

LAX *for Parents*

by Drew McGaffrey

Lacrosse is a different sports experience for most parents because it is very common that a fully-grown adult will have never seen a lacrosse game unless they grew up in specific communities along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States or in Ontario or British Columbia, Canada. Thus, outside of these “hotbeds” it is very common for children to introduce Lacrosse to their parents. Such a trend is a definite role-reversal of the typical American sports experience in baseball, football, and basketball where it is usually the parent who introduces the child to the sport.

So before you worry about your boy or girl coming home and overwhelming you with sports jargon and asking you to buy every gadget under the sun for this bizarre sport, here are my...

LAX FACTS

- Boys High School Lacrosse is played at the Varsity level in 41 states in the United States
- States that do not play organized Boys Varsity HS Lacrosse are Alaska, Arkansas, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wyoming.
- LAX is most popular at the Boys High School Level in the following states
 1. New York- 369 programs
 2. California- 219 programs
 3. Maryland- 212 programs
 4. Pennsylvania- 187 programs
 5. Massachusetts – 178 programs
- This year, 87 programs in Illinois will compete in 2 Divisions (A & B). This will be the last year of the 2 Division format.
- When I graduated from high school in 2000, there existed only one division of 16 teams in Illinois. That’s roughly 440% growth over 9 years!
- Modern Lacrosse is an adaptation of the North American Continent’s oldest sport. Originally played by Native American tribes under various forms and names such as “Baggataway” (meaning “Little Brother of War”) and “Tewaaraton,” the sport was, in some instances, used as a manner to settle disputes between tribes. The field stretched miles long, games often lasted several days, and in some instances games were played until death. However, this was not always the case as the cultural significance and the construction of the stick itself varied tremendously from tribe to tribe and region to region.
- Ample opportunities exist for an athlete to play Collegiate Lacrosse. The sport is played at Division I, II, III as well as extensive Club A and B levels.

- Two professional leagues exist: The NLL (National Lacrosse League, indoor league) and MLL (Major League Lacrosse, outdoor field league). Chicago now has one professional Lacrosse team, and Chicago Machine (MLL). For more information about see www.chicagomachine.com.

THE GAME ITSELF

In the United States, Lacrosse is a field sport that demands acute hand-eye coordination, agile footwork, endurance as well as sprint speed, and the ability to make good decisions in pressure situations. The game is won by scoring more goals than your opponent in 4 fifteen-minute periods. Games tied at the end of regulation time are settled by a sudden-victory overtime period of 4 minutes.

Positional Breakdown:

- 10 players per team on the field at one time with unlimited substitutions
- 3 Defensive players use long sticks (52"-72") and generally stay in the half of the field with the goal they defend
- 3 Midfielders use short sticks (40"-42"). Midfielders play on both the offensive and defensive side of the field. One midfielder may substitute out for an extra long stick when a team is playing defense.
- 3 Attackman use short sticks (40"-42") and generally stay in the half of the field with the goal they are attacking.
- 1 goalie uses a special goalie stick (unregulated length)

The Rules:

- Offsides: A team must have any four players on the defensive side of the field and three players on the attack side of the field at all times.
- Penalties/Rule infractions: Penalties in lacrosse are time serving (a la "Power Play" in hockey) if a penalty is committed against a player in possession of the ball. If a player commits a rule infraction while the ball is "loose," or not possessed by either team then the offended team is awarded possession of the ball. If a player commits a rule infraction while his team is in possession of the ball, then possession is awarded to the opposing team. Here is a list of common rule infractions:
 - 1. "Warding off": an infraction that results in a loss of possession when a player uses his free hand to push, hold, or change the direction of an opponent's stick check. Thus, a player must have his or her two hands on the stick at all times, or he or she must keep his or hand "stiff" and not move it any time they cradle with one hand. **Note this rule prevents tackling.**
 2. Interference: an infraction that results in a loss of possession when an offensive player without the ball pushes or picks, without his or her feet

