

SCHOOLS' IN

DESPITE SEVERAL OBSTACLES, HIGH SCHOOL LACROSSE IN ONTARIO IS GROWING IN POPULARITY, MAINLY DUE TO THE ENTHUSIASM, COMMITMENT AND DEDICATION OF THE COACHES WHO ARE TRULY PASSIONATE ABOUT THE SPORT THEY LOVE

// By Melissa Yollick

field time and lack of funding, to more complex issues such as the sport not being sanctioned as an official Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) at the university level (for men), and the lack of athletic scholarships at Canadian universities. While there is still significant room for growth, and some challenges that lie ahead, it seems the enthusiasm from the coaches — who simply love the game — is what is driving lacrosse's positive progression.

Becoming an OFSAA sanctioned sport in 2007 has no doubt helped develop high school field lacrosse over the past few years. However, since lacrosse (at the high school level) is played in the spring, it depends on the availability of outdoor fields, thus the season's length is at the mercy of school board regulations that do not allow teams to start playing until May 1. One way around this obstacle is to install turf fields, which may be customary in private and independent schools, but not for public schools that are already feeling the pinch of tightening budgets. And it is because of turf fields that teams like St. Michael's College in Toronto, Ont., can start practicing right after March Break — more than a month before many of the public schools.

Besides the turf versus grass debate, some of the other challenges confronting high school lacrosse affect all schools and high school sports, such as dividing the leagues by school population instead of ability.

"It is a challenge because we have a couple of schools in our conference that could probably be better suited playing with teams that are more on par with their skill level, but they have



Photos: Paul Grossinger

High school sports in Ontario is no joking matter. Whether it is hockey, rugby, track & field or volleyball, both boys and girls from grades 9 to 12 are participating at record levels, and at great intensity.

You can now throw lacrosse into the mix of high school sports garnering greater interest from kids, university coaches and the media as participation in the game has expanded to 70 boys and 60 girls lacrosse teams in Ontario, according to the Ontario Federation of School

Athletic Associations (OFSAA). And with many kids landing scholarships to play at colleges in the United States, there is no doubt that high school lacrosse in Ontario is only getting stronger.

However, there are still several issues that stand in the way of the sport ever reaching the popularity of more traditional high school sports, such as hockey and basketball. The concerns from high school lacrosse coaches vary from the usual complaints like competition for



to play based on school population,” says Rob McDonald, the boy’s field lacrosse coach at St. Mary Catholic School in Pickering, Ont.

As for girls’ high school field lacrosse, there are some schools that are seeing more development, such as St. Mary, which started a girls’ program this year. But where the most development lies is at the university level because Canadian women’s field lacrosse has been sanctioned as an official CIS sport since 1998. This status provides them with larger budgets, among other benefits, making it easier to play more games.

“One of the barriers is the failure of Canadian universities to sanction men’s lacrosse as an official CIS sport, so many of our best college-bound lacrosse players go to the United States,” says Greg Reid, director of athletics at St. Andrew’s College in Aurora.



It is evident by watching just one game that high school lacrosse is surely not lacking talented, passionate and skilled players. It is this skill level that attracts many coaches from U.S. Division I, II and III colleges.

“There’s about 150 Canadians on various scholarships and bursaries right now playing men’s lacrosse [in the U.S.],” says Reid. “In Canada, there are a number of universities playing lacrosse, and have been doing so since the early 1980s. The Canadian universities generally do not have athletic scholarships. We are told this may be changing, but we haven’t seen it yet.”

While there are a number of former Ontario high school students currently playing lacrosse at U.S. universities on athletic scholarships, talent alone cannot lead to receiving a scholarship. Many high school coaches are teachers as well, with busy schedules and not enough resources or time to place their students’ academic and athletic prowess in front of U.S. college coaches.

>> *Continued on page 18*



ST. PETER'S CROWNED CHAMPIONS



At this year’s OFSAA Boy’s AAA/AAAA field lacrosse championships held on June 4-5 at the Sheppard’s Bush Conservation Area in Aurora, 12 teams started the two day event with only one goal in mind: to be crowned champion. However, only one team left the tournament with the right to this claim and that was Peterborough’s St. Peter’s Secondary School which beat Holy Cross Catholic Secondary School 14-11 in the gold medal game. St. Andrews College nipped Leo Austin Catholic Secondary School 8-7 to take home the bronze medal.

Going into the two-day, pool play tournament, the 12 teams were ranked in the following order: #1 Holy Cross, St. Catharines (SOSSA Champion); #2 St. Andrews, Aurora (CISAA Champion); #3 St. Peter’s, Peterborough (COSSA Champion); #4 Father Leo Austin, Whitby (LOSSA Champion); #5 Malvern Collegiate Institute, Toronto (TDSSAA Champion); #6 MSGR Paul Dwyer Catholic High School, Oshawa (LOSSA Representative); #7 Mayfield Secondary School, Caledon (ROPSSAA Champion); #8 Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School, Burlington (GHAC Champion); #9 Sir William Mulock Secondary School, Newmarket (YRAA Champion); #10 Aurora High School, Aurora (YRAA Representative); #11 Brampton Centennial Secondary School, Brampton (ROPSSAA Representative); #12 St. Joseph Catholic High School, Nepean (NCSSAA Champion).

In the OFSAA Boys’ A/AA Field Lacrosse Championship game, held in Peterborough on June 1-2, Hagersville Secondary School defeated Holy Cross Catholic Secondary School 13-10.



Photos: Paul Grossinger

“Teachers in the public and catholic school systems have their plate full with teaching. If kids want to get athletic scholarships in the States, they almost have to do it themselves. They have to go to summer camp in the U.S. and they have to promote themselves because most teachers don’t have the information, the experience or the extra time to do it for them,” adds Reid.

That being said, there are coaches who are going above and beyond to make sure their players get noticed. Next year, both St. Mary and St. Michael’s are planning to go to Florida to promote their teams in front of university coaches. This June, St. Michael’s went down to New England to showcase 10 students in front of approximately 50 U.S. university coaches, while St. Andrew’s ventured on a similar trip to Pennsylvania earlier in the year.

“It takes a lot of leg work on a high school coach’s behalf and I know most are interested in moving their kids to a higher level. They are in it for the student athletes, and you hope that when their playing days are done they are going to jump back in there themselves and help with the next generation,” says St. Mary’s McDonald.



Some professional players have done just that, such as Jim Veltman and Jason Crosbie, former and current Toronto Rock players, respectively, who coach high school and other junior field lacrosse teams in Ontario. “Because of the dynamic of professional lacrosse, professional athletes are very accessible,” adds Alex Fescura, head coach of the St. Michael’s boys lacrosse team.

It is these men, and the other men and woman coaching high school lacrosse throughout Ontario, who are fueling interest and excitement in the game for the younger players, and are stimulating the growth of the sport.

“Ideally, the high school players that I have now that are going to university will comeback in five years time and say, ‘Coach, can I give you a hand?’ or they become teachers and start their own teams, and give back to the sport,” says a hopeful McDonald.

And with more opportunities to play at the university level, the more players there will be to come back and pass on their enthusiasm to the next generation of high school student-athletes. ♦

Melissa Yollick is a freelance writer in Toronto, Ont.