



IN GOOD HEALTH

IF ENTRY LEVEL COMPETITIVE PLAY IS A GAUGE OF LONG-TERM SUCCESS, THEN THE RECORD-BREAKING UNDER-11 GIRLS FIELD LACROSSE PROVINCIAL CHAMPIONSHIPS PROVED THE GAME'S POPULARITY IS GAINING MOMENTUM

On July 3 at three mini-fields at Burlington's Brant Hills Park, 11 teams — nearly triple the entrants from the previous two years — competed under a sweltering sun for provincial championship bragging rights.

Oshawa 1 was the class of the "A" Division, going undefeated in clinching the Ontario title. Turning heads in the "B" Division was champion Oakville, a first-year club with girls, like many in Burlington that day, that had dramatically improved from the start of the season.

"Looking back on the championship, the scores in the games were almost always close indicating competitive play," says Todd Pepper, the director of development for Ontario Women's Lacrosse and head coach of the University of Toronto women's varsity team. "I was watching a semi-final game and the ball didn't go out of bounds for five minutes. The quality of play changes so much during the season. By the time they get to provincials the girls understand the game much better, plus their skills have improved greatly since the first day of games."



Oshawa 1 head coach Carolyn Toll has a unique perspective. Toll, who played, officiated and coached at the international level for Canada, says she saw dramatic improvement over the four-week regular season and throughout the one-day provincial tournament in Burlington. The high school teacher deems the 2010 league a "huge success" in the teaching and refining of game skills, the understanding of game concepts and introducing the competitive nature of rep lacrosse.

"In the final game, the game was played in the air as most of the girls were passing and catching at speed, a skill that is usually acquired in the later stages of U15," Toll asserts. "One of the biggest achievements for all clubs was spacing as the athletes, as time went on, gained a good understanding of where to be on the field. Getting that concept is half the battle at the highest level."

What makes some of these achievements easier for the girls — most of them between the ages of seven to 10 — is a tweaking of the rules that streamlines the



game, including playing on smaller fields and with only eight players aside, as well as prohibiting stick checking and allowing shots on goal only after the ball had been passed between three different players. The entire season consisted of games played on four Saturdays including, the one-day Ontario championship.

Those modifications encouraged a quicker understanding of the game while emphasizing basics, like passing, catching, cradling and scooping, Pepper says.

"This is an entry-level program for the sport, meaning the players, parents and coaches are new," he adds. "Girls field lacrosse is very different from men's field or box lacrosse. We want to keep to the basics as much as possible;



to make it easier for new minor associations to get involved and make girls field lacrosse available in their community."

The three new minor lacrosse associations offering field lacrosse for girls were Oakville, Mimico and a coalition team of Toronto Stars and Toronto Beaches. Pepper says the short



season was intentional, as was the use of a softer pink ball.

"We are trying to reach the families that go to the cottage for the summer and would not normally participate in rep lacrosse that continues into August," he explains. "The commitment level is low as a way to get people into the game so they can see what we have to offer.

"The soft pink ball," he adds, "is used because we want to emphasize safety, but we have learned there are other benefits as well. It is more difficult to catch the soft ball because it's lighter. But that helps develop what I would call soft hands and when the players get to the real ball they can catch more easily."



Also, many players in U11 take turns playing goalie and the soft ball doesn't hurt when it hits them so the fear of being hit by the ball is diminished.

Another positive note regarding this year's season was the large number of female head coaches and assistant coaches on the sidelines, many of whom are current or former players and who serve as role models for their young charges.

As for the future, Pepper hopes more organizations will add the youngest age group to their girls programs. Not only would the girls learn a new skill, but the party atmosphere at the provincial championships — barbecues, loud dance music, big shady tents for relaxing and making new friends — definitely showed field lacrosse as a great way to have fun. ♦