- planted, a player who is defending the ball. **Note this rule prevents blocking in the football sense. Picking with feet planted is allowed.**
3. Slashing: 1:00 (major) releasable foul for a stick check that is made without respect for player safety (stick check to the helmet is the classic example)
 4. Push with possession: 0:30 (minor) releasable foul when a player thrusts another player in possession of the ball from behind/ **beyond the front of the hips (is what the referees are looking for)**. Note that a push without possession results in possession being awarded to the offended team.
 5. Crosschecking: 1:00 (major) releasable foul when a player does not legally push a player with his or her hands together on the stick, but instead spreads his or her hands apart effectively using the stick as a metal bar.
 6. Stick violations: 2-3 minute unreleasable foul that occurs when a player's stick does not meet the specifications as set forth by the NCAA Men's Lacrosse rule book. The foul is termed "unreleasable" in the sense that the full time of the penalty will be served regardless if the opposing team scores or if they do not. In the previously mentioned examples of releasable fouls, a score by the opposition releases or negates any time remaining the time serving foul.

Roughly speaking:

- Field dimensions are 110 yards by 60 yards. Goals are 6 feet tall and wide. Goals are placed 15 yards from the end lines. This affects the game strategy in a unique way as players can attack and assist from behind the net.
- Goaltending, penalties, checking, stick skills resemble hockey (*except* passes/shots are in the air instead of on the ground)
- Field running is similar to soccer/football
- Offensive/ defensive formations and footwork similar to basketball (*except* you can attack from behind the net and it is 6 players against 6 players instead of 5-on-5)
- Passing/shooting motion and fielding the ball all resemble baseball except that the mechanics must usually be performed while running all over the field in live ball situations as opposed to starting from static positions in dead ball situations.
- Quick ball movement, fast reactions, and footwork similar to tennis
- One aspect of lacrosse that is unique from all other goal sports is the rule with regards to possession after a shot. ***On a shot the team of the player who is closest to the ball when it goes out of bounds is awarded possession.*** This encourages offensive shots with "unlimited downs" so long as the offensive team places a player behind the goal to "back up shots."

PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Several pieces of equipment are required to participate in Lacrosse due to the occurrence of stick checking and body contact. The following pieces are required:

- Helmet
- Mouth guard
- Gloves
- Elbow pads
- Shoulder Pads
- Cup (*not* the drinking type) and athletic supporter
- Cleats

All equipment can be rented or purchased from Lacrosse America at their Downers Grove and Libertyville Store Locations, as well as at any of their clinics. These stores offer the widest range of equipment in the Chicagoland area while their staff is knowledgeable and friendly *and can string sticks*. DO NOT BUY equipment from chain retail stores. They know nothing about the equipment they carry, cannot string sticks, and overcharge for the extremely limited range of equipment they do sell. Renting equipment is advisable until a player is fully grown.

THE STICK

Caveat emptor is the name of the game. It is most unfortunate that Lacrosse stick manufacturers prey on inexperienced players and purchasers by marketing heads that either catch the eye and/or have a cool name in order to charge 20% more for it while a head with identical dimensions, and thus performance, sits next to it on the rack. In general, DO NOT let your child pick a head the first time you go out to buy one. Five out of ten times they will pick the name that sounds cool (“Matrix,” “Cyber,” or “Prodigy”). The other half the time they will pick a colorful stick that stands out next to the white ones.

Names and colors relate in no way shape or form to the performance of a Lacrosse head. Only the dimensions of the head determine the mechanics by which a ball will leave it. Below are several heads that I and countless players I play with, have tried and feel deliver consistent results:

- Brine E3: 3rd version of the revolutionary “Edge” series
- Gait Torque: Light head designed by the games’ 2 best players

It is important to understand that purchasing a good stick does *not* automatically translate to good performance. Even the best heads will throw into the ground when strung improperly or when guided without proper form. A good net and a lot of practice are necessary for success.