

INAUGURAL FIRST 4 DRAWS 7,000-PLUS

BY ROBERT SPUHLER

Syracuse freshman Jake Myers stood on the field at the Home Depot Center in Carson, Calif. in mid-March during the First 4 and was awed by what he saw. More than 7,000 fans had come to watch the first two NCAA Division I men's lacrosse games played in California and, thanks in part to high school and USL MDIA games going on all day, the sport was showcased like never before in the Sunshine State.

"The kids out here are lucky," he said. "I wish I had this at age 10. This is an awesome atmosphere. Look around—it's crazy."

But up in the stands, thousands of those California kids were saying the same thing about him. A San Diego-area product out of Torrey Pines High, Myers is a freshman goalie for the defending national champion Orange. One of two California players on SU's roster (frosch defenseman Sean McGonigle is from neighboring La Costa Canyon High), Myers gives hope and motivation to the scores of youngsters in the state who are scrambling to pick up this suddenly hot sport.

Throughout the day, spectators came and went on the Home Depot Center's auxiliary fields as some of the top high school teams in the state came together for competition and to celebrate the sport's growth in Southern California. The night doubleheader featured two upsets, as Notre Dame took down North Carolina and Georgetown beat Syracuse.

More importantly, it was the second half of a huge one-two punch in March for the sunnier side of the state. Earlier that week, the Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG) announced that it is bringing a Major League Lacrosse team to the Home Depot Center for the 2006 season. Combine that with the news earlier in the spring that the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF), the state's governing body for high school sports, would sanction lacrosse for varsity play in the Los Angeles area in 2006—the last area in the state to be added—and 2005 has already been a banner year for the sport on the left coast.

"We've never had something like this," said John Fox, the head coach at Foothill High near Oakland. "This has to be the spark for the sport out here."

For some of the younger players and spectators, the First 4 provided the first opportunity to see lacrosse at the vaunted next level. With no professional



The 7,182 fans who watched the First 4 in Carson, Calif., were the most to ever see an NCAA regular-season lacrosse game west of the Mississippi River, according to U.S. Lacrosse.

outdoor team and no Division I college programs, the closest many of these burgeoning lacrosse players had previously come to high-level play was television broadcasts of the Final Four.

It was those players that made up the majority of the audience at the First 4—rows of team jackets could be seen in every section—and they came out in force.

"It's huge just to watch these guys, see how they play and find out how they get there," said junior Foothill attackman Patrick Cleary. "Just to watch their practice was incredible. They were so organized."

For the college teams, the trip paid dividends in multiple manners. The coaches seemed to agree that such trips can make lasting impressions on future recruits, the competition was of the highest caliber and the weather was a welcome break from a particularly oppressive East Coast cold snap.

Notre Dame had to leave from Philadelphia on Tuesday without even playing; the Irish's game against Villanova was cancelled due to snow.

"We get here, it's 75 degrees and we practiced on Newport Beach that afternoon," ND coach Kevin Corrigan said.

The coaches also got the chance to see in person the rising talent level of California high school lacrosse. Syracuse and Georgetown know already that there are upper-level California players available, with Myers and McGonigle following in the footsteps

of San Diego-product Spencer Wright. Freshman Neil Bassi and sophomore Matt Fredericks make up the California contingent on Georgetown's roster. Fredericks in particular is an interesting case—he made the team this year as a walk-on after an All-American high school career at St. Ignatius.

"I would have loved for something like this to happen when I was younger," he said. "We never got to see this. All the guys in high school will get the chance to see what the next level is like."

The schools representing Division I lacrosse at the First 4 likely did not need to see this event to know about the inroads being made in California, though. With Myers in net, Torrey Pines beat traditional Long Island powerhouse Garden City last season. And Wright was a second-team All-America for the Orange in 2002, running around the field at Rutgers with a California flag tied around his waste after winning the national championship.

Most importantly, California is a state that takes its athletics seriously, and boasts both a large population and, in the southern half, year-round play.

"Let's not get carried away, it's not going to replace Baltimore or Long Island any time soon," Corrigan said. "But in 20 years, can you imagine? There's 36 million people in this state, and there's no limit to what can happen here."

That's not to say that the road to California being a lacrosse power is the only one in the state without traffic.



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While the interest has provided a boom in player numbers, the same can't be said for experienced coaches and referees. Both are in short supply, especially across the southland, and the need for both is set to grow again next year when the southern section of the CIF comes onboard with lacrosse as a varsity sport.

Michael Avenali of Santa Barbara played club lacrosse in college and in a post-collegiate league, and has now been a referee in the state for the last seven years. Before working the Foothill-Malibu match at the First 4, he called two games on Friday afternoon—giving him three in 24 hours.

"We're recruiting referees from other sports who might have to train in this sport but know the science of refereeing," he said. "It makes for some challenging situations at times, to get everyone to understand what your role is as a coach or as a referee."

But those problems can be rectified as lacrosse takes hold in Southern California. And if they can't be solved internally, Georgetown coach Dave Urick joked that he could be persuaded to help.

"I'll come out here and coach if you can guarantee me this kind of weather," he said. "I've got to get a heavier surfboard, though."

ON AIR

**April 2, 1 p.m.
Men: Navy@Georgetown (WMAR-2, ESPNU)**

**April 8, 8 p.m.
Men: Duke@Johns Hopkins (WMAR-2, ESPNU)**

**April 8, 8 p.m.
Men: Maryland@Navy (CSTV)**

**April 9, 1 p.m.
Men: Syracuse@Loyola (WMAR-2, ESPNU)**

**April 15, 3 p.m.
Women: Temple@Lafayette (CSTV)**

**April 16, 1 p.m.
Men: North Carolina@UMBC (WMAR-2)**

**April 16, 12:00 p.m.
Men: Army@Navy (CSTV)**



In a battle of teams that feature California players, Georgetown took down Syracuse 10-7 at the First 4.

DIRK DEWACHTER