

US Lacrosse leads development of age-appropriate, national playing rules for youth boys' lacrosse and youth girls' lacrosse

(An edited version of the story below appeared in the July 2011 edition of Lacrosse Magazine.)

Laura Frankenfield has experienced her share of confusion with the playing rules of youth lacrosse.

"We never knew if we could check or not," Frankenfield said of the time she spent growing up in the Wissahickon (Pa.) Lacrosse Club while also beginning to play for the more travel-oriented Ultimate Goal Lacrosse Club. "That always got us confused."

Now 16 and a rising junior attacker at Wissahickon High School, Frankenfield sees some of the same frustration. Already with the foresight to give back to the game as an umpire for youth lacrosse, she answers the same questions for other players that she may have once asked herself.

"I was working a game for sixth-graders in the Wissahickon club," Frankenfield said. "There was a girl checking above the shoulders. I told her she couldn't check. And she would say, 'In [the] Ultimate [club], we can check.' But I had to tell her, 'This game's not an Ultimate [club] game. You can't check.' "

Frankenfield's experiences are certainly not isolated to Eastern Pennsylvania, but her tale represents some of the unintended consequences of the sport's rapid national growth.

In Portland, Ore., for example, rules varied like restaurants from neighborhood to neighborhood.



"Believe it or not, youth organizations had different rules from one side of the city to another," Terry Vance, president of the Oregon Chapter of US Lacrosse, told Lacrosse Magazine's Mark Macyk. "We're getting a consistent set of rules... It's starting to come together."

Local lacrosse organizations are often run admirably by adults who give their time, but some do not have much lacrosse experience and those that do may have played in a different era. Thus exist differences in what is taught, how it is taught and what rules govern play across the country.

Adjusting to different youth lacrosse playing rules across leagues or tournaments can be, at best, a mild nuisance for players, coaches, officials and parents. At worst, especially if magnified by inadequate communication or instruction, different rules can pose a safety hazard and facilitate unnecessary injuries.

It's a fact not lost on the US Lacrosse Board of Directors, which in January directed the staff to work with the organization's volunteer leadership structure to begin the process of developing age-appropriate, national rules of play for youth boys' lacrosse and youth girls' lacrosse. The effort continued in the spring as US Lacrosse surveyed more than 50 youth lacrosse leagues or programs that accounted for 68 percent of the total youth membership to learn more about the rules being utilized, how teams are organized (age-based or grade-based), the experience and training of youth

coaches, and other topics in the youth game. US Lacrosse staff and volunteer leaders are visiting several youth organizations this summer.

"We spent a few months gathering rule modifications, exceptions and opinions on how various areas around the country were doing rules," said Chase Howse, a member of the US Lacrosse men's game rules subcommittee from Glenside, Pa. "We got information on how they did it in house and the kinds of issues they faced when they traveled. We got help from the staff to broaden the outreach... The NorCal youth league, CONNY (Connecticut New York Youth Lacrosse Association), the [Upstate (N.Y.) Lacrosse Association), the Maryland league, Georgia — we received input from the four corners of the country on this issue, and it's been very helpful."

Howse is familiar with the occasional rules complexities brought on by the regionalization of the sport, having spent 28 years as an official and several years as a coach. He's also helped develop the boys' youth rules addendum to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) boys' rule book, which provided rules suggested by the former US Lacrosse Youth Council.



But with US Lacrosse now in the midst of its second decade as the sport's national governing body, the timing appears appropriate to seek ways to improve the lacrosse experience for its largest population base, youth players.

"This is probably one of our boldest initiatives, but given the work we've done to develop, fund and support our Sports Science and Safety Committee and the experts we have in the youth game, we're well positioned to do this," said Ann Carpenetti, managing director of game administration at US Lacrosse.

"We'd like to put in as much science as we can find regarding the rules that we generate in collaboration with coaches, officials and administrators," said Dr. Richard Ginsburg, co-director of the Paces Institute for Sport Psychology at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and a member of the US Lacrosse Sports Science and Safety Committee since 2008.

"From a psychological perspective, a goal would be to make lacrosse as enjoyable as possible for young kids so they keep playing," said Ginsburg, who played lacrosse and soccer at Kenyon College and co-authored the book "Whose Game Is It, Anyway?," a guide for parents of young athletes. "There's been an evolution or revolution in youth sports that has moved away from fun and enjoyment as a priority to more of an emphasis on outcomes and on progressing your skill or honing your craft. While all those things have their proper place in athlete development, I'm seeing that initiative of developing expertise in a game starting too early and too intensely."

The development of national sets of playing rules for youth boys' lacrosse and youth girls' lacrosse represents one way to restore more fun to the younger levels of play and to remove guesswork and confusion from the youth lacrosse experience.

"Rules should be based on what's appropriate for youth players at various stages of development, not what's appropriate for high school or college games," said Jenn Eames, chair of the US Lacrosse women's game committee and a longtime umpire from Wareham, Mass. "They'll also help to unify

what fundamentals are taught.”

“[National rules] makes sense,” said Brian Eisenberg, a boys’ youth coach in SoCal Lacrosse, a league that serves southern Orange County, Calif. “You want things to be as consistent as possible.”

Eisenberg grew up in the Baltimore area before attending Chapman University and settling in Orange County. He’s also the boys’ varsity head coach at Tesoro High and the head coach of Chapman’s women’s club team.

“We try to look at US Lacrosse as a standard for our local league, but at the same time, how tightly things are called is a little different,” Eisenberg said. “We had so many kids come from football that it’s much more physical here than in San Diego. The rules are the same. It’s just a matter of how tightly the game is called.”

Eisenberg’s anecdote speaks to US Lacrosse’s broader efforts to continue to expand its nationwide education programs for coaches and officials, but in the short-term development of national youth rules, determining the appropriate amount of contact in the boys’ game and the appropriate type of checking in the girls’ game will be a primary means to ensuring an enjoyable and safe lacrosse experience for a given age group.

Howse noted that one proposed change on the boys’ side is to reduce the sphere for checking around the ball from five yards to three yards. Reducing the incidence of violent collisions and providing an environment for younger players to have fun and focus on skill development can help preserve lacrosse’s participation growth, and US Lacrosse is not alone in erring on the side of safety and skill development. The USA Hockey Board of Directors voted in June to increase the age that legal body checking is allowed from the 12-and-under level to the 14-and-under level.

“We’re not eliminating contact in the boys’ game; it’s a contact game,” Carpenetti said. Part of the process also is examining whether youth leagues organize teams by grade or by age, a question that Howse said has been around for some time.

“Universal adoption of [age-appropriate] youth rules will allow safe play between neighboring youth organizations,” said Bob Russell, chair of the US Lacrosse men’s game committee from Madison, Conn.

Current plans call for the printing and distribution of a new youth lacrosse rule book for the spring 2012 season, and the new boys’ rules would continue to be published in the back of the NFHS book. The youth rule book would be a free benefit of membership in US Lacrosse for youth coaches, officials and parents, and it would be available for free download at www.uslacrosse.org.

“I’ve spoken to plenty of coaches, parents and officials, and every one seems to be excited about it — just to have that resource available to help understand the game and how it’s played,” Eames said.