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They Made Lacrosse Mainstream

By MARK YOST
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Foxboro, Mass.

It's 208 miles from Garden City, N.Y., to Foxboro, Mass., but it took Bob Stevenson and a carload of his high-school lacrosse buddies about 35 years to get here.



From left: Joel Snodgrass, John Snodgrass, Roger Rydell, Bob Stevenson and Roger Hueglin.

Mr. Stevenson and his coterie of fellow 53-year-olds -- Roger Rydell, Roger Hueglin, and John Snodgrass -- grew up on Long Island playing lacrosse, first in high school and then in college. Careers scattered them across the country, but as they married and had families their children started playing lacrosse, they started coaching, and they created leagues where there had been none.

This close-knit group of friends is symbolic of the small network of former players who have not only kept lacrosse going but have made it one of the fastest-growing sports in the country. Their long efforts paid off at this year's NCAA Lacrosse Championships, which saw the Syracuse Orangemen win their ninth title in front of a record crowd of 48,970 for the championship game and 145,828 over the three-day tournament at Gillette Stadium in Foxboro.


Once confined to the elite precincts of New England boarding schools and the Ivy League, high-school and club teams are sprouting up in such unlikely places as Texas, Illinois and Florida. According to the best estimates, there are about 300,000 kids playing lacrosse today. This has created a bottleneck in the NCAA, where there's room for only about 10,000 players in Division I, II and III. With the NCAA predicting that lacrosse will be its next money-making sport, many schools are thinking about converting club teams to intercollegiate squads.

When Messrs. Rydell and Stevenson played together in the 1970s, first at Garden City High School and then at the University of New Hampshire, lacrosse was a niche sport. But over the years, they have spread the gospel wherever they went.

After graduation, Mr. Rydell was a volunteer assistant for Villanova University in Pennsylvania, and helped start youth programs in Dallas and Lexington, Ky. When Mr. Rydell became a vice president at Goodyear, his son and daughter, both lacrosse players, transferred to Western Reserve Academy, a rising high-school lacrosse powerhouse in Hudson, Ohio.

Mr. Stevenson is from a lacrosse family. His dad played at New Hampshire and Cornell, his two brothers played in high school and college, and his nephew played for the Rochester Institute of Technology. So when Bob had children himself, they were destined to have a stick in their hands -- even though two of them were girls.

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"It was a totally new experience," Mr. Stevenson said. "I quickly figured out that boys' plays don't work for the girls."

That's because women aren't allowed to body check and the basket on the end of the stick is much flatter, creating less of a cradle for the ball. "It's more of a finesse game," he said.

Today, the women's game is growing as fast as the men's. There are developmental programs and travel leagues popping up around the country; equipment maker Warrior already has a stick named for the women's coach at Northwestern University, Kelly Amonte Hiller.

Mr. Stevenson, a communications consultant in Washington, has been instrumental in much of this growth. He's been on the board of U.S. Lacrosse, volunteered for countless leagues and clubs, and is considered one of the premier women's coaches in the country.

When his oldest daughter, Brittany, went to college and decided she wanted to focus on being a lawyer instead of a lacrosse player, "it was a bitter pill for me to swallow," Mr. Stevenson admits. But his younger daughter, Erin, is making up for it. A 5-foot-11 attacker, she's going to Lynchburg College in the fall to play lacrosse. His son, Matthew, is a rising star, too. "He's 9, but he's playing in the 11-year-old league."

Mr. Hueglin and Mr. Snodgrass were lacrosse players at Manhasset High School, Garden City's chief rival. Mr. Hueglin, a senior vice president at Morgan Stanley, brags that he wielded the same stick used by Jim Brown, another Manhasset grad. "It was 39½ inches long and it was illegal," he says.

He played at Gettysburg College, an up-and-coming Division III school that lost this year's semifinal game by one goal to eventual national champion Salisbury State.

John Snodgrass, who works in Merrill Lynch's private client group, played college lacrosse at New Hampshire and coached in the Police Athletic League on Long Island. His younger brother, Joel, 49, played at tiny Dean College and coaches for Harborfields Lacrosse, a K-8 developmental league in Huntington, N.Y. The Snodgrasses' nephews recently transferred to Oregon, another budding lacrosse powerhouse.

"The thing about this is the camaraderie," Mr. Hueglin. "It's all the same people. If you hear a name, you know it's the son of so-and-so. You absolutely do. It's a fraternal order."

But its one that's expanding rapidly, especially at Division III, which has more lacrosse programs than Division I and II combined. "Cabrini and Villa Julie are in the top 10 in Division III," Mr. Hueglin said. "Five years ago, no one had heard of these schools. They were laughed at when it came to athletics."

Noticeably absent from this year's festivities was Jay Harkey, an all-star midfielder for Maryland who in years past hosted the premier tailgate party at the NCAA tourney. Logistics prevented him from coming to Foxboro, the first time the tourney has been played outside of Baltimore and Philadelphia.

"The Harkey Tailgate," as it's known, had been the gathering point for former players, a reunion of sorts. Mr. Harkey's absence left a sour taste in the mouths of some of these old-time players. While they love seeing the sport grow, many felt something was missing this year.

"I'm not sure an NFL stadium is the place to have this tournament," Mr. Stevenson said. "It's not the right atmosphere."

The tournament will return here next year, but where it's played after that will be decided by the NCAA in August. "My guess is that it will go back to Baltimore," Mr. Rydell said.

Maybe so, but with lacrosse growing nationwide it's a good bet that Mr. Stevenson and his buddies will be

roadtripping somewhere new again. And they have only themselves to blame.

Mr. Yost is a writer in Chicago.

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