

CANADIAN UNIVERSITY FIELD LACROSSE

STILL MAKING THE GRADE

>> By JACK KOHANE PHOTOS: JEFF VOGAN

IT'S ACADEMIC. The class of athletes and the quality of field lacrosse play at the post-secondary educational level has never been better. Ontario university teams are garnering top marks for performance as well as accolades from fans in the know.

"Today's lacrosse is just incredible, heads and shoulders above what it was even 10 or 15 years ago," enthuses Mark Walker, a former coach and player who first fell in love with the game at age four. "The players are bigger, quicker, more conditioned and better prepped than ever. The coaches are savvier, on top of their game, and really understand the mechanics and nuances of the sport." Field lacrosse has come a long way, he notes, since he played it 30 years ago.

Nurturing that natural evolution is the Canadian University Field Lacrosse Association (CUFLA), a league of men's field lacrosse teams connected with several Eastern Canadian universities and colleges. Founded in 1985, CUFLA was originally known as the Ontario University Field Lacrosse Association (OUFLA) and, as the name suggests, was entirely Ontario-based. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, OUFLA expanded to include more teams across Ontario and later into Quebec. Walker has been involved with both leagues, and was there at the start of CUFLA. He's currently CUFLA's Treasurer and always enjoys telling the league's storied history, which had

its genesis on a shoestring budget driven by a nucleus of lacrosse-impassioned students of which he was one while working to earn his degree at the University of Guelph.

The league, Walker recalls, got off the ground with a three-team tournament and by 1986, its first full season of operations, was concluded with the McMaster Spring Classic played at Hamilton's Ivor Wynne Stadium. By 1988, the league had expanded to include Waterloo's Wilfrid Laurier University, Western, Brock, McMaster, York University, University of Toronto, and the University of Waterloo. "At that point we wanted to formalize the league and after serious consideration, a constitution was written up, putting rules on paper for league play, player eligibility, and the organizational eligibility of the universities," he notes.

Another UofG alumnus who was there at CUFLA's birth, Sam Kosakowski, remembers those as the league's lean years. "It was a grass-roots movement that began with a 'hey, do you want to start a lacrosse program,' and that was it," he chuckles. "We elected a commissioner and agreed to meet a few times a year to discuss the direction of the league."

Kosakowski, now UofG's Alumni Advancement Manager and Head Coach of the Gryphons, the university's men's lacrosse team that won the league championships the past two years, smiles at the thought of how



the players arrived at their games. "We'd roll up in our cars and just start to play lacrosse. For some of those games, there was quite a distance to travel, but we did it gladly because we just wanted to play lacrosse." On the way home, it was a quick stop at a roadside burger joint to help fortify the team's bonding. Kosakowski started coaching the Gryphons in 1994 and was a player-coach for the team from 1987-1992. "Things are a lot different today," he says. "Teams travel to games by bus and the meals are a bit more nutritious," he nods with amusement.

Having grown to 10 teams in 2002, OUFLA changed its name to the Canadian University Field Lacrosse Association to reflect the additions of McGill University and Bishop's University, both located in Quebec. The league expanded to 12 teams in 2007 with the additions of Trent (Peterborough) and Laurentian (Sudbury) universities. These additions split the league into two divisions (east and west) based on geographic location of member schools. Concordia University in Montreal became the 13th member, the third in Quebec, in 2012.

Last year, The Canadian University Field Lacrosse Association celebrated its 30th anniversary, which culminated with a further expansion of the league to 15 teams with the addition of Nipissing University and the University of Ottawa. The teams compete for the Baggataway Cup, the Canadian university field lacrosse championship hosted by one of the member schools, awarded annually to the winner of the post-season tournament by CUFLA.

From its humble 'club' beginnings, the league has steadily advanced over the last





three decades, where the competition is intense and continues to improve each and every year. “This ongoing growth bodes well for the continued expansion of men’s field lacrosse at various universities across Canada,” says Ryan McGrath, former CUFLA Commissioner (2008-2014) and McGill grad. “Many CUFLA graduates go to play professional lacrosse, or play for Canada’s national box or field lacrosse teams. CUFLA’s recruiting efforts are not simply Canadian-based, as many of our American neighbors know of the “NCAA scholarships myths” and head north to play “college” lacrosse in Canada. McGill’s roster is roughly 50 percent American, while Bishop’s, Queen’s, University of Toronto and Western have all rostered American players in recent years.”

McGrath cites a few reasons why he believes the league has significantly improved. “The first being the quality of players coming

out of the OLA system,” he emphasizes. “Also, many CUFLA programs now have official varsity status and are actively recruiting, combined with the realization that there are some myths regarding full scholarships and how Canadian schools can offer a low cost high quality education while playing in a very competitive field lacrosse league.”

In fact, many decorated lacrosse players turn down NCAA scholarships to play in the CUFLA right out of high school. A 60 percent scholarship at an American university, especially with the recent decline in the Canadian dollar, is still more expensive than Canadian tuition. Moreover, there are many players each year that decide to transfer or continue grad school studies in Ontario. Among CUFLA’s most famous graduates are National Lacrosse League (NLL) legends Shawn Williams and Colin Doyle.

According to Eddie Comeau, former NLL and National Team coach, the heightened quality of the game is attributable to skills development and increasing public interest in field lacrosse. “We are now getting players who have grown up playing field lacrosse and playing at club leagues to hone their skills,” he says from his home near Hamilton. “People’s awareness of the sport continues to grow and grow. A few years ago, that

knowledge wasn’t there. What is spurring more interest is that public access to field lacrosse has opened up dramatically in the past few years. We may not be an OUAA-sanctioned (Ontario Universities Athletic Association) sport, but that hasn’t hindered us in attracting top talent. All the universities and colleges associated with CUFLA support their respective teams.”

Looking ahead, CUFLA is banking on fresh ideas and smarts to propel field lacrosse forward. Its new League Commissioner, is 33 year-old high-profile lawyer Dave Fenicky, a player and former coach of the University of Toronto Varsity Blues. As an admittedly-biased observer, Fenicky says that the 2014 Baggataway Cup Championship provided a showcase of some very high-level lacrosse and out-of-province players featured prominently on the final four teams. “This is significant, because it suggests that the opportunity to play in CUFLA is now a significant factor in some students’ choices to leave home for school. The McGill roster is an excellent example of this trend, boasting players from as far away as the U.S. states of Florida and Utah.”

As the new Commissioner of the league, Fenicky sees one of his key goals as driving the sport to be played nationally at the uni-

versity level from coast to coast. “There is a thriving league in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and they are always keen to travel to test themselves against CUFLA’s best. Naturally, the next logical step would be expansion westward.”

If you look at the coaching staff of existing CUFLA teams, many coaches are former CUFLA players. It seems a given, from Fenicky’s viewpoint, that many of the players who come to eastern Canada from out west will return home, maintain their love of the game and work with their local schools to build a true western conference to compete with teams from Ontario and Quebec. “We already know that the skill level is there, the issues facing us are primarily logistical”; not-so-subtle code for “financial”. But one thing is certain: the will is there. “We need to organize, get the word out, and attract more nation-wide interest in our league so we can showcase the quality play we are already putting out there on a daily basis.”

Fenicky points to Canada’s national motto is *A Mari Usque Ad Mare* (From Sea to Sea) as a perfect model to emulate. “Canada’s national summer sport is lacrosse. A Canadian University Field Lacrosse Association stretching from coast to coast just makes sense,” he says. **OLM**

