



## **Keeping Score**

Christine Brennan

### **Lacrosse is sticking with more athletes**

America's little love affair with lacrosse may now be in full bloom, but could we have a show of hands, please, for the number of people who, when first confronted with the sport's nickname "Lax," immediately went into transportation mode and pictured Los Angeles International Airport?

Those days of confusion are long gone for the sport that seems to be popping up everywhere a new cable channel turns up these days. National television exposure for the college game has increased 600% in five years. In 2000, only five games made it to television nationally, according to Steve Stenersen, US Lacrosse executive director. This year, at least 30 were on national cable outlets.

The national media have latched onto lacrosse as the latest fad in kids' spring sports, with good reason. It's the faster, trendier stick-and-ball cousin of baseball and softball. It's also being viewed as a shifting geographical and cultural phenomenon. Lacrosse is no longer just the pursuit of the Eastern elite, but of those in the hinterlands as well — Georgia, Utah and California. And even in the East, it's not the highbrow game it once was thought to be. Ninety-five percent of the high schools that play the game in New York state are public, Stenersen said.

The men's and women's NCAA tournaments were recently completed, with the men drawing a title-game record 44,920 in Philadelphia and with a surprise winner in the women's tournament. For the first time ever, an NCAA lacrosse champion has come from somewhere other than the Eastern time zone.

Northwestern, which restarted its varsity program just four seasons ago, defeated defending champion Virginia in the title game, striking a blow for the Central time zone and for the sport's newfound appreciation of Lewis and Clark. Next stop, the Mississippi River.

Even men's winner Johns Hopkins of Baltimore fielded a roster that included players from Ohio, Michigan, Texas and Colorado.

This uniquely American sport is catching on because it plays right into the wheelhouse of what so many U.S. kids want to do these days; that is run, throw, catch, score and hit people (which is allowed in the men's game, but not in the more fluid women's game). Look at it this way: It's soccer with hands, arms — and scoring.

"It reflects the principles of a lot of different sports," said Northwestern coach Kelly Amonte Hiller. "It reminds me of basketball with its offense and defense, and of soccer and field hockey with the running and patterns."

"The physical nature of the game appeals to football fans," said Northwestern athletics director Mark Murphy, the former Washington Redskins free safety. "For a lot of kids, baseball is too slow-paced, so this is a popular alternative spring sport."

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Murphy household. Mark Murphy was a football and baseball player as a young man; his son, a sophomore in high school, is doubling in football and lacrosse.

Over the past 20 years, the number of men and women playing lacrosse in college has risen by at least 75%, according to *Sports Illustrated*. So far, though, this hasn't led to the kind of troubles some big-time college sports face. Lacrosse seems to be a sport bent on behaving itself.

"There's none of this, 'Drop out of freshman year of college and go pro' kind of thing," said Stenersen. "It's amateur and it's connected to the education process. It's played by people who play it for the love of the sport."

It should come as no surprise that women's collegiate participation has been spiking skyward the past few years. For schools looking to add women's sports, lacrosse is a natural. Roster sizes of around 30 help offset those massive football squads and allow schools to obey the law under Title IX.

When Amonte Hiller was hired at Northwestern, she went to great lengths to fill out her roster. Lacking players only four months before her first season was to start in 2002, she spotted two women — twins, actually — playing rugby on a nearby field. She could tell they were strong athletes. A few days later, she saw them again, this time jogging down a street. She jumped out of her car and went after them. "Hey, did you ever play a varsity sport?"

They said they weren't interested in lacrosse. But that didn't stop Amonte Hiller. In a story first reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, she obtained their e-mail addresses from the school directory and invited them to her office to talk. Soon the twins — Ashley and Courtney Koester — were taking sticks and a ball home for Thanksgiving.

By the next spring, they were starters, and four seasons later, they were team captains for the NCAA champions.

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