

## THE LAX TRACK

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IT is a blistering week in July, and thousands of girls and scores of college coaches pour into Love Point Park in Stevensville, Md., for the annual All Star Express. The tournament, a four-day extravaganza of athleticism and ambition, is billed as the recruiting event of the year for women's college lacrosse (lax, for short).

Tractor-powered trams lug spectators to 12 fields marked off by huge helium balloons. In the middle is a corridor of vendors hawking chocolate chip cookies, lacrosse gear, preppy ribbon belts and hot-pink and lime-green flip-flops adorned with mini-lacrosse sticks. On Thursday and Friday, middle school and younger high school girls play. On the weekend, when 55 teams of seniors compete in up to seven games a day, the crowd swells to at least 12,000.

Tournaments like this represent the latest, strangest chapter in the history of lacrosse. Originated centuries ago by American Indians, it is now one of the fastest-growing sports among high school students. Once played mostly in New England prep schools and other pockets in the East, the game has spread wildly through suburbs nationwide. In towns where weekends are spent carting children to athletic events and the names of top-tier colleges are stenciled on car windows, families see lacrosse as an opportunity for their sons and daughters to shine in the equally competitive arenas of college admissions and athletic scholarships.

Many parents figure that, compared with soccer, basketball and football, lacrosse offers less rivalry for spots on college teams. And national surveys suggest they are right: while 660,000 students play high school soccer and a million play football, according to the National Federation of High School Associations, only 96,000 play lacrosse. Nonetheless, that's almost three times what it was a decade ago; the number of college teams has increased, too, to 493 from 316. Title IX, the anti-sex-discrimination law, has had an especially strong impact on women's college lacrosse, and in Division I, for example, women's programs greatly outnumber men's. In general, though, colleges haven't kept pace with the explosive growth of lacrosse at the youth levels, and coaches warn that the edge will diminish.

Right now, however, "there's no question that there are more opportunities in lacrosse," says Kurt Hansson, whose 14-year-old daughter, Kyra, played at the Express. "Lacrosse is viewed by me and many other parents as a way to make them more competitive at Division III schools that are looking at lacrosse as a program they need to fill." But, cautions Mr. Hansson, a lawyer from Wilton, Conn., who played soccer at Tufts, the child has to love the game.

And what's not to love?

Fast and spontaneous, lacrosse is an hourlong adrenaline rush, and the fact that it is outside mainstream sports lends a component of cool. The game is played with a stick with a webbed pocket at the end. Girls' teams have 12 players on the field; boys' have 10. The team that is on the offensive dashes up the field with the ball cradled in the pocket. Players pivot, pass and scoop the ball off the ground, trying to get it into the goal. Speed and stamina are vital, but so is precise stick work.

As lacrosse has grown, so has a booming mini-industry of private teams, personal trainers, tournaments and camps. In the past, younger girls and boys learned the sport in town recreation leagues, progressing to more demanding high school varsity teams. These days, a growing number of young athletes join private teams that play virtually year-round except for spring, which is varsity season. These "pay for play" clubs (which can cost up to \$2,000 a year) are more prevalent in girls' lacrosse but are gaining ground with boys, too. And like soccer clubs, those for lacrosse promise challenging competition and exposure to college scouts, especially during tournaments like the All Star Express.

But perhaps the best places for girls and boys to get noticed are the summer lacrosse camps run by college coaches - so-called skills camps for younger players, and recruiting camps for older students. Coaches used to find players primarily by scouting high school games; today they can see scores of players at the camps, which generally run four to seven days, and they know which draw the best players. To get into recruiting showcases like the Peak 200, run by a former high school coach and coaches from the University of Massachusetts and Springfield College, students often need to be recommended by their high school coach as one of a team's top players.

Dan O'Brien, a senior from Souhegan High School in Amherst, N.H., played at four camps last summer. His performance at the Peak 200 and New England Top 150 in Portsmouth, R.I., generated serious interest from coaches for Division III campuses like Wesleyan, Hamilton and Connecticut College.

"If you want to be recruited, at least up here, you have to go to the camps," says Ed O'Brien, Dan's father, noting that New Hampshire lacks the cachet of lacrosse hotbeds like Maryland (home of the Battle of the Beltways tournament for boys in November) and New York (home of the Skyscraper tournament for girls in February). "From what I hear on the coaches' side in Division III," he says, "it's worth a couple hundred points on the SAT."

