

Lacrosse making in-roads into Mum City

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BRISTOL – One of the growing sports that's rarely talked about in the Mum City is lacrosse.

It's a sport that's growing all over the United States. And in Bristol, it's following the same path.

And in Bristol's Youth Lacrosse league, new teams and growing numbers of participants are joining the program and playing the "Fastest Game on Two Feet."

"We've been running for eight years," said coach Darren McGowan, one of the Bristol coaches in the program. "This year, we have 128 kids so we added a second team at the senior level. And we started a new Lightning league for kindergarten through second grade and I think they're 13 or 14 kids on (the team)."

The new programs join the previously existing Bantams (third and fourth graders), Juniors (fifth and sixth graders), Seniors (seventh and eighth graders), a boy's high school team and a girl's high school team.

The Bantam and Junior teams are looking for more players to join its program while younger participants are encouraged to join the Lightning league as well.

The problem is that other towns, such as West Hartford, have been playing for years and have great feeder systems while Bristol is still catching up.

"We're behind" in Bristol, said McGowan. "West Hartford has one 'A' team with all the kids they have and then they'll have two or three 'B' level teams because they have a better starter program. I think not having that Lightning program, kids get to be first and second graders (and) parents see baseball and soccer available to them and put them in that pipeline."

"It's hard to get people to change over...Bristol has always had lower number at the Bantam level."

The key is getting parents to see that the sport isn't a violent one.

In fact, there's grace, skill and really good athletes take the field on a regular basis to play the sport.

"It's not crazy guys running around with sticks," said McGowan. "The kids talk amongst themselves (at the high school level) and those numbers don't swell but get bumped up. We're behind the eight ball in skill level at that point because you get kids starting later."

"We don't have a town

league that everyone plays in...it's all basically travel teams from the get go."

In Bristol, the Lightning team will be a developmental team and not play any games.

The Bantams, juniors and seniors play in the Connecticut Valley Youth Lacrosse League and play against teams from towns in Connecticut and Western Massachusetts.

Since the Bristol public high schools do not offer its students the opportunity to play lacrosse as a varsity sport, high school boys and girls play as club teams against other school clubs teams and even some varsity programs.

And Bristol's numbers should rise further as the word spreads of all the programs available.

"It's steadily growing," said McGowan of the Bristol turnout. "This year is a biggest year yet and it's creeping up there."

The problem is not having a regular venue to play the games at.

Bristol Eastern fields serve as the grounds that Bristol Youth Lacrosse uses. But the coaches had bigger venues in mind and when there was talk about putting fields in across from

Chippens Middle School, it might have been a big springboard for lacrosse in town.

"We thought it was with the doggy ditch across from Chippens Middle School," said McGowan about possible fields built in town. "We thought there was going to be a park over there and they were going to put fields in like all the other towns have. But the dog people fought it and the neighbors fought it."

"It's nice to walk the dog but it's such a waste of space there."

This year, at least one local high school is going to field a squad.

After being a club team last season, the St. Paul squad will carry JV status and will play in the newly formed Western Connecticut Lacrosse Conference.

The Falcons will join such teams as Lewis Mills, Watertown, Housatonic and Holy Cross in the division.

And after this coming year, the program will become a varsity program.

So like it or not, lacrosse will certainly become more popular in town. And hopefully, it will start at a younger age.

"I think it's going to get more popular," said McGowan. "I think the Lightning program is going to be a big plus, getting the younger kids in."

A whole lacrosse starter package runs somewhere in the vicinity of \$200 at the low end and the costs up from certainly add up for this sport.

The Bristol program tries to get it players to donate its old equipment and if anybody that needs equipment, they can take it.

For Bristol Lacrosse, the high school games begin in March and the youth games begin in April.

Bristol Lacrosse Day is scheduled for May 19, when all teams will play games at Bristol Eastern in a big day of fast paced action.

Bristol is certainly joining the lacrosse bandwagon and in just mere months, you'll be able to catch a game or two around the area.

"I think that some parents think it's a scary game and their kids are going to get hurt," said McGowan. "This is not a hitting sport. If you want to hit, play offensive or defensive line in football."

"Lacrosse is a pretty sport, a fast moving sport and only reason if you get hit is because you're basically standing still."

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