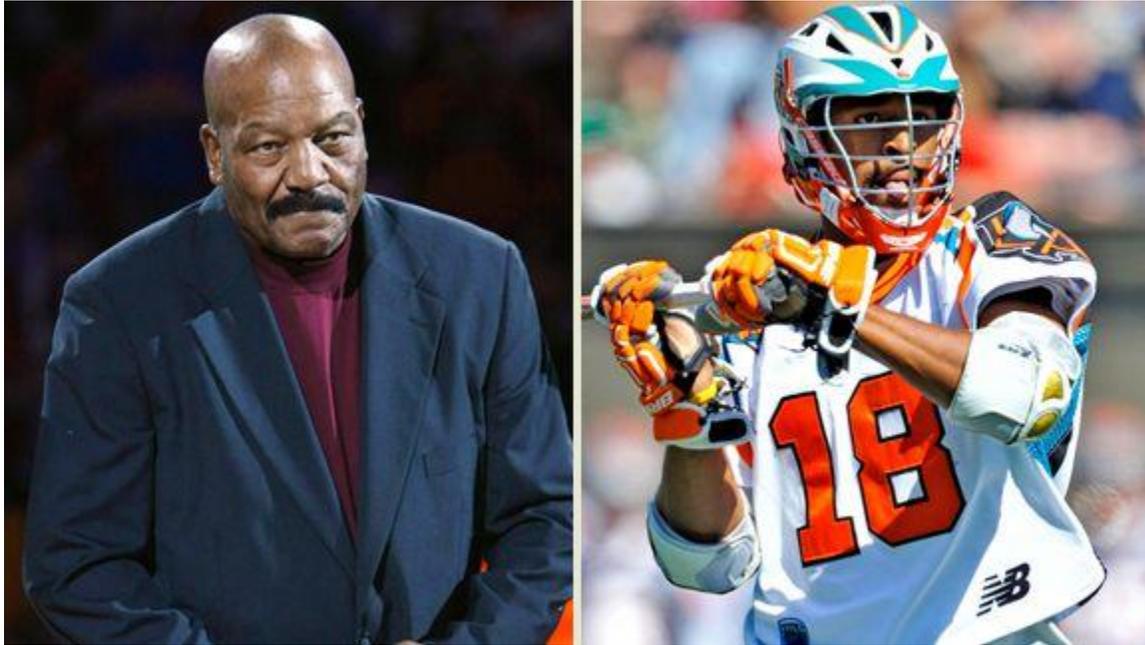


Diversifying lacrosse still work in progress

By Alisha Ricardi
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AP Photos, Icon SMI - NFL legend Jim Brown also played lacrosse in college, which helped pave the way for other African-Americans like Major League Lacrosse player Kyle Harrison.

Jim Brown was one of the greatest football players to ever grace the gridiron. But many say he was better at lacrosse.

Brown helped create possibilities for black athletes by playing football and lacrosse at Syracuse University in the mid-1950s, a time when racial integration in collegiate and professional sports was still very much developing. Since Brown, the most recognizable black lacrosse player has likely been current pro Kyle Harrison. The four-time Major League Lacrosse All-Star was the NCAA player of the year as a senior at Johns Hopkins in 2005, nearly 50 years after Brown's playing days.

Two black lacrosse stars. Five decades apart. Very few like them in between.

While Brown's other sport, football, grew increasingly diverse over the years, lacrosse hasn't follow suit. In fact, as one of the oldest sports in the United States, lacrosse originated among Native Americans but has evolved into a predominantly white sport. Far smaller than football both in participation and popularity, lacrosse has struggled to find its way outside the suburbs and prep schools of the country, where the student-athlete population is mainly white.

"I think that it hasn't grown as quickly because of -- No. 1 is the facilities and the location of where most people of color are; those are major cities," said Tina Sloan Green, president of the Black Women in Sport Foundation and the first black head coach in women's college lacrosse. "You don't have open space, open fields for lacrosse. ... Those outdoor sports are limited. They suffer because of that."

Without easy access to lacrosse, inner-city kids need a strong connection to the sport.

"We need to get more role models in the communities that look like the people we're trying to attract, who have passion for the sport," Sloan Green added, noting that soccer and tennis have grown more broad-based because of role models such as Pele and the Williams sisters, respectively.

"If we really want to see growth, it's going to take a really combined effort and support being put behind the effort," said Sloan Green, who was the women's lacrosse coach at Temple University from 1975 to 1992. "[In soccer,] the initiative really came from the top to the bottom, and soccer has just taken off. The difference between soccer and lacrosse is [soccer] is not that expensive."

Most traditional lacrosse programs are club-based, which incur fees. And the cost of equipment - - specifically in the men's sport, which uses pads, gloves and helmets, as opposed to the women's goggles -- can run high. But Sloan Green thinks if the sport commits to putting in the resources needed to diversify, lacrosse will grow.