For children who start in elementary school, parents can easily spend \$25,000 by college, especially with travel expenses to tournaments and camps. Mr. O'Brien, a lawyer, invested \$2,000 in Dan's camps last summer and another \$2,000 on a recruiting consultant, who contacted coaches to gauge their interest in Dan, kept him on schedule and outlined a plan for e-mailing coaches. (Tip: End each message with a question that begs a response.) But fees can reach \$5,000 for full service, which includes help assembling a résumé of sports and academic achievements, arranging for a videotape of best plays and giving a hand in finding a college that suits a player's game and disposition.

Is all that necessary? Not always, experts say.

"Part of the issue is that parents aren't good consumers," says Steve Stenersen, executive director of US Lacrosse, the sport's governing body. "They just are immediately bombarded with, 'If you want your son or daughter to play at this college, you better go to this camp or that camp.'"

In fact, college coaches say they want students to contact them directly. "I don't deal with recruiting services, or parents," says Bill Tierney, head men's coach at Princeton. "We do make it a point to return a letter to every student who writes us."

While some college coaches appreciate the role clubs and camps play in developing talent, they don't like the overkill they cultivate. "I like kids to play other sports," says John Battaglino, assistant women's coach at Syracuse, while scouting players at the Express. "I think the kids get burned out playing so much. The club thing is kind of conveying that they have to." In their quest for excellence, some players forsake all other sports. That's unacceptable to college coaches who value the skills and conditioning students attain from multiple sports.

Most of the 4,500 girls at the Express are from clubs. Many have written college officials ahead of time, letting them know they are going to be there and asking them to please, please, watch them pass, run and score.

But only a small number are scholarship material. (Only Division I and II teams can give scholarships, and full rides are rare in any case.) In Mr. Battaglino's view, only 5 percent should play at the top Division I level. Mike Spinner, head coach at the fledgling Division III team at Mount St. Vincent College in Riverdale, N.Y., has automatically crossed off 10 percent as unacceptable. "And I'm the bottom of the barrel," he says matter-of-factly.

Clearly, some players will be disappointed. For others, dreams come true.

At 17, Rachel Guerrero is a case in point. She has played for the Long Island Elite Yellow Jackets club since seventh grade. A Wantagh High School senior, she has been courted by Brown, Georgetown, Cornell, Boston University and the University of Notre Dame, and committed verbally to Notre Dame. Her job is to stop other girls from scoring. While actual contact is allowed only in boys' lacrosse, Rachel uses her body to block a competitor or check a girl's stick. "She's a beast," says Traci Landy, 17, a club teammate and opponent from nearby Seaford High. Says Rachel: "Give me a girl to watch and I'll get the job done."

Rachel has not attended expensive camps or hired a personal trainer. "It's kind of like a defensive instinct; it just comes," she says. She did invest \$500 for a highlights tape and \$1,000 for her club's recruiting services, which made calls to alert coaches where she was playing. It was totally worth it, she says. But she still needs financial help for college. Her mother is an assistant preschool teacher; her father is a safety coordinator for the town of Hempstead.

For Rachel, the interest from top colleges is the culmination of countless ice packs and Advils, meals gulped in transit, and thousands of hours of practice, games and late-night studying. Class co-president for four years, Rachel also has a 97 average and made a 680 on both the math and verbal portions of the SAT. At times, leaving in the predawn darkness for yet another tournament, she wanted to give up, she says.

At the Express, Rachel plays her heart out, battling through seven exhausting games on Sunday. "I knew I had to push myself," she says later. By the sixth game, even with the Duke coach watching, Rachel bends over, her legs burning and chest heavy, and tells her coach, "I need to come out." A minute later, revived by a cool towel, she's back in.

Athletes often play with injuries, especially when a scholarship is hanging in the balance. Traci competes that day with a stress fracture so severe that an orthopedist warned her to stay on crutches or risk a complete fracture. But the Boston University coach may be watching. "It was all or nothing," she says, shrugging. The gamble pays off with a promise of a scholarship from B.U. Without lacrosse, says Traci, who has attended skills camps since sixth grade, she would go to a state college because of her lackluster test scores.

Rachel and Traci's team will publicize its success on its Web site, as other clubs do, bolstering the perception of lacrosse as an advantage in admissions. "I've used it as a sales tool, the fact that there's more opportunity to get into college playing lacrosse," says Chris Cahill, an investment counselor from Princeton, N.J., who coaches the Central Jersey Select team. "It's an affluent area and people are starting to realize, 'This could help my kid.' "

But speed and athleticism can't be bought or coached, and competition for spots at prominent schools is incredibly tough. "We see about 5,000 kids per year," says Andy Shay, head coach for the men's team at Yale. "Only 9 or 10 come to Yale." Disappointments abound, and moms and dads aren't afraid to communicate them. "Parents are a nightmare to deal with if their kid doesn't get called July 1," says Mr. Shay, referring to the date when Division I coaches have traditionally contacted students entering their senior year.

