

Girls lacrosse: New rules stress safety first

One ref's message, 'Clean it up'

By Nelson Coffin



Figure 1 - Checks to the head will draw a mandatory two-minute penalty this year in girls' lacrosse and the offending player's team will have to play a "man down" or player short until the penalty expires.

March 7, 2012 - Protecting players from themselves is at the heart of the rule changes for the 2012 girls' high school lacrosse season, which is intended to have a long-lasting impact on the evolution of the rapidly growing sport.

If players adjust to the new standards as well as they have to other major changes in the last decade or so, such as hard boundaries, protective eyewear and restraining lines, girls lacrosse will lose none of its allure while simultaneously making the sport safer.

At least, that's the theory behind a get-tough policy of issuing yellow cards for rough, reckless checking, slashing or dangerous follow-through (on a shot) that will force the guilty party to leave the game for two minutes without a replacement.

In other words, the offending team will have to play "man-down" at both ends of the field for the duration of the penalty.

Although last year carded players also had to take a seat without a substitute taking their place, penalized teams were still allowed to be at even strength below the restraining lines.

For the first time, this spring prep players will have to come to terms with what is referred to EMO (extra-man offense) in the boys game.

Moreover, the girls will also have to learn all about penalty killing or "man-down" defensive schemes and slides.

"The jury is out," said Bryn Mawr coach Wendy Kridel, whose team is ranked fourth in the Mid-Atlantic (Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Virginia) region by Lacrosse Magazine. "All of us will know better after the season ends. Some teams may really use that player-up situation to take advantage of an opponent, others will be trying to kill penalties."

Towson High coach Deedee Franke said her EMO won't be much different than a regular seven-on-seven offense.

Moreover, she said she expects the Generals to stay out of man-down situations as often as possible.

"I don't like my kids checking anyhow," the Anneslie resident said. "Most of the time, you put yourself out of position when you check. It makes kids lazy, because they check instead of moving their feet. So, I think it's a good thing (giving cards). It makes you feel the penalty more."

Besides, her husband, Bill, is a longtime referee who believes the girls game needs to rein in overly aggressive defenders before more stringent measures are adopted.

"We don't want to go to helmets," he said, articulating the fear of many of the game's traditionalists.

To that end, any player collecting two yellow cards will be banished for the remainder of the game, and one red card — for a flagrant or intentional violation — mandates a suspension for the following game as well.

Any team that accumulates four yellow cards in a game will have to play man-down for the rest of the game, and each successive card will pull another player from the field.

"That's a clear message to players and coaches: 'Clean it up,'" Bill Franke said.

Still, Kridel is taking a positive view of the changes.

"Last year, we had to deal more with red cards," she said. "This year it will be killing penalties in man-down situations. It keeps you advancing as a coach. (You) have to change the way you do things, and that isn't always a bad thing."

There are several other changes, too, the most significant of which is ball placement on the draw.

The new rule states that "the ball is to be placed in the upper third of the head of the crosse at the widest part of the head."

According to Melissa Coyne, US Lacrosse Women's Game Director, stick designers were outpacing the rule makers' ability to keep the players with the best equipment from determining the outcome of the draw.

"The way some sticks are designed, it allows for a deeper reverse pocket," the former Towson High and University of North Carolina standout goalie said. "We banned some of those sticks. But then the manufacturers would come up with something new. So now it doesn't matter what type of stick a kid shows up with."