

# Chapter 1

## Lacrosse and You

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Taking a big-picture look at lacrosse
  - ▶ Playing lacrosse
  - ▶ Coaching lacrosse
  - ▶ Watching lacrosse as a fan
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**T**he popularity of lacrosse is at an all-time high. Why? Because more people in more places have been exposed to lacrosse. It really is that simple. As anyone who watches the sport for the first time quickly discovers, lacrosse is habit forming — some may even say addictive. It combines the best attributes of several of the most popular sports around — football, basketball, hockey, and more. It's fast moving, challenging, and never dull. Plus, you don't have to have superhuman strength or size to succeed at lacrosse.

In this chapter, we provide a quick overview of the differences between field lacrosse (which is typically played outdoors) and box lacrosse (which is played indoors), as well as between the men's and women's games. Then we look at lacrosse from three perspectives — that of the player, the coach, and the fan.

Whether you're playing lacrosse for the first time or looking to improve your game, whether you're coaching a team or you're a parent or fan, lacrosse — and this book — has something to offer you. This chapter gets the ball rolling.

### *Understanding the Game of Lacrosse*

Someone watching a lacrosse game for the first time may be surprised, intimidated, or just plain confused — after all, there's a lot going on. Players are running on and off the field or floor rapidly, possession is often up for grabs,

and the hits just keep on coming (except in the women's game, where contact is not allowed). Lacrosse is a game of running, dodging, spinning, cutting, and faking. It offers plenty of excitement — from sprinting all out on a fast break to outrunning an opponent for a goal.

Lacrosse is a high-scoring game, which makes it especially exciting for fans. If you ever see a shutout in a lacrosse game, mark it on your calendar, because chances are, you'll watch thousands more games and never see another.

With lacrosse, throwing a ball — accurately — is the name of the game. The difference between lacrosse and most other sports is that you have to throw the ball using a stick, not with your hand.



A lacrosse ball is about 8 inches in circumference and about 2½ inches in diameter. It weighs a bit more than 5 ounces.

Although it's not easy, with good instruction and lots of practice, in a short time, almost anyone can master the basic skills needed to play the fastest game on two feet. In fact, unlike many other team sports where size and strength are essential, lacrosse rewards the small and the speedy. Sure, it helps to be big (especially if you're also fast), but small players can excel in lacrosse if they're quick, intelligent, aggressive, and skilled with a stick.

In the following sections, we fill you in on the two forms of lacrosse and the ways in which the men's and women's games differ.

## *The two forms of lacrosse: Field and box*

Lacrosse comes in two main forms:

- ✓ **Field lacrosse:** Today, field lacrosse (which got its start with Native Americans — see the nearby sidebar “The origins of lacrosse”) is the most popular form in the United States. There are 10 or 12 players on the field (depending on whether the players are men or women — see “Mars and Venus: How the men's and women's games differ”). The playing surface is 110 yards long and 60 yards wide for men, a little bigger for women. The goals are 6 feet high and 6 feet wide.
- ✓ **Box lacrosse:** Box, which is most popular in Canada, is played on the equivalent of an ice hockey rink, in which the ice has been replaced with artificial turf. Box lacrosse has fewer players than field lacrosse — only 6. The players are assigned different roles — offense, transition, or defense — depending on their position. The playing surface is smaller (180 to 200 feet long and 80 to 90 feet wide), the goals are smaller (4 feet





high and 4 feet wide), the goalies wear more protection, and there is more scoring than there is in field lacrosse.

Box lacrosse has been strictly a male domain for most of its history. But lately, some upstart women's leagues have formed in Canada.

For more on the rules of lacrosse, and the differences between field and box lacrosse, check out Chapter 4.

## *Mars and Venus: How the men's and women's games differ*

Men's lacrosse is one of the oldest sports in North America — possibly dating back to the 12th century (see the nearby sidebar “The origins of lacrosse”). But the first women's lacrosse game wasn't played until 1890 in Scotland; it wasn't played in the United States until 1926 in Baltimore, Maryland. And women's lacrosse wasn't played at the Division I level in the National Collegiate Athletic Association until 1982.

The field lacrosse game for women has grown and evolved over the years. For example, formal boundaries weren't instituted until 2006 (before that, no hard boundaries existed), and you can count on more changes in the women's game in the years to come.

### **The origins of lacrosse**

Lacrosse was first played by Native Americans, usually as a way to settle disputes between tribes or to celebrate and honor religious rituals. The Cherokee Indians referred to the sport as *Tewaaraton* (which means “little brother of war”) and actually used it to train for battle.

In these early contests, the field of play could stretch for hundreds and hundreds of yards with no boundaries to speak of, teams could number well into the hundreds, and a game could last for several days. The small, speedy, and healthy players would've been the earliest stars of the game.

The sport was called *baggataway* by the Six Nations of the Iroquois in the area that is now western New York and southern Ontario. *Baggataway* is an Algonquian verb meaning “to hit with something.” The Iroquois narrowed the number of participants significantly (to around 15 per team), set up goals, and established boundaries.

The name *lacrosse* was born when French explorers first witnessed the sport. The French thought that the stick looked like the staff of a bishop — which was known in France as *la crosse*.



One thing is for sure, though: The game has caught on. Today, there are three times as many women's collegiate lacrosse programs as there were in 1990. In fact, the sport is so popular that colleges are having trouble finding enough qualified officials and coaches, especially outside the sport's traditional East Coast hotbeds.

Some key differences do exist between the men's and women's game:

- ✓ **Physical contact:** The main difference between men's and women's lacrosse comes down to contact. In the men's game, physical contact is legal — and encouraged (especially by coaches) — while in the women's game, it is not. As a result, there is far less protective equipment in the women's game: Men wear helmets, mouth guards, gloves, shoulder pads, elbow pads, and often ribs pads, whereas women wear mouth guards and protective eyewear, but (with the exception of goalies) no helmets or padding. (For more on lacrosse equipment, see Chapter 2.)
- ✓ **Number of players:** In the men's game, ten players are on the field — three attackmen, three midfielders, three defensemen, and a goaltender. In the women's game, there are 12 players on the field — offensive attack players (first home, second home, third home, and two attack wings) and the defense (center, two defensive wings, point, cover point, third man, and goalie). (Turn to Chapter 3 for more on all these positions.)
- ✓ **Sticks:** Unlike men's lacrosse, mesh is not permitted for the pockets of women's sticks; the pockets must be strung in the traditional way. Also, the top