

Jersey City Lacrosse aims to expose urban kids to fast-growing sport

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By **Dan Rosenblum/For The Jersey Journal**



Dan Rosenblum/For The Jersey Journal A potential player participates in a drill.

When Emily Litman was growing up in Hoboken, **lacrosse** was so unknown, she said, other kids would see her stick and ask what was wrong with her tennis racket.

Now, **Jersey City Lacrosse**, a program she co-founded will introduce local children to the growing sport. While there are lacrosse teams in at least two high schools in Jersey City, this would be the first inclusive youth group.

"It's always been a dream of mine to have lacrosse in Hudson County," Litman, a fourth-grade teacher at the Learning Community Charter School in Jersey City, said Saturday during an introduction to the game at the school.

In lacrosse, players use sticks with nets to shoot a ball into the opposing team's goal.

Often referred to as a combination of hockey, baseball and soccer, it's one of America's fastest-growing sports. The most recent statistics from US Lacrosse, the sport's governing body, say the number of lacrosse players in the United States more than doubled from 2001 to 2009, when 568,000 players were counted.

Still, lacrosse is sometimes thought of as a sport mainly played in suburban areas or private colleges. Over the last few years, though, lacrosse teams have sprouted in urban areas such as Trenton and Newark, and US Lacrosse also offers grants to inner-city programs to promote the sport.

At Saturday's open house, the charter school's auditorium was filled with kids getting a feel for the equipment and receiving coaching from teachers and long-time players.

Learning Community fifth-grader Lawrence Jones said he's been playing lacrosse for a year and a half and called it a mixture of his other favorites: football, baseball and soccer.

He's excited, he said, to begin playing on a team.

"I've been waiting for this for a long time," he said.

Lawrence was one of a number of kids who easily scooped and managed trick shots, but for many children and parents, the open house was their first exposure to the sport.

Kim Van Burch brought her fifth-grade daughter, Janae, out of curiosity. She said she didn't know about the sport but saw it was in Janae's age range and figured it would be a good chance to expose her to an outdoor sport.

It didn't hurt, she joked, that she heard about a co-worker's child receiving a lacrosse scholarship to attend college.

"As long as she's interested, we'll give it a try," Van Burch said.

On Saturday, Jersey City Lacrosse registered 13 kids within the first half-hour. The program is open to kids from second to sixth grades and will meet Sundays from May 1 to June 12. The six-week program will be part of an ongoing effort the founders hope will expand into league play.

For now, except for a scrimmage at the end, the program won't be competitive. Instead, it will teach the basics and prepare kids to play on teams.

"It's almost like a community service organization, in a way," co-founder Chris Reed said.

Reed said he hopes to take a sport many people think of as elite and bring it to a diverse mix of kids in an inner-city environment. In fact, he said, the name of "Jersey City Lacrosse" avoids the word "club" to demonstrate the group's inclusiveness.

On a case-by-case needs basis, the group will lend equipment and waive the \$35 registration fee.

The group is getting equipment and administrative help from national and local lacrosse groups, as well as the Jersey City Department of Recreation. Members say the lack of open space is one reason lacrosse never caught on in Jersey City, so they are thankful that St. Peter's Prep is letting the group use its field.

George LoForte, president of the Cranford Lacrosse Club, went to the open house, he said, to help Jersey City with its burgeoning lacrosse scene.

"Most people don't know that it exists in Jersey City yet," LoForte said. "It'll explode."

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