

# Learning lacrosse inspires kids to work, and study, harder

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A sport that mystified most kids in Northeast Park Hill now is giving them a goal, inspiring passion to compete — and even to study harder — in order to continue to play.

"We'd never heard of anything like it," said Trevon Hamlet, who remembers how, a few years ago, his teacher at Hallett Elementary School brought in some lacrosse sticks for kids to try at recess. "We

were like, 'What's this?' "

City Lax, the first lacrosse team in north Denver, quickly sprang to life, drawing a wide swath of support from the community.

Traditionally played by kids at elite prep schools, lacrosse is breaking into more-diverse communities nationwide, and City Lax is part of that movement.

"Some kids have started setting goals related to lacrosse," said Erik Myhren, the teacher who brought those first lacrosse sticks to Hallett.

"They've been to new cities and new parts of the state, which opens up their world a little bit," he said. "I think, as a teacher, that's why athletic enrichment opportunities are so crucial for children. Every kid deserves some time to shine, whether it's academics, lacrosse, acting or music."

Considered America's first team sport, lacrosse started as an American Indian religious ritual. Now it's one of the fastest-growing team sports in the United States, with youth participation up more than 138 percent since 2001 to nearly 300,000 kids, according to US Lacrosse.

Denver City Lax is one of 14 programs in nine states and the District of Columbia participating in US Lacrosse's BRIDGE program, designed to use the sport to bring positive influences and life-skill lessons to youth in communities not previously exposed to the sport.

Jaden and Joanne Franklin are two teenagers whose lives have been changed by City Lax. They were fifth-graders when the first team organized at Hallett.

Now, thanks to their skill at the sport — and the hours of practice at home in their front yard — they'll start their first year at the elite prep school Kent Denver this month, where they will play lacrosse.



Figure 1 - Jaden Franklin practices in his front yard. He plays on City Lax, a league tied to the growing national movement to introduce lacrosse into more diverse communities.

"Jaden will be one of the best players in the state, and Joanne, too. She is as good as there is at the eighth- grade level now," said City Lax director Rod Allison, commissioner for Colorado high school lacrosse coaches.

The twins' passion for the sport — shared by their teammates — and the story of the team's first year is chronicled in a new documentary, "City Lax: An Urban Lacrosse Story."

Twenty-two kids wanted to play, but Myhren had only 10 sticks. So he called Rob Gormley, director of the Denver Lacrosse Club, who came up with the necessary equipment and encouraged Myhren to start a team.

Gormley hooked him up with Allison, whose son, Ben, had come up with an idea for an inner-city team.

Myhren then recruited his friend George Moore, the first African-American to play lacrosse for the U.S. Naval Academy, as one of City Lax's first coaches.

That first year, the girls played alongside the guys, their gender invisible under uniforms.

"When I went out there that first day, Joanne was running with the ball and she ran through some guy," said Moore. "I told her she couldn't kick guys like that."

But Joanne said she liked "being aggressive. I liked the contact — at first, then after a while I got sick of it, because I got sick of being hit like I was a dude."

Now Denver City Lax has two girls' teams and three boys' teams.

Joanne, who this summer traveled the country playing on Colorado's elite women's Team 180, was accepted this spring at Kent Denver with a full academic scholarship. Jaden, whose grades weren't as good, didn't find out that he'd been accepted until June 25.

"He said, 'Mom, I just want this so bad,' " said his mother, Rosie Franklin. "Whatever he needed to do, he was willing to do it."

When he wasn't playing in games like the 2010 U.S. Lacrosse U-15 National Lacrosse Championships in Orlando, Fla., this summer, Jaden studied hard. To solidify his academic foundation, he will repeat eighth grade when he starts at Kent.

Because he didn't win an academic scholarship to cover the \$20,000 annual tuition, leaders in the lacrosse community are working to raise that money.

"I just cried," Franklin said, recalling the moment she first heard her son was accepted. "I couldn't believe it."

For her, education is the best gift of lacrosse. On a recent morning, when Joanne expressed some anxiety about all the changes, her mother assured her she'd be fine on the lacrosse field. "But here," she said, tapping her head. "Here is what is really important."



Figure 2 - Twins Jade, left, and Joanne Franklin will play lacrosse for Kent Denver starting this month. They sit with Trevon Hamlet, 14, right, who also learned the game at Hallet Elementary. (Kathryn Scott Osler)