

Local college lacrosse players take city girls under wing

College of Notre Dame women have mentored Barclay Elementary/Middle School girls



Ebony Rivers, left, a member of the College of Notre Dame lacrosse team, practices a skill drill with Kristina Harlee, 12, of Barclay Elementary/Middle School in the city. (Baltimore Sun photo by Gene Sweeney Jr. / April 29, 2010)

By Katherine Dunn, The Baltimore Sun
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In the halftime huddle, the **College of Notre Dame** women's lacrosse players stress only a few points to their Barclay Middle School proteges: Spread out, don't cover the ball and cheer for everyone.

After the break, the level of play picks up in the intra-squad scrimmage. There are no more big clusters of girls going after the ball. A few passes hit their marks. A handful of shots find the net. Of course, passes still drop, balls take a while to scoop up and players hesitate to go for ground balls.

That's how it is when you're learning to play lacrosse. It's a challenge, but the Barclay Bulldogs laugh and squeal a lot as they play.

"It's fun, and I'm really getting the hang of it," eighth-grader Aminata N'diaye said. "It's a really cool sport."

That's the point of the College of Notre Dame-Barclay Elementary/Middle School partnership -- to get inner city girls to think lacrosse is a "really cool sport."

The partnership is the first of its kind in Baltimore, formed by long-time Notre Dame coach Melissa Falen and Barclay coach Erin Curran, who started the Bulldogs team this spring. Each had separate ideas for fostering inner city girls lacrosse, which came together through the US Lacrosse W.I.L.L. 2 Win (Women in Lacrosse Lead) program.

While girls lacrosse thrives in the counties around Baltimore City and in the private schools within the city, it has not taken hold in the public schools. Only five city high schools have girls lacrosse teams, and other initiatives to bring the game to middle school girls have not had prolonged success. The most notable program, Leigh McDonald Hall's Pacas at William Paca Elementary School, was the most successful, but it ended last year after an eight-year run.

The W.I.L.L. 2 Win partnership goes further by adding the college mentors.

Notre Dame senior Ashley Demski, an elementary education major who plans to teach and coach, was eager to be involved.

"It's been great to have a personal connection with the girls, because we can work on a personal level with each of them," the Loch Raven graduate said. "I think it's important for them to know that there's somebody that cares. When they come to our games and see us out here playing in college, it shows them they can do the same thing if they work hard."

Earlier this spring, one of the Bulldogs told Curran the only reason she had come to school that day was because the Notre Dame players were going to be there.

"They're fun," eighth-grader Topaz Harris said, "because they encourage you to do better and they don't put you down when you mess up or make mistakes."

Besides working with the Bulldogs throughout the season, some of the college players will take some of the Barclay girls to Sunday's **NCAA** Division championship game at **Towson University**. The younger girls will also attend a clinic at Towson. Thursday, the Bulldogs will be treated to a season-ending awards dinner at the Lacrosse Hall of Fame.

The goal of the W.I.L.L. 2 Win program is to build lasting relationships between college programs and inner city middle school programs, which will have effects on the younger girls that carry well beyond lacrosse.

Ann Kitt-Carpenetti, the women's division director for US Lacrosse, said the program targets seventh and eight grade girls, because that's when they are most at risk to succumb to such temptations as drugs and gangs.

"Everyone wants to get involved, diversify the game and help kids," Kitt-Carpenetti said. "That's why we developed this program. It's a different approach, having a team responsible for providing mentorship, a schedule and planning and then having an organization like US Lacrosse helping to administer, facilitate and say, 'Hey you guys really need to factor for these worst-case scenarios.' I talked to Melissa [Wednesday] and she said, 'We would have gone out on the field and just started doing this, and then when we hit the first bump in the road, we probably would have just walked away.' "

Falen, Notre Dame's coach for 21 years, said she had often thought about such a mentoring program, but never acted on it. When Curran, a former Mount Hebron and **Virginia Tech** player, applied for an equipment grant last summer through US Lacrosse, Falen, a member of the youth grant review committee, saw her chance.

Nudged along by the folks at the Parks & People Foundation, Falen and Curran had a plan in place before Christmas, just a few weeks after they met and three months after Curran received the equipment grant. This spring, the teams met regularly for clinics, but the Bulldogs had only one game, against KIPP Academy, a program Monica Logan, of Parks and People, hopes to find a partner for next year.

"If every college in Baltimore adopted a middle school, then we could start a league," Falen said, "and then maybe [the public schools administration] would give support for the middle school lacrosse. They'd have each other to play."

"They may not all stay with it," Falen said of the Barclay girls. "But if some do, it's worth it. If one goes to college, it's worth it."

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