Earning Their STRIPES

Potomac Chapter gets high school players into the game — as officials

by Rebecca Lestner

A gainst the backdrop of the 2007 Northern Virginia Youth Lacrosse League (NVYLL) championship games at St. Stephens’ and St. Agnes School during the first two weekends of June, the Potomac Chapter of US Lacrosse celebrated more than just another successful season. It had more to do with the third team on the field than it did with the squads competing for the championships.

Greg Bentz, a junior attacker at Langley (Va.) High School, officiated the under-15 boys championship game, culminating a three-year investment in the chapter’s junior officials program.

“I was honored,” he said. “It’s the first time I’d [referred] one of those types of games.”

Most lacrosse officials get started in part to give back to the game, but that sense of responsibility usually isn’t reached until one’s playing days have passed. Six years ago, the chapter began turning a glaring need — the shortage of qualified, trained officials to referee an ever-increasing game schedule — into an investment that has reaped rewards for all in the local lacrosse community.

The chapter’s solution: empower high school lacrosse players to give back to their sport by becoming junior officials. It’s a local project, but one that would likely succeed anywhere. A shortage of qualified officials continues to hamper the sport’s growth in many lacrosse communities across the country.

“The idea is to make it a win-win situation for everyone,” said Roger Smith, president of the NYLL Board of Commissioners. “Hopefully, we are producing more well-rounded lacrosse players.”

The program trains high school players to become officials and uses their talent to referee the chapter’s youth games. That reduces the strain on the chapter’s adult referees.

“Four or five years ago, more than 30 percent of the games were done by solo referees,” said Smith. “I don’t care how senior a referee is, it is tough to referee a game by yourself.”

According to Smith, solo officials now handle no more than 2 percent of games, and most games have at least two.

“This way you have more eyes and fresher legs [on the field],” he said.

“Within the last five years, the group has really blown up,” said Homer Schwartz, president of the Potomac Chapter and past president of the Potomac Lacrosse Officials Association (PLOA).

Throughout the season, the chapter facilitates more than 1,000 games and Schwartz said “it’s hard to find enough referees and coaches to support the growth of the sport.”

The girls’ junior umpires program has been a high-interest operation for the past six years, and the boys for five. Both programs have helped keep chapter leagues fully operational and games fully staffed. And the players really like the new element of officiating.
"It's definitely given me an opportunity to look at the game from a whole new perspective," said Karen Glass, a senior defender and co-captain at Potomac (Va.) High School. Glass is in her second year as a junior umpire.

"[Officiating] makes you more aware of what you're doing on your own field, and it makes you a smarter player," said Julianne Tela, in her second year of the program.

At the root of this success lies the training each junior official undergoes before stepping onto the field. The new junior umpires participate in five training sessions, each lasting approximately four hours. The group participates in role-play as well as discussions regarding rules and regulations. The trainees also participate in a "play day," where local chapter members play recreational games to give the new umpires live experience.

Jessica McDonald, a senior attacker and co-captain at Potomac High, credits the organized training for giving her confidence. For Ethan Bailey, a midfielder who just finished his first year in the junior officials program, the training and officiating experience also helped him gain a better understanding of the rules.

"It's really a win-win situation for us all," said Patti Cleary, president of the Washington Lacrosse Umpires Association (WLUA). "[The high school students] were just players before, and now they are learning so much more from a whole different perspective of the game. This is something they can take back to their teammates."

Cleary credited Ann Ljione, the chapter's current junior official trainer, with much of the program's success. Sixty-five high school students apply annually, but Ljione said she is only able to admit 30 into the program each year. All applicants must have at least one year of playing experience before applying. Ljione's operational theory is simple: "The program has to be fun."

Ljione includes tactics such as pairing new junior umpires with more seasoned peers. With a 100-percent return rate, she knows she is doing something right.

"We teach them how to use their cards, how to be aggressive with their whistle and how to anticipate tough calls," said Cleary.

Bill Harvey, the originator of the NVYLL junior officials program and a member of the Board of Directors for the Potomac Chapter, sees nothing "junior" about the program he has helped establish.

"[The high school boys] are very well certified. They are in charge. They have the ultimate decision during each game," he said.

Harvey's training regimen includes continuous evaluation by coaches and other officials as well as an "icebreaker tournament," where each new junior official referees an entire practice game. Even technology gets into the act. Live coaching occurs throughout the game via headset communication between the new official and a more seasoned official watching from the side.

In the early stages of the program, Harvey says one of his key recruiting strategies was to enlist father-son teams to officiate together. What started as just three or four pairs has now grown to 25, and similar family pairings have popped up in the WLUA.

Rob and Katherine DeSilva umpire youth games for WLUA. Rob, who recently graduated from high school after four years in the program, and his sister, Katherine, a rising junior in her second year as a junior official, enjoy refereeing side by side. Both agree that their comfort level as brother and sister has made them more comfortable on the field.

"I love refereeing with my brother," Katherine said. "And, he's able to drive me to the games."

The program pays junior officials $35 to $55 per game, according to Bentz.

The Potomac Chapter has trained more than 600 students in the past six years. And while the fundamental benefit of having nearly each youth game covered by two officials has been realized, the investment in the overall development of young people is paying off in other ways.

"We are also now starting to reap another benefit, as the junior umpires and officials who were trained are now completing their college educations. They're returning to our chapter area and are becoming high school umpires and officials," said Harvey.