

GROWTH SPORTS: LACROSSE

Once the preserve of the north-eastern pocket of North America, and especially of expensive private schools and universities there, lacrosse is now taking the whole continent by storm. It has also become more international. The world championships were held in July this year in Manchester, UK, when 30 nations took part. Given the history of the sport, it was not too surprising that the US beat Canada in the final.

Exclusive sport becomes all-inclusive

The numbers of high-school students in the US alone who choose lacrosse as a spring and summer sport to take part in have doubled in a decade. The numbers come from the National Federation of State High School Associations, which puts the total number of girls and boys playing high-school lacrosse at around 150,000 compared to 75,000 in 2001.

Naturally, this has led to an increase in interest and participation at college level too. There are now so many university teams taking part (more than 200 in the men's competition alone) that their championship has three divisions. The women's competition also has three divisions, in which more than 300 university teams take part. The play-offs for crowning the national champions—the National Collegiate Athletic Association Lacrosse Final Four—frequently draw crowds of 100,000 spectators.

Media interest is also growing and a professional men's league, extending into Canada, has teams and fans in or around New York, Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, Denver and Toronto, although previous manifestations have had higher numbers of teams. The Canadian team, the Toronto Nationals, was only formed in 2009 and took the place of some of the US franchises

Men's lacrosse is a full-contact sport. It's legal to hit your opponent on the body, which means male players wear lots of padding and protection.

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Apparel and textile major and avid lacrosse player, Christina Hill of the University of Alabama, during the 2010 Outdoor Retailer Summer Market exhibition in Salt Lake City.

 Outdoor Retailer

that had fallen away. Toronto won the title at its first attempt, although it has had a poor second season. One of the interesting points about the Nationals is that the team-list includes five players from the Iroquois nation, to which some of the Native American tribes that invented the game belong.

For much of the twentieth century, the game was largely the preserve of prep schools and exclusive universities in the north-east of the US. For it to have grown, numerically and geographically, so quickly, is testimony to a new inclusiveness in lacrosse. Rich Donovan, a former player and coach at the University of Massachusetts men's team, is in favour of expansion, but insists children interested in the game must be allowed to learn it in a fun environment "with the scoreboard turned off". He fears some youngsters will be put off by being placed under too much pressure at a very young age. This applies to many more sports than lacrosse, of course.

Mr Donovan is also in favour of improvements that have taken place in the equipment lacrosse players get to use. He recalls having to work hard on the pocket area of his stick to make it usable again after a match in the rain. Advances in technology mean this is no longer necessary.

In the men's game, attacking players use a shorter stick than defenders. All have a basket-like pocket at the end in which to catch the ball and cradle it to keep it out of opponents' reach,

and from which to flick the ball to a team-mate or towards the opposition's goal. In the men's game, teams have ten players on the field at a time: a goalkeeper, three defenders, three midfielders and three attackers. It is a full-contact sport, so players wear helmets and padding under their shirts (usually short-sleeved) as well as arm-guards. They, even goalies, wear less protection on the lower body.

Women's teams have 12 players on the field at a time, with two extra midfielders. No body contact is permitted, so women traditionally wear little protection, except perhaps around the mouth and eyes, and sometimes gloves.

Christina Hill, a young fashion designer who took part in the 2010 Project OR design competition at the Outdoor Retailer Summer Market exhibition in Salt Lake City in August is a proud lacrosse player and living proof of the changes that have been taking place. Growing up near Atlanta, the idea of a lacrosse team was very new at her high school and college, even further south in Alabama. But it happened; she played all the way through high school and continues to combine lacrosse with being an apparel and textiles major at the University of Alabama.

"It's true that people have always regarded lacrosse as more of a northern game," she explains, "but my parents are from the north, so I have always been able to relate to that. I played from eighth grade and was one of the founders of the University of Alabama women's team."

She prefers the non-contact, "except by accident", nature of the women's game and the lack of padding. "We wear a knit top, a skirt like a tennis skirt and shorts underneath the skirt. On our feet, we just wear cleats like soccer cleats. Lacrosse is a great team sport and it's a lot of fun." 



Women play with far less protection and contact, but enjoy the speed and team-spirit of the sport just as much.

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