"I really, truly believe once the people of color at a young age are exposed to the sport, they'll love it &and so, it'll catch on."

That's what US Lacrosse is hoping for. In 2003, the organization created the BRIDGE Program to enable lacrosse programs in underserved communities and those unexposed to the sport. This year, there are 14 lacrosse programs in 10 cities nationwide affiliated with the BRIDGE Program, including Sloan Green's BWISF.

"There's a huge perception out there that they [inner-city kids] can't or won't [play lacrosse]," said Mary Cate Slay, manager of youth development for US Lacrosse, "or there are too many blocks or too many walls, or it's too white or too rich, or whatever, and we're just really trying to make sure that's not the case any longer."

But in 2008, US Lacrosse found that the enrichment component of supporting teams -- coaching, mentoring, etc. -- wasn't enough. Last year, it created a three-year pilot program called First Stick to better measure the success of new teams. Slay said they will also implement a large structural change to create tiered levels for programs so they can better serve groups based on individual needs.

"Personally, I probably feel like there's a disconnect between urban youth and college potential," Slay said. "How do we connect these kids to the right people to get them involved after high school?"

When Mat Levine formed CityLax in 2005, his goal was to give New York City more high school lacrosse so that there wouldn't be such a drop-off in participation after the middle-school level. But as the program grew to help establish 15 girls' and 15 boys' varsity teams, Levine's focus shifted to also exposing the student-athletes to college lacrosse.

About 80 City Lax volunteers who put on free offseason lacrosse clinics each year also bring the players on trips to local colleges and college lacrosse tournaments.

"While we would love to see these kids go off and lacrosse become part of their college experience, it's really more a vehicle to get them focused on the best educational opportunity they can after high school, more than anything else," said the 59-year-old Levine, who estimates about 45 percent of the players on those NYC teams to be black student-athletes.

Professional players are also doing what they can to change the face of the game.

Harrison got involved in the lacrosse community the moment he graduated from Johns Hopkins in 2005. The No. 1 pick in the MLL draft that year, Harrison is currently on the board of Lacrosse for Life -- a San Francisco-based organization focused on bringing lacrosse into the city -- and works with the Starz Foundation, a nonprofit that is trying to develop lacrosse in Southern California's underserved communities.

"Being a black lacrosse player isn't something I shy away from, it's something I'm proud of," said Harrison, who turns 28 in March and was introduced to the sport at a young age by his father, Dr. Miles Harrison, who played on the first all-black NCAA lacrosse team at Morgan State in the 1970s. "I know guys like myself, [fellow black professional players] Chazz Woodson, John Christmas, we do our best to reach out to & all the other black lacrosse players that are in the game right now and try to make sure that everyone knows we're there supporting them and we all support each other."

Woodson was a two-time team MVP at Brown University and has played the past seven seasons in MLL, but his best work might be in developing lacrosse programs in Miami. Woodson is focusing on recruiting at the youth level of the game to give inner-city kids more opportunities beyond football and basketball.

"Professional lacrosse is not very lucrative, so ... everybody wants to be successful -- black, white, other; it's hard to make that [monetary] connection with lacrosse," said Woodson, 28, who coaches lacrosse at Ransom Everglades in Coconut Grove, Fla. "The connection is you can get a great education and you can tap into a great network, and you can be successful in other arenas because of playing lacrosse. And that's a difficult concept for certain young people to wrap their minds around, especially when they don't see anyone like them doing it."

In 2009-10, less than 10 percent of the student-athletes playing NCAA lacrosse were black, according to the most recent NCAA Student-Athlete Race/Ethnicity Report. That statistic carries over to both men's and women's lacrosse in Divisions I, II and III.

To further unify black lacrosse players, coaches and enthusiasts from around the country, Harrison and Woodson are teaming up to develop a national association that will not only expose and support lacrosse within the black community but create a network for opportunity.

"The mission is greater than lacrosse -- the mission is greater than just saying, 'Oh, let's get black people playing lacrosse,'" Woodson said. "The mission is let's give our people another avenue for success."

Woodson said he and Harrison hope to have the organization up and running by the fall.

"For whatever reason, you hear Jim Brown, and then you hear Kyle Harrison, and there's a big, big gap in between those two players," Woodson said. "So what we want to kind of do is take that gap and bridge it."

It's a hefty task. But if programs continue to grow at both the youth and high school levels, and they receive the support they need to do so, the future of lacrosse as a truly diverse sport seems possible.

"I'm very hopeful," Sloan Green said. "I think that it's to everybody's advantage. If you want your sport to be a household name, you've got to expand to various markets."

Alisha Ricardi is an editor for ESPN.com.