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CHRIS ERSKINE / FAN OF THE HOUSE

Lacrosse isn't just sticking around in Southern California

The sport is suddenly everywhere, with USC adding a women's team, high schools picking up the game and parents lauding the sense of sportsmanship.

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Lacrosse's lineage traces to the era of the birch canoe. Passion pockets eventually sprang up in Baltimore and New York, where they have played it for decades. And finally, inexplicably, it has found a following here on the West Coast, enjoying a growth spurt that might be a backlash to the just-win attitudes of other youth sports, might not. Might be TV and Internet exposure. Might just be that lacrosse is painless to learn and pure fun to play.

Whatever the tipping point, the sport of Cherokees and Choctaws is suddenly everywhere in Southern California — in pickup games, in sprawling new youth leagues, in elaborate displays of \$200 sticks at sporting goods stores.

Lacrosse players listen during a practice session at Cheviot Hills Recreation Center in West Los Angeles. (Chris Erskine / Los Angeles Times)



The state now ranks fifth in the number of youth players nationwide. USC just added it as a women's varsity sport, and Southern California high schools are picking it up at a rate that's almost viral.

"It's the oldest sport on the continent," says US Lacrosse's Steve Stenersen. "But in many ways, the youngest."

Trendiest too. Suddenly, summer camps are devoted to it — doesn't everybody know a kid who plays? There are clinics, tournaments, major sponsorships.

Parents love lacrosse as an alternative to the headbangers' ball that football has become, and laud its sense of sportsmanship. In truth, proponents are a little self-congratulatory to that end.

But make no mistake, lacrosse is now a force in these parts, and according to USC Athletic Director Pat Haden, the fastest-growing sport in the West.

"Good students, good sport, good opportunity to expand our ... women's programs," Haden says in explaining why the Trojans just made lacrosse their 21st varsity sport.

"Look, we're not competing with other sports," says Mitch Fenton, who has developed youth leagues from San Diego to Los Angeles. "But what I find is that by the time they are in seventh or eighth grade, a lot of kids have dropped out of sports.... And they make good lacrosse players.

Much of the sport's explosion can be attributed to the formation of US Lacrosse in 1998, a savvy governing body.

"We've seen a West Coast surge," says Stenersen, the organization's president and silver-tongued ambassador. "Until somewhat recently, L.A. has been behind San Diego and the Bay Area. That's all changing now."

Think of it as hockey without midnight ice times. Football without concussions. Soccer with sticks. Put them all in a blender. Hit "crush." That's lacrosse.

"It's all the things your mother told you not to do," explains one parent. "Running around and beating people with clubs."

In fact, lacrosse aspires to be above that. Proponents go on and on about teaching and sportsmanship. With checking (in men's play only), it has the potential for thuggish hits, but coaches with longtime links to the game insist that it be taught properly and with an emphasis on proper values.

Good luck. Have you seen America lately?

But I give the game a try the other evening, with a West L.A. Lacrosse youth team.

Like they say, lacrosse is easy to pick up. Within minutes, I am able to throw and catch. My stick work is a little spotty, and at one point I stumble for no apparent reason (I also do this at weddings).

Help!

That's lacrosse-speak for "I'm open." Help! A kid named Kevin flings me a pass. I stab at it, cradling the ball in the webbed pocket ... nothing but net.

This much I can assure you: Lacrosse is a blast. It's like hockey, in how you wrist a shot. Like football, in that it rewards courage. Like basketball and soccer, strategic.

In short, it's easy to understand the excitement.

And if I were Little League, I'd be very worried. The game is faster, more involved, more engaging.

Don't get me wrong, baseball is phenomenal — as American as corn whiskey. But lacrosse is growing at a 10% clip. Where soccer seemed to be 20 years ago, that's where lacrosse is now.

That double-digit growth rate concerns Stenersen, the US Lacrosse president. He doesn't want to see the mercenaries move in the way they did in soccer, forming too many expensive club teams, imposing adult values on a youth activity and, in the end, burning out many kids.

"It's still a little wild, wild Westy," he says of his sport's surge. "We need to throw a rope around that and provide the resources to be sure it's done right."

Lacrosse's other pied pipers agree — folks like Fenton or Charlie Meister, who runs the Los Angeles Lacrosse League. Both played back East and brought their love of the game here, dedicating long hours to business plans, sponsorships, all the invisible work of volunteer sports.

They have also capitalized on growing coverage by ESPN and CBS College Sports Network, as well as the Internet — that carnival barker of modern life — as a way to recruit kids and spread the word.

"The limiting factor here is field space," says Meister, whose league started with 60 kids in 2001 and has 1,800 on the rolls today. "We're limited by fields and referees."

Meanwhile, the kids keep coming.

John Cook, who played at Brandeis and now coaches, says participation in Pasadena Tribe Lacrosse grew 45% this season.

"The draw is the same as when I played," he says. "It's the type of sport that is adaptive to your body style. You don't need to be the fastest, or the biggest, to find a spot in lacrosse."

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