Outside the coaches' tent at the Express, Mr. Spinner of Mount St. Vincent College recalls how the pressure from parents became so unbearable that he left Greenwich High School, where he had coached the girls' team to the state finals in 2002: "It became an obsession for parents. It wasn't about finding a right fit for the kid. It was finding the school with the biggest name. I got parents calling me up, saying, 'I want my kid to get into the Ivy League.' I felt more pressure about keeping parents happy than winning the game."

Later, at one Express game, an agitated, bare-chested father questions a referee's call - a taboo. Such pushiness can undermine a child's prospects. "Do you want that on the sidelines for four years?" asks Karin Brower, head women's coach at the University of Pennsylvania.

The same drive surfaces at some of the camps. Parents repeatedly call and e-mail officials to try to enroll their sons at the prestigious Warrior Champ Camp, which is held at Johns Hopkins (2005 national champions) in Baltimore and accepts mainly high school varsity, travel or all-star teams. "They feel like their son won't be able to go to college if he isn't there," says Bryan Matthews, who is athletic director of nearby Washington College and runs the camp. Jake Reed, a high school coach who operates the Graph-Tex Blue Chip Camp in Maryland, tells of one father from Manhasset, N.Y., who unsuccessfully offered \$10,000 to secure a place for his son.

Some boys attend six grueling camps a summer. For others, even four is too many. In late July at the Peak 200, a record 20 boys were no-shows, losing their \$540 fee. Many parents called with the same reason. "They said, 'My son is overextended because he just did four other camps,' " says Keith Bugbee, Springfield College's head coach.

The Peak is serious stuff for its 440 or so players. College coaches are either observing or instructing them - 140 coaches in all. There is a pool, but some boys are too exhausted between sessions to walk there. Wrung out from morning and afternoon games, Sam Spillane, a 16-year-old from Darien, Conn., remains convinced lacrosse will get him into a choice college. He says, "You get good grades and also play lacrosse - and lacrosse is big among the colleges. And going to college is very important to me. It's the starting base of your life."

Sam's friend Alex Yackery, 16, also of Darien, believes lacrosse can compensate for less than stellar grades. "It's a really good springboard if you're not the best student." Alex has been working all year with a personal trainer experienced in lacrosse skills. He is also working with an SAT tutor, and Sam plans to do the same. The boys are counting on their high school coach to put in a good word with college coaches. Meanwhile, they are dreading the admissions process. "It's a lot of pressure," Alex says. Sam adds, "We don't want to think about it."

How big is the lacrosse advantage?

Athletes like Rachel are nearly a slam dunk for Division I scholarships. But of course, virtually no candidate is a sure bet for admission to the college of his choice. "It could be a tip factor," says Erin Quinn, the head men's lacrosse coach for Middlebury College. But he adds, "All things being equal, there are no guarantees." Wylie Mitchell, dean of admissions at Bates College, has a similar view. "In a few cases it might make a difference," he says. "But it's not nearly as dramatic or different as the average family might think."

Nonetheless, given the right circumstances, even less talented applicants can benefit from lacrosse. That's because coaches will ask admissions officials to take another look at potential players if their transcripts and scores are within an acceptable range. And that is considerable at colleges that reject so many applicants with such impressive transcripts.

At Yale, the lacrosse player with a strong academic record is going to have the edge over a nonplayer, Mr. Shay says.

Ditto for Duke. "If the coach says, 'This is one of the players who matter to me, who I'd like to give a scholarship to,' I take that very seriously," says Christoph Guttentag, director of admissions. "It can be anything from a small nudge to a nice push to that student's chances to be admitted." And if a recruit is not outstanding otherwise, says Scott Marr, head men's coach at the University of Albany, "the coach can help him gain admission."

In fact, gifted athletes with borderline transcripts have been known to get into the Ivies. "I barely made the qualifications," says Crista Samaras, a varsity lacrosse player at Princeton (class of 1999) who now coaches the X Team, whose members hail from around the country and meet for tournaments several times a year.

"I was an athlete; that's why I was there," she says. "Lacrosse was my hook."

