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Why lacrosse's popularity is spreading across the U.S.

RICK BURTON AND NORM O'REILLY

Published May 31, 2010



**RICK
BURTON**

Editor's note: This story is revised from the print edition.

The NCAA is scheduled to crown its 2010 Division I men's lacrosse champion today. Sadly for us, Syracuse University's bid to capture its third straight men's title was dashed in the first round of the tournament by Army. This year's women's NCAA champion, meanwhile, was slated to have been crowned on Sunday.



**NORM
O'REILLY**

Given these concurrent dates, our upstate New York location (standing hard in the box lacrosse-playing shadow of the Six Nations of the Iroquois) and our Canadian heritage, we decided it was time we wrote about the growth of lacrosse.

Known as Canada's national summer game, lacrosse represents one of the few NCAA major sports categories in which Ivy League schools like Cornell, Princeton, Brown and Yale can run comfortably with (and score on) the big boys from Syracuse, Notre Dame North Carolina and

Ohio State.

In the fast-growing women's game, which is played with slightly different rules from the men's game, blue-chip schools from Virginia, Northwestern and Stanford are commonplace near the top of the NCAA's rankings.

Finally, at the pro level, the Major League Lacrosse (the outdoor version of the men's college game) and National Lacrosse League (the pro version of box lacrosse, also known as indoor lacrosse) have both shown stability and staying power in the competitive sports entertainment world.

Setting those facts aside, what's more interesting is the astounding, almost exponential growth of the participation levels in this team game, invented by the original people of the land. Like a fast-spreading prairie fire, we can easily predict this sport has the surging capacity to emerge as a future revenue challenger to the other grass-based sports that North Americans cherish. We're not the only ones watching lacrosse: In a recent survey of 60 sporting goods industry experts, half picked lacrosse as the sport most likely to generate sales growth, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association's State of the Industry Report.

How interesting is it then that we might see North Americans return to their original athletic roots to play the oldest and formerly most popular game on the continent? And rather than read about a sport's owners and

players threatening a strike or lockout, this sport is springing back to life with little concern for the haphazard U.S. economy or competitive initiatives of far larger league-driven games.

That's nice to write, but we certainly recognize that suburban participation doesn't necessarily equate to high-performance TV ratings and blanket avidity. Soccer, with its massive youth participation numbers in the United States and Canada, continues to trail the NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB at the professional level.

Lacrosse growth

In fall 2009, the sport finance course at Syracuse was built around a project in lacrosse. Among the facts the students uncovered:

- Participation in U.S. high school lacrosse grew 528 percent between 1990 and 2008, as per the National Federation of State High School Associations.
- In 2007, it was estimated, by a survey authorized by the National Sporting Goods Association, that 1.2 million Americans older than age 7 had played lacrosse.
- By recent accounts, there are more than 240 men's and more than 300 women's college lacrosse teams playing in Division I, II and III.
- US Lacrosse reports suggested that in 2009, total lacrosse participation included more than 520,000 players, an increase of 8.4 percent from 2008 and more than double the 2001 number.
- An estimated 265,000 of those players were youths. US Lacrosse membership numbers (those players who are registered) hit 296,743 in 2008, a growth rate of 579 percent since the organization's inception in 1998.

Jim MacKenzie, the integrated marketing manager at New Balance Team Sports, which includes lacrosse brands such as Warrior and Brine, told us that lacrosse is "the growth sport for team sports in North America."

"The speed and strategies of the game and how the game is played matches up great with the other sports American kids are playing," he said. "Lacrosse has elements of football and ice hockey as well as the constant movement of soccer. It's natural in the spring for kids to move over to lacrosse. And playing lacrosse lets a young person carry their identity with them. Their stick is a part of who they are. Kids can bring their individual personalities to the game and it's really encouraged. Size and shape don't really matter."

So, in taking the input of the student research and MacKenzie's expertise, plus some of our own knowledge, we took a crack at attributing the growth drivers for lacrosse, and potentially for other sports.

1. Lacrosse has an original history and a devout following that is busting out of its original niche markets like Syracuse, Long Island and Baltimore.
2. Lacrosse is generally a high-scoring game that is played and enjoyed by both men and women. Plus, it sets up easily on a football or soccer field.
3. Lacrosse is a relatively easy game to learn and understand. Ball in the net equals one goal. Running, dodging, throwing, catching and shooting are frequent actions.
4. Lacrosse can be played in a low-cost way. True, the full competition game requires a helmet/eye guard and some padding, but recreationally, other than the stick and a ball, the game can be played on any piece of grass



STAN HUBER / INSIDE LACROSSE

Lacrosse offers college athletic departments a women's team sport option in dealing with gender equality issues.

with two makeshift nets. A decent game can be played with as few as six people, and two people can play a game of catch almost anywhere.

5. Lacrosse has caught the attention of big-time sports apparel and equipment companies who are helping grow the game while extending their team businesses.

6. Lacrosse is benefiting NCAA athletic departments as they deal with the complexities of gender equality because it provides a large-number participant team sport for women.

Lacrosse has huge momentum behind it and is making notable moves to become a choice sport of the future. At Syracuse, this is obvious. It may soon be that way elsewhere, as well.

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