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# An Explosion of Growth for an Age-Old Game

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — At spring break, Joe Ernst took his college athletes on a memorable trip to compete in their thriving sport.

Basketball? Nope. Baseball? Guess again. The Southwestern University team headed north from Texas to play lacrosse in Michigan.

What was once a niche sport in New England and the Middle Atlantic is now one of the fastest-growing games in the United States.

In the three N.C.A.A. divisions, 20 women's lacrosse teams and 12 men's teams made their debuts this year, most of them in Division III — including Southwestern. At least two dozen teams are scheduled to come on board next year.

The reasons are simple. It can be relatively inexpensive to start a lacrosse team, and the games are fast paced and high scoring.

Several colleges that are expanding their athletic programs cited the need to boost enrollment and thereby generate more tuition, particularly in Divisions II and III, where athletes often do not receive scholarships.

"It is just blowing up at the Division III level, particularly moving westward," said Ernst, Southwestern's coach. "There's really no expenditure on our part. It's equipment and travel."

Four of this year's new N.C.A.A. teams are outside the Eastern time zone, including a women's team at Carthage College in Wisconsin and a men's team at the Milwaukee School of Engineering.

“I definitely didn’t come to school expecting to turn into a Division III lacrosse player,” said Milwaukee goalkeeper Ian Wilson, who had last played lacrosse as a freshman in high school in Illinois. “It’s the exact opposite of what I thought I would be doing my senior year.”

The debut of Southwestern — the first N.C.A.A. men’s lacrosse program in Texas — comes nearly four decades after Navy and Johns Hopkins played the first varsity college game in the state at the Astrodome in Houston, according to US Lacrosse, the sport’s national governing body.

Southwestern, located about 25 miles north of Austin, had success as a club team. Investing in lacrosse was seen as a way to boost male and out-of-state enrollment, Ernst said.

“They wanted to be the first,” he said.

Being a pioneer is nice, but it also poses a scheduling challenge.

Southwestern’s inaugural varsity season started with a four-day trip to California, followed by a two-game swing in St. Louis. After the first of only three scheduled home games, Ernst packed up his squad, led by the 275-pound attacker Ed Williams, and headed to Michigan for games with two Division III opponents. The Pirates are still searching for a victory.

“Once we win a couple of games, I think it will start blossoming,” said Ernst, who previously coached at Mercyhurst North East Junior College in Pennsylvania.

Some other programs have brought in coaches with Division I pedigrees.

Division III Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania hired John Haus to revive its men’s lacrosse team. Haus led North Carolina and Johns Hopkins to N.C.A.A. tournament appearances and won the 1998 Division III championship at Washington, Md.

Michele Uhlfelder was hired to coach the women at Division III Occidental College in Los Angeles after earning six conference titles at Stanford.

Amanda O’Leary left [Yale](#) in 2007 after 14 seasons, including two N.C.A.A. tournament appearances, to start a women’s team at Florida. The game may seem out of place at a Southern football powerhouse — and 23 players are from the lacrosse hotbeds of Maryland and New York — but O’Leary takes heart in the fact that the women’s soccer program at Florida won a national championship in 1998, four years after its debut.

“If there’s already a team that has done it, this is awesome,” she said.

Part of the reason lacrosse is catching on is that, although it was invented by North American Indians hundreds of years ago, it has echoes of popular modern sports. It

combines the back-and-forth movement of soccer, the motion plays and contact of basketball, and the sticks, hand skills and setup behind the goal found in hockey.

“The sport lends itself to the strategies of other sports that the kids kind of pick up on,” said Brian Logue, a US Lacrosse spokesman.

The number of high school lacrosse players more than doubled in the last decade and 21 states now host championships, including North Carolina and South Carolina beginning this year. Illinois has added it for 2011.

Participation in N.C.A.A. lacrosse has grown 105 percent since 1988-89 to 15,730 athletes in 2007-8, according to the N.C.A.A.’s 2009 participation survey.

Over a 10-year period ending in 2007-8, the N.C.A.A. said there were 88 new women’s teams and 42 new men’s teams.

Karen Sutphin said she was looking for a college that offered environmental science, and she found it at Shepherd University in West Virginia, two hours from her home in Baltimore. Shepherd did not offer lacrosse then, but Sutphin helped organize a club team. Less than two years later, the university made lacrosse a varsity sport. . On Monday, the team earned its first win after an 0-3 start.

“It’s an extra thing to do that’s fun,” Sutphin said.

Varsity lacrosse has another potential benefit. According to the N.C.A.A., among freshmen entering school from 1999 to 2002, the graduation rate of lacrosse players was the highest among 17 men’s sports and tied for second with gymnastics — behind skiing at No. 1 — among 18 women’s sports.

“Across the country, it’s amazing,” O’Leary said. “I’m getting e-mails from recruits from Michigan and places that really aren’t hotbeds. It really is growing nationwide and it’s exciting.”