

A SPORT FOR EVERY KID

DURHAM SCHOOL TOURNAMENT NOW REACHES 1,000 STUDENTS

>> BY DONNA PARIS

EVERY MAY, KIDS IN DURHAM REGION

get to participate in an annual lacrosse tournament. And this year, more than 1,000 students came ready to play and have some fun.

"It's a great introduction to the sport, all you need are sticks and balls," says Rob Dymont, the convener and a health and physical education teacher with the Durham District School Board in Southern Ontario. "The great thing about the tournament is that it's accessible to all kids — you don't have to be a superstar to play."

Dymont started the tournament nine years ago at Sherwood Public School in Oshawa for juniors (grades 4 to 6). The tournament followed him when he moved to a new school, where it just kept getting bigger. Now the co-ed tournament is held at the Oshawa Civic Recreation Complex on indoor and outdoor fields. Open to girls and boys in elementary school, 40 teams in each category (grades 4 to 6, and grades 7 and 8) play over two half days.

"We started with 16 teams and now we have 80 teams playing," says Dymont, who is actually having to turn teams away now. The event is funded by the individual schools, which pay \$85 per team, and each team is guaranteed a minimum of four games.

Dymont specifically organizes the tournament to be played with masters rules and even those are modified. "It's no risk, no body checking," he says. If a player traps the ball, they have possession, so there's no contact, and a player can only hold onto the ball for five seconds before it has to be passed. The best part? No one gets to hog the ball.

In this tournament, first-time lacrosse players and high-level players get to play side-by-side. "Actually, I think it's the kids who play lacrosse in our community that have more difficulty adjusting to the rules," Dymont says. This year, one of the best lacrosse players was a team captain, who actually became the best assist person in the tournament.

That's what makes the game accessible to all kids, says Cheryl MacNeill, a teacher at Sunset Heights Public School in Oshawa, who has coached teams in the tournament. "The tournament levels the playing ground for everyone," she says. "We had a junior and intermediate team, the kids had never played lacrosse and they loved it." In fact, she adds, the kids became quite competitive, much to the

surprise of some of the teams with rep players.

"Lacrosse sometimes has that club like atmosphere — if you aren't born into a family, if you don't know about it, then you don't have the opportunity," says MacNeill. "Playing in this tournament certainly opens the doors for those kids that would never have even played, and playing at school introduces a whole new group to the sport." It's a quick season, and the tournament is a fun day for the kids who get to try out a new sport, she adds.

"Our mantra is to try and give the kids who can't afford access to some of the sports in the community a chance to play it in school," says Dymont. "My dad was a phys ed teacher and he said it best — there's a sport out there for every kid, so let's give them a chance at every sport." Similarly, Dymont is a big proponent of exposing children to as many sports as possible in school, and lacrosse works well, he adds, as kids pick it up quickly, it's not just for elite athletes and the season is short, so it doesn't interfere with playing other sports. "Why not play lacrosse?" asks Dymont. And now, even some professional hockey players are asking why children are playing hockey year-round, he adds.

"Lacrosse has every aspect of every other sport: you need vision and anticipation, it encourages teamwork, it builds camaraderie and it's a sport for both genders," says Terry Rowland, vice-president of marketing for the Canadian Lacrosse Association. "The whole thing about lacrosse is that you have to get more kids involved, so it has to be fun — you need a strong and successful house league, that's the heart of the association."

Many of the kids in the tournament have never had the opportunity to play lacrosse before, says Rowland, who has also coached kids in the tournament. "When you are coaching them and they start to get it, you know because they just get the biggest smile on their face," he says. "They don't know about the game, but they start to get really excited about it." For him, that's the fun part: watching the kids improve and get a little better with every game they play during the day.

How does the tournament happen? "It's a lot of work and a lot of hours — it takes time to organize, collect the money, set up a schedule," says Dymont. He likes to get everyone involved, so older kids come to referee and he takes a full class to do scorekeeping. The big thing is

finding a facility to play the games, however, even if you can't get one that is large enough, you can run the tournament at individual schools. It's simply a matter of having people, such as coaches and a convener, willing to give of their time to make it happen, he adds.

Rowland is impressed with the model of the tournament. "It's an excellent way to promote the sport," he says. "Some people think we should play it the way it's played by associations and at club levels, but this is the best way to get the development of lacrosse to happen."

The tournament takes effort, of course, but Dymont thinks there's no reason that it couldn't be replicated all over the province, anywhere really. "When it's this simple, when you adopt the rules that we have, you are going to have success, whether you are running it in Winnipeg, Saskatchewan, Quebec or the Maritimes."

In fact, MacNeill, who is from Western Canada originally, says she did not even start playing lacrosse until after she graduated from high school. "There was no real grassroots development," she says. "In Ontario, they get that — they are truly developing the school programs and getting those going." For her, it's the opportunities now available, especially for girls that are so exciting. "Because it's so fast growing, there are more opportunities to play," she says. "My daughter plays house league, she's not necessarily a competitive kid, but she loves the game — it's a great opportunity for kids to experience a new sport and not feel intimidated."

As an ambassador of the sport, that's Dymont's mission: To get more kids playing at the grassroots level and introduce a sport that can be played indoor or outdoor and at a rep or house league level. "If kids are having a great time, if they're having a blast, if we get one or 10 who want to play more, then I'm happy — and really, as long as they're enjoying something, who cares?" he says.

How do the children feel about it? Some want to go home and play with their friends, some want to play on a team and, as one kid put it at the end of the day: "Everybody should play, at least once, and I bet if they try it, they will fall in love with it." **OLM**

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