



# ALL THE WAY TO PRO

## OLA JUNIOR "B" LACROSSE A GREAT PLACE TO GROW

// By Mike Hancock

**T**he Ontario Junior B Lacrosse League (OJBLL) has provided many of today's top Major Series Lacrosse (MSL) and National Lacrosse League (NLL) players with the foundation for their careers and those numbers are only going to grow moving forward.

The OJBLL, which is the largest lacrosse league in Canada, consists of twenty-six teams that cover the map from one end of the province to the other and also includes one team in Quebec. After playing a 20-game regular season within each teams' respective

conference with no crossover play, 16 teams (8 from each conference) advance to the play-offs and could play up to four rounds of best-of-five series on the way to crowning an Ontario Champion each year.

Recently, the past half decade has featured four teams enjoying tremendous success and making it the league's final four on a regular basis. The Six Nations Rebels, Halton Hills Bulldogs, Elora Mohawks and the Green Gaels have each advanced to the league semi-finals in at least four of the last six seasons (2012 included) with Six Nations being in the

mix in each of those six seasons and Halton Hills accomplishing the feat five times.

"Over the past few years those four teams have become perennial favourites to go to the Founder's Cup Tournament," said long-time OJBLL Commissioner Dave Vernon. "These four teams have taken Jr. "B" to a new level of consistency. Their programs bring out the best in each player first year or fifth year and games between these teams are a joy to watch."

Each organization has taken different paths to success. Both Six Nations and the Green Gaels are tied very closely to their local



Junior "A" organizations and the success enjoyed at the Junior B level has prepared these players to have similar success at the Junior A level.

"It comes down to the passion and desire of the players and what they want and what they're willing to do for the game they love," said Wray Maracle, General Manager of the Six Nations Junior "B" Rebels. "The Rebels, having developed a program, rewards those players that are willing to buy into that system the Rebels have in place. The players will only get better. The Rebels usually have players for their first few years of Junior lacrosse, while the (Six Nations Junior "A") Arrows tend to have a majority of their players being 20 and 21 year-olds. The Rebels rarely have fifth year players on their roster and the coaches and management expect this to be the case every year."

Elora and Halton Hills have worked with various Junior "A" affiliates in recent years, but are built on the hometown pride that players have instilled in them from a very young age. Players often turn down chances to play

at a higher level early in their Junior lacrosse careers. In some cases, completely bypassing the Junior "A" ranks and still enjoying success at the MSL and NLL levels.

"Elora is probably one of the best places that you could ever play lacrosse. The fans and the community are so full of support it is hard to believe sometimes," said current Toronto Rock veteran forward Kasey Beirnes who spent all five of his Junior lacrosse years playing "B" in Elora.

"In Elora, lacrosse is like a religion and everybody does believe in the Mohawks year in and year out. If you played for the Mohawks you were considered a local celebrity and would be recognized throughout town. This was pretty special for me as I grew up idolizing the Mohawks. If you have ever been to a game in Elora to see the size of the crowds that they play in front of, it's a prime example of why people choose to play for Elora. The fans, and a great organization are two reasons I did choose to play at home and this seems to be a common theme with many players."

Kody Lyons who spent all five of his Junior lacrosse years at home in Halton Hills.

"Winning a championship with your friends that you grew up with and getting to play at such a high level is something pretty remarkable and something not everyone has the privilege of experiencing. Players who play for Halton Hills have it pretty good and I don't think there's a better organization to play for."

While Junior "A" lacrosse is undoubtedly the highest level of Junior lacrosse played in the country and the much more traveled route to the pros, the OJBLL is providing players with an opportunity to prepare to compete at the next level, whether it be Junior "A", Senior lacrosse or the NLL. It's also keeping the grassroots of the game alive and well in many smaller communities and more recently established lacrosse hotbeds by giving local players a place to play Junior lacrosse at an elite level. ♦

**Mike Hancock is the Communications Director of the Toronto Rock Lacrosse Club.**

While Six Nations has had a stranglehold on the Founder's Cup winning three of the past five titles, the Halton Hills Bulldogs captured the championship in 2010 making them the only team from the OJBLL's Eastern Conference to win the national championship during that five year span.

"It's an incredible rush playing in your hometown in front of over a thousand people in the playoffs," explained Bulldogs captain