

# US Lacrosse's Stenersen sees bright future

## On eve of gathering, governing body's president discusses plans for growth and the sport's image problem

By Mike Klingaman, The Baltimore Sun  
*January 20, 2011*

Steve Stenersen, a fixture with US Lacrosse since its inception in 1989, can feel a new season coming. Outside of his office, located in a low-slung building near the Johns Hopkins field, boxes were stacked high Wednesday as staffers prepared to transport them to the Baltimore Convention Center, which hosts the US Lacrosse National Convention this weekend. The Baltimore Sun Media Group is a sponsor of the 2011 US Lacrosse National Convention. The event will move to Philadelphia for a three year stint starting in 2012.



Stenersen, a Baltimore native and North Carolina grad who is now the President and CEO of the sport's governing body, believes this year's gathering of players, coaches and fans will be a chance to discuss ways to grow the game. But he did not shy away from addressing the sport's recent troubles.

**Question:** It's a big weekend for lacrosse, with the convention being downtown. What do you hope to accomplish here, and what is the message the convention sends to your fans?

**Answer:** This is the single largest education opportunity for coaches and officials in the country, with more than 150 presentations on everything from X's and O's strategy to player safety. Coaches from every level throughout the country are coming to hear the best strategists, but also to hear from experts about how to make sure that the lacrosse experience is a great one for kids at every level. If the weather cooperates, we'll be pushing a record 6,000 fans

**Q:** Concussions are getting a lot of attention in every sport. What are the US Lacrosse guidelines for head injuries, and what are you doing to make sure this message gets out?

**A:** We're doing a ton. We have a very dynamic sport science and safety committee that includes some of the foremost experts on concussion in sports. They'll conduct presentations (this weekend). Last fall, we made a formal presentation to the **NCAA** and the National Federation of State High School Associations boys rules committee to add specific language that severely penalizes any contact with an opponents' head. We've also got a very robust library of information on our website. In the last three or four years, we've invested at least \$250,000 in research on concussions.

Lacrosse is the fastest growing team sport in the country, but it is still very immature. For instance, there is no national standard for youth rules. If you go to both San Diego, Cal. and Milford, Mass. and play Under-13 boys lacrosse, you may be playing by different rules. That inconsistency is a safety issue. So, this year, we'll be writing youth rule books for boys and girls lacrosse that, for the first time, are focused on the cognitive and physical development stages of kids, rather than adaptations of adult rules. Soccer is a model for that, and we're taking a lead on it.

**Q:** What changes have you seen in the sport since you started playing at St. Paul's School, and what changes still need to be made?

**A:** The stick design and the consistency of high athleticism in the best colleges and high schools is completely different from when I played. I used a wooden stick in middle school (40 years ago). Mass-produced, synthetic sticks have changed the game dramatically, making it more consistent and easier to play.

Some say the stick evolution has radically changed the men's game from a passing to a possession game and that, as a result, the game has lost excitement. It's very difficult to dislodge the ball from the men's stick, which makes play rougher and more physical, and that's a concern.

Also today, everybody on the field is an athlete, girls and boys. When I played, the bigger, slower guys played defense, the quick guys played attack, and the fastest guys played midfield. Today, everybody is big, strong and fast. It's that speed game

that's driving the best teams — and the ramifications of bigger, stronger athletes running around like crazy on the field means collisions are more significant. That's a safety issue, too.

**Q:** Lacrosse has seen tremendous growth to the west, and in states where the game hasn't been played before. Do you see that growth leveling off any time soon?

**A:** No. The breadth of play has exploded domestically. National participation has more than doubled in the last 10 years to nearly 700,000, and they're now playing lacrosse in every major metro area. Ironically, lacrosse is the oldest sport native to North America, but it's also the newest team sport in terms of dramatic growth in the U.S.

What could impede growth? Safety; if a lot of kids start getting hurt, people will steer away from the game. But that won't happen if we do our job.

So many more kids in so many more zip codes want to play that the real challenge is finding a balance between the game's integrity and its evolution. As broadly as lacrosse has grown, there is parochialism, self-interest and private enterprise. Now, people see lacrosse as a market and are trying to leverage that market for business purposes. If you run a recruiting tournament or a private club program, are you interested in what's best for 10-year-olds, or in what's best for your business plan? When you start to factor financial gain into decisions you make about children, people can be very conflicted. Trying to manage those influences caused by growth is part of our challenge.

**Q:** Will lacrosse become the sport kids turn to, instead of soccer?

**A:** I don't want lacrosse to be the next soccer. I want to give kids an alternative to soccer, so they can play both it and something else. We're firm believers in multi-sport participation at the youth level. Sport specialization at an early age is unhealthy. You get overuse injuries and burnout. Nine of 10 college lacrosse coaches will tell you they'd rather have a student-athlete who plays multiple sports than one who has played only lacrosse for the last six years.

There are more than 3 million kids playing soccer, and 10 percent of that playing youth lacrosse. That's fine by us. Dramatic growth, for growth's sake, is not necessarily a healthy thing. We need to grow responsibly.

**Q:** How do you keep up with the growth?

**A:** We're non-profit, so it's a challenge. We need resources to fuel our mission. We need to generate a lot more dollars from philanthropic sources than we currently do. Of our \$15 million annual budget, more than \$10 million comes from membership, and about \$1.25 million from philanthropic support. So we've got a lot of room to grow, in that regard.

**Q:** At many levels for different sports, they have trouble finding officials. What is the state of officiating in lacrosse, and what are you doing to get new referees interested?

**A:** Volume is an issue. It's not an urgent crisis, but a very important need. There aren't enough officials to meet the demand, and those who are out there in the high-growth areas don't always have the experience to step out on the field and officiate a high school game, where 16- and 17-year-olds are running into each other.

We try to reach out to intercollegiate players, most of whom don't play after their college years. Officiating is an opportunity for them to stay involved in the game. And we've worked with Referee magazine to appeal to officials in other sports to make the crossover to lacrosse. We've had some good success with basketball referees because of similarities between the sports.

It's all about making officials aware that lacrosse is growing in their region, and that there are valuable educational resources available to make it as easy as possible for them to give refereeing a try.

**Q:** Every time a lacrosse player does something wrong off the field, it's magnified 150 times because of incidents over the years. What have you done to change the perception that lacrosse is just a sport for spoiled rich kids?

**A:** Every perception is based in reality. Is there a strong tradition of lacrosse at private schools? Certainly. Because a lot of private schools are expensive to attend, is there an association with a certain economic strata? Absolutely. There's fuel to perpetuate that stereotype. But kids of every socio-economic strata make catastrophic mistakes every day.

New York has more high school lacrosse programs than any state, and they are 95 percent public schools. But you don't hear that when a kid makes a dumb mistake in lacrosse — you look for the kid of private school breeding and upper economic status. It's unfair, but it's life.

The real key [to changing that perception] is growth. We want to grow this game and diversify it so that every kid of every race and ethnicity in every zip code has an opportunity to play. Will that remove the catastrophic consequences associated with people in our sport? Absolutely not. Things will happen and kids will make horrible mistakes in judgment, whether it's having a party and deciding to call up some strippers, or a kid who evidently had serious mental illness issues that allegedly resulted in a death. Are these endemic to lacrosse? No. That's the nature of life, sadly.

**Q:** What special events are planned for the convention, and why should people attend?

**A:** For kids, Fan Fest is a cool launch of the lacrosse season. There's a huge trade show with all of the latest gear and gadgetry that the sport has to offer. And both the women's national team and the Chesapeake Bayhawks, of Major League Lacrosse, will scrimmage, conduct exhibitions and sign autographs.

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