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Lacrosse Is Crossing Into New Territory

By [PETE THAMEL](#)

PHILADELPHIA, May 29 - Shortly after Matt Cone began working at Microsoft in 1994, he looked into playing in a lacrosse league. Cone, who grew up in Massachusetts and played at Ithaca College, was dismayed to find there were only 30 teams in the state of Washington.

Today, there are more than 200 teams in Washington, including 86 high school club teams, a boom that is indicative of lacrosse's status as perhaps the fastest-growing team sport in America. The popularity of lacrosse - known as the fastest sport on two feet - has rapidly spread outside the traditional pockets of Long Island, upstate New York and the mid-Atlantic region. California, Florida, Michigan and Minnesota have sanctioned high school lacrosse programs in recent years, and Washington is expected to join them soon.

"The game is the mix of the best attributes of all sports," Cone, the president of the Washington Lacrosse Foundation, said recently in a telephone interview. "It has grace, finesse, contact and is a lot of fun to play and watch. People become addicted to it."

When Johns Hopkins plays Duke in the final of the N.C.A.A. men's Division I tournament at Lincoln Financial Field here Monday, about 40,000 fans are expected to attend. The crowd will be the second largest to attend an N.C.A.A. championship game this year; 47,262 attended the men's Division I college basketball title game at the Edward Jones Dome in St. Louis.

Lacrosse is considered North America's oldest sport. Its origin stretches back to the 15th century, when Native Americans played matches that lasted days on mile-long fields and involved hundreds of players. The teams used sticks that resembled a bishop's crosier, from which the name lacrosse derived.

Lacrosse is growing rapidly among men and women, but it is played differently for each. The men's game is more physical, as it allows checking and hitting, while the women's game is noncontact and predicated more on finesse and passing. According to the sport's governing body, US Lacrosse, 354,361 people played the game in 2004, compared to 253,931 in 2001.

Despite a rich history that includes the former Syracuse all-American and N.F.L. Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown, lacrosse has only recently begun to spread outside its Northeast roots.

Many credit the sport's growth to the proliferation of East Coast transplants to places like Colorado, Texas and the San Francisco Bay Area. As Cone found in Seattle, adult leagues for transplanted players were started first. Those adults helped start leagues for their children, who went on to play in high school.

Since 1995, the number of varsity high school lacrosse programs increased to 2,332 from 808. With such swift growth, many areas struggled to find enough coaches and officials.

"The biggest obstacle to growth is the lack of coaches," Alexis Longinotti, the Northern California chapter president of US Lacrosse, wrote in an e-mail interview. "There have been several teams that wanted to start, but weren't able to find a coach, so they didn't happen."

Longinotti, a former player at Stanford who is from Pennsylvania, said that there were more than 10,000 players in Northern California, with the biggest increases at the youth and high school levels.

Corporations, which can fuel the sport with sponsorship money, have taken notice.

Jim Davis, the chief executive of New Balance, said a cultlike devotion to lacrosse among its fans transcended the numbers and made the sport a viable investment. New Balance purchased the lacrosse equipment company Warrior last year.

Davis played lacrosse for a year while at Middlebury College, then watched both of his children play. But only recently has he seen the lacrosse stick become a status symbol on beaches in Southern California, evidence that the game has spread out West.

"I think it has more legs than soccer - no pun intended," Davis said. "Soccer has a problem after high school keeping kids

playing, as there's a big weeding-out period. Lacrosse kids will continue to play even after college."

New Balance is also a corporate partner of Major League Lacrosse, a six-team professional outdoor league that has teams in Boston, Rochester, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Uniondale, N.Y., and Clifton, N.J. It has corporate support from companies like Anheuser-Busch and Starbucks. Tommy Hilfiger designed the league's uniforms.

The fitness guru Jake Steinfeld, host of the "Body By Jake" infomercial, founded M.L.L. in 2001 and said in a telephone interview that the league would add four Western teams, including one in Los Angeles, for the 2006 season.

There is also a 10-team indoor league, the National Lacrosse League, with teams in cities from Anaheim to Toronto, and it plans to expand to Portland, Ore., and Edmonton, Alberta, in 2006.

Collegiate lacrosse, the sport's most visible outlet, provides further evidence of growth.

Programs like Vanderbilt and Oregon - not located in traditional lacrosse hotbeds - have added women's Division I varsity teams in recent years. Northwestern, a varsity program since only 2002, won the women's national championship last weekend, making it the first university outside the Eastern time zone to win the title.

The men's game is showing signs of increased parity, perhaps because there are more talented players throughout the country. Before this season, Princeton or Syracuse had won 11 of the past 13 national titles. Princeton did not make the 16-team N.C.A.A. tournament this season, finishing with a 5-7 record. Syracuse lost to Massachusetts in the opening round of the tournament, ending a streak of 22 consecutive years of reaching the semifinals.

Despite the more balanced field, Division I men's lacrosse is one of the few places where the sport's growth has been inhibited. According to N.C.A.A. participation studies, there were 54 Division I teams in 2004, only three more than in 1994.

Some coaches and administrators say gender-equity initiatives of Title IX have handcuffed universities from adding men's lacrosse, especially at institutions where Division I football is played because football, with its 85 scholarship athletes, creates an imbalance.

"I don't think there is any other solution that is within our ability to influence," said Steve Stenersen, the executive director of US Lacrosse. "The issues that are limiting Division I men's lacrosse growth are far bigger than lacrosse and far bigger than any sport."

Some college coaches are concerned, saying the sport is hindered at its most prominent level and cannot expand.

"There's going to be a crisis of opportunity, and I have no idea what the answer is," Virginia Coach Dom Starsia said. "I really don't see a resolution of this issue."

Judith Sweet, the N.C.A.A.'s senior vice president for championships and education services, points to expansion numbers in all divisions of lacrosse, male and female, and predicts continued growth.

"The solution lies in evaluating how existing resources are used and/or generating new resources to best meet the interests of males and females on campus," Sweet said in an e-mail message. "Title IX should not be blamed for institutional sponsorship and financial decisions."