



STILL RUNNIN'

GROWTH AND GREATNESS IN THE ONTARIO JUNIOR MEN'S FIELD LACROSSE LEAGUE

>> BY MICHELLE MORRA-CARLISLE PHOTOS: TAMMY SCHUETZKOWSKI

AT A TIME WHEN HARDLY ANYONE in Ontario played field lacrosse, Terry Lloyd and his friends decided to start a league just for fun. It was 1980, and three teams signed up from Oshawa, St. Catharines and Toronto. Word caught on and eventually teams from other southern Ontario towns participated when they could generate enough interest.

The Ontario Junior Men's Field Lacrosse League (OJMFL) is an amateur, volunteer driven, club based field lacrosse league for players aged 15-19. Lloyd, who had been a prolific goal scorer as a Junior player in the 70s, was the league's first Commissioner. He has seen the league grow from three teams to as many as 20 in peak seasons. The league had 16 teams in the 2014 season and expects two or three new ones this fall.

From the start, joining a fall field lacrosse league appealed to players as something dif-



ferent to add to their athletic roster. It also gave them a chance to team up with kids they had played against in box lacrosse. Meanwhile, it turned out they were gaining new skills that would serve them well in the future.

The OJMFL hit a major growth point in 1988, which marked the beginning of the World Championships. Suddenly those Ontario players were being groomed for opportunities to play outside of Canada.

"I think the league has grown over the years for a couple of reasons," Lloyd says. "Firstly the players have the opportunity to play the game of lacrosse for an extended period each year. Secondly it gives them a chance at U.S. scholarships."

Box lacrosse players, while intensely athletic, soon discovered the benefits of being skilled in both disciplines. After all, field lacrosse was the game played by every other country in the world, box being primarily a Canadian version of lacrosse. What had started out as a Fall Fun League became integral to a well-rounded player's skills.

Lacrosse hit another growth spurt in the mid-90s. Dave Vernon of Niagara took over as league commissioner circa 2000 after putting in time as bus driver, coach and other roles. He says of his predecessor, "Terry was the person responsible for getting the league started and he ran it for 20 years before asking for help."

Gradually, as more Canadian kids were playing field lacrosse, they attracted the attention of US coaches. Canadian players had a great advantage: most had also played box, which is unique to Canada. While there is no checking in field lacrosse, a history of "being beat on constantly" —as Vernon puts it—in box lacrosse made Canadian players fearless on the field.

Canadian kids were accustomed to being cross-checked. They shot close to the goal and ended up being scoring leaders in U.S. college games. Another factor was that in box lacrosse, players shoot at a 4 foot net, whereas field is a 6 foot net. "Canadian kids got very good at shooting, at threading that ball in a small space," Vernon says.

He adds that while the U.S. wanted Canadian lacrosse players, the feeling was mutual. "In US colleges, lacrosse is considered an elite sport and receives an amazing amount of hype. Canadian kids see this and want to be part of it."

According to Vernon, most OJMFL players start out essentially playing box lacrosse on the field but quickly pick up on the different style of play. He compares field lacrosse to a game of



chess. "It seems like a slower game to people who are used to box lacrosse, but once they learn the rules they understand the chess-like thinking of the game. It's more cerebral," he says. "All moves have to be planned out before they're executed. There are few instances where you just throw a ball out and do a hail mary."

Another difference is in the goaltending. Whereas in box lacrosse the goalie's bulky equipment allows him to make saves with his body, the field lacrosse goalie is armed with just a chest protector, cup, helmet, gloves and stick. He must have exceptional hand-eye coordination since his only hope is to catch the ball with the stick.

The OJMFL plays every Sunday from the week after Labour Day to the end of October (except for Thanksgiving weekend). Teams usually play two games per day as part of a 12 game regular season and must qualify for the Championship weekend. Originally, there were three games in a day, but the league determined that two was the optimum number to reduce injuries from fatigue.

A grassroots league such as the OJMFL is a labour of love. Those it has benefited like to give back. Players often return to coach and as the torch is passed, along with experience and wisdom, players ultimately become more skilled and the game gets faster.

Also contributing to the speed of play is quality turf, which is increasingly replacing

grass in newer facilities. Grass tends to be uneven and muddy by autumn. "Turf provides a standardized playing surface," says current OJMFL Commissioner Mark Schuetzkowski. "If players aren't having to compensate for poor field conditions it allows them to show their skill sets more."

Today, the Ontario Junior Men's Field Lacrosse League is going strong. At the 2014 championships in Oshawa on October 26, the Oshawa Blue Knights were very strong all year and continued to display their dominance in the A loop. The Ottawa Nemesis were finally rewarded for their efforts by winning the B Division. Barrie Lakeshores peaked at the right time and rode that momentum into the playoffs to capture the C Championships. "Each division had some very exciting and extremely competitive semi-final and or final games," Schuetzkowski says.

The league is made possible by an executive and council comprised of representatives from each team. It is relatively inexpensive to join—registration is roughly \$250-300 per player (compared to \$400-800 for some winter leagues).

While Schuetzkowski now carries the torch, Vernon and Lloyd remain "go-to guys" as long-time friends of the league. "It means not having to reinvent the wheel all the time," Vernon says. "We can offer advice like, 'no, we did that in 1994 and it doesn't work.'" **OLM**