lane Tech lacrosse players trickled out of the Brands Park fieldhouse and confronted the day's first challenge: How to arrange the goals so that the practice field included the least mud possible.

Grass-roots lacrosse? Yes and no, judging by the tracts of damp brown earth. It certainly wasn't the manicured green swath upon which New Trier worked out a few days later, nor Loyola's Glenview home is landscaped like the gardens of Versailles.

Still, it is in those places and others that lacrosse, the fastest-growing high school sport in the past decade nationally, attempts to solidify its foothold. Muddy or otherwise.

"This year we've had a pretty decent turnout, friends and fans showing up," Lane senior James Driscoll said. "It's a lot better than previous years, when there was pretty much one or two people at every game. No one at school will come up to ask you, 'What is that?' Because they know it's a lacrosse stick."

Undeniably, the sport has had to answer more discomfiting questions of late, with the Duke lacrosse scandal rekindling stereotypes of privilege and exclusivity.

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But mostly the questions are as basic as the one Driscoll alluded to, as a sport with East Coast roots is only recently penetrating the state's consciousness.

Overall, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations, high school lacrosse participation has rocketed 206 percent in the past decade.

In Illinois--where boys and girls lacrosse rank 1-2 in terms of popularity among "emerging sports"--anecdotal evidence tells a similar tale. Lyons began its program five years ago as the 21st Illinois varsity program; there are now 41, and Lyons reached the state finals last season.

And last Saturday, in a battle of teams that hadn't lost a game to another Illinois squad all season, Loyola defeated New Trier, with not a blade of grass at Loyola's field unoccupied by a fan. "It's insane how much it's grown," said Loyola senior Daniel Mortell, who will play at Loyola University in Baltimore. "Before I came to high school, no one would know what it is. And then the other week, I was driving by a park near my house, and it must have been 2nd- and 3rd-graders playing. It's really picking up."

"It's a little different, a little unique, kind of like some of the extreme sports that have come in," St. Charles coach Dave Neff said. "But it's still a game that has a lot of traditional aspects that sports has. It kind of offers kids both the old and the new."

The growth rate in the past decade for girls (270 percent) actually outstrips that for boys (163 percent). Part of that may owe simply to the previous non-existence of girls teams. But it's also attributable locally to Northwestern's ascent to an NCAA championship in women's lacrosse, and overall to improved technology, in which curved sticks with deeper pockets opened some distaff doors.

"All these things are enabling the girls to become more creative," Lake Forest girls coach Steve Dunn said. "You go out there and watch, and for those whose mothers did play, it's not the same game at all."

Many Illinois teams exist as club outfits. The qualification for full IHSA recognition starts with 10 percent of the association's members playing the sport--that's roughly 75 at this point.

Full recognition could lead to better officials' training--currently a huge hole in the view of many coaches--as well as better visibility. And though it may further stretch athletic budgets, school funding would open the sport to players for whom the personal price tag is too high.

"It would definitely increase the rate of growth of the sport," said New Trier senior Chris Chandler, who is set to play at Princeton, "because the

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schools would start to pay a little more, which would take the load off the kids and parents who want to participate in it."

Relative to how the game is played back East, Illinois lacrosse is by consensus more physical. Part of that is a still-improving stick-skill level that leads to more ground balls, part of it is a reliance on athleticism more than finesse.

Depth is greater elsewhere; after playing teams in March's Jesuit Classic in the Washington, D.C., area, Loyola coach Rob Snyder observed that "kids on their third and fourth line are as good as some of our first-team guys."

Indeed, there is room to grow. Connor Detten, who has played just the last two seasons, recalls tossing a ball against the wall at Loyola when a car pulled up alongside and asked what sport he was practicing.

"I said, `Lacrosse,'" Detten said, "and they said, `I've never heard of that. How do you play?'"

Judging by the numbers, they might figure it out soon enough.

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bchamilton@tribune.com

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