

Lacrosse is making waves in Fox Valley

BY CHUCK CARLSON
of The Northwestern

Over behind the fence the Neenah High baseball team was playing against Fond du Lac. Down the other way, over where the Rockets play football, Neenah was in the midst of a track meet.

And in the middle, practicing a game that is still learning its way around the Fox Valley, was the Neenah High lacrosse team. They wore helmets and pads and wielded sticks with nets on the end and the point, seemingly, was to put the rubber ball in the goal though often that seemed more a theory than anything else.

Nonetheless the 20 or so players practicing on this cool, spring afternoon on what doubles as the freshman football practice field, are the true believers, the vanguard of what lacrosse fanatics believe is the next great sport to hit the area.

And the symmetry of the practice being held between a baseball game and a track meet seemed perfect because, to those same lacrosse devotees, it's a game that fits snugly between the two traditional spring activities.

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NEENAH HIGH SCHOOL'S ERIC HEYWOOD (7) and Dan Stankivitz (19) race to gain control of the ball recently during lacrosse practice at the school. DAN POWERS/FOR THE NORTHWESTERN

cial Bay-Valley Conference. "It's not your typical football, baseball, basketball thing. It's something new and different."

For this area perhaps. But lacrosse has long billed itself as America's first sport, invented and played for generations in this country by Native Americans. It eventually spilled into mainstream America and took root on the East Coast — especially in the Baltimore suburbs, upstate New York and Long Island.

But the game and its popularity has slowly spread to the point that high school leagues are flourishing nearly everywhere back east and on the West Coast while in the Midwest the hotbeds are the ritzy Detroit suburbs and in the Twin Cities.

And, slowly but surely, it is seeping into the Fox Valley.

Menasha High, under Connecticut transplant Chris Schwab, started a club team four years ago and in the years since, club teams have sprouted up in

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Green Bay at Southwest, Notre Dame and Bayport high schools as well as a unified team in Appleton and Neenah.

The six teams have no affiliation with the schools athletic department, are not WIAA-sanctioned and must raise money for uniforms and equipment on their

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NEENAH HIGH SCHOOL'S Dan Stankivitz (19), Paul Strain (4) and Brendon Otto (14) fight for a loose ball recently during lacrosse practice at Neenah High School. Lacrosse is a new sport to the school.

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own. But the schools have also been helpful, Zielski said, providing field time and space for games and practices.

Zielski, who hails from Cudahy and played lacrosse for a UW-Oshkosh club team in the mid 1990s, decided to try and form a team at Neenah and began the process by posting a sign-up sheet on campus last year.

"We had 60 kids who signed up," he said. "By the first practice we were down to 30 and then maybe we had 19 on the team. A lot of kids went into this not knowing anything about lacrosse except maybe what they'd seen on ESPN."

But it was the intrigue of the unknown that attracted many and keeps bringing them back.

"I was bored during the spring because I didn't have a sport to play," said Neenah junior midfielder Kevin Prince, who also plays football.

"I didn't know a thing about it," said Michael Babbitts, another junior midfielder.

But they wanted to learn about a game that was unlike anything they'd seen before. For Zielski, his assistant coach Chris Green, and the other coaches in the league, teaching lacrosse is only slightly easier than teaching a rhino to hula.

It requires skills that many athletes have never had to use before, including running while cradling the ball in the stick. All the while players on the other team are trying to dislodge the ball from the stick.

"Learning how to cradle was the hardest part for me," said Neenah junior midfielder Brian Schneekloth, who at least had some rudiments with his hockey background. "I'd go home all night and practice cradling."

There are different rules, bizarre penalties, strange requirements for each position and for many players, it's all brand new and completely addicting.

"It's amazing how fast it's growing," Babbitts said.

"I have guys asking me questions all the time about it," Prince said.

Indeed after a recent game, Zielski welcomed three new players who had watched and wanted to be a part of it.

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From last season to this season, Zielski said he has already seen his players show remarkable improvement.

The next goal is to seek WIAA sanctioning. At the moment, 23 schools in the state have lacrosse clubs and for the WIAA to recognize it, 50 schools need to have teams. And the numbers do appear to be growing.

There are teams scattered throughout the state in Madison and Milwaukee as well as the Fox Valley.

There are college club teams at UW-Madison, UW-Stevens Point, Marquette and elsewhere. There is a Wisconsin Lacrosse Federation based in Madison and the word is spreading.

As well, each district with high school teams have chipped in \$50 a piece to hold an informal state tournament in Stevens Point on June 5.

"The ultimate goal for all of us is to see lacrosse become a mainstream sport in Wisconsin," Zielski said. "The reason we do it is for our love of the sport. I love every aspect of it. It's just an opportunity for a lot of kids to get involved in athletics because I know kids who don't play any other sport who play lacrosse."

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