



WONDERFUL MEMORIES

THE ONTARIO LACROSSE FESTIVAL IS AN ANNUAL EVENT WHERE THE SPORT OF LACROSSE IS PUT ON A PEDESTAL FOR PLAYERS, COACHES, PARENTS, OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS AND FANS TO WITNESS, ENJOY AND REMEMBER

// By Lance Naismith

For Shane MacDonald, they were the longest 35 seconds in his life. Let's take you back to the 2004 Ontario Lacrosse Festival and MacDonald, a left creaseman at the time for the Elora Mohawks, scored what appeared to be the game winning goal in a championship game. This is the memory that stands out in his mind when looking back at his experiences playing in the Ontario Lacrosse Festival.

His advice for today's Festival athletes: enjoy the atmosphere, love the game and cherish every moment you are there.

And that is what the Ontario Lacrosse Festival is all about.

The development of the Ontario Lacrosse Festival, launched in 2004, is based on a rich historical background of lacrosse in Ontario.

The Ontario Lacrosse Association (OLA), the oldest sport organization in the province and sole governing body for lacrosse, was established way back in 1897. Its mission was to "administer, promote and develop the national summer sport of Canada within Ontario."

To showcase youth involved in the sport and let them compete at a high level, the Ontario Lacrosse Festival was developed. Today, both Whitby and Oshawa host the Festival with the former's Iroquois Park Sports Centre being the epicentre. In just six years, the festival has become one of the largest youth sporting events in the province, hosting 401 teams and more than 6,800 athletes, and featuring competition for 35 provincial and national lacrosse championships for kids between the ages of six and 16.

This year, the event stretches from July 30 to August 8. The multi-jurisdictional nature of this event allows players and coaches to test their skills against players from across North America and to observe new playing strategies. But what cannot be lost amidst all of the competition and top-notch lacrosse play is the family atmosphere of the event.

It is also an opportunity for lacrosse manufacturers and OLA supporters to showcase their wares to players, coaches, parents and lacrosse fans in general.

"The Festival is the ideal time for us to interact directly with players, parents and officials and gather their feedback on what we're doing well and what opportunities are out there. We're always thinking about the player," says Jay Rabjohn of Gait Lacrosse Canada.

The Ontario Lacrosse Festival, with a budget of \$900,000, attracts more than 45,000 people over its 10 days. Bob McMahon, assistant coach for the Team Ontario Girls Bantam Box lacrosse team, views the event from two



Photo courtesy of Pixels Photography Services



distinct perspectives: coach and parent. As a parent, it is "very special to see your own kids do it" and, as a coach, it is "nice to see representatives of the province do well." To McMahon, one value of attending the festival is "having met other parents over the years and made friends that last years."

Troyhann Santos, head coach of Team

Ontario's Bantam Girl's squad, knows the pressure of this event as she is also the owner of The Lax Shack, a lacrosse retail store in Pickering and an event sponsor that has supported the Festival for several years. Balancing her head coach position, along with preparing her company for this major event, is not easy. Last year, many of her players

"participated in the field provincials, box provincials and the nationals — all at the same time during the Festival," she notes, adding some players had to push the limit by playing nine straight days of intense lacrosse.

But is it all pressure? Santos notes that players would watch the games and participate in the events as well. They enjoy being part of the Festival, especially "because of the large number of spectators at the event."

Santos has seen the potential of the festival since day one and isn't surprised it has become an international event. Her brother is even bringing a team from San Jose, Ca., to participate.

Wendy Cuthbert, vice-president of development for the OLA, notes that the Festival keeps growing and gets better each year. For her, "the addition of the Girls Bantam Nationals was exciting, not only for the players but also for all of the Girl's Box Provincial participants".

Enjoy your time at the Festival and feel the thrill of competition and make some friends. Or, as Shane MacDonald notes: "It's a great time and they'll have lots of fun." ♦

Lance Naismith is a freelance writer in Oakville, Ont.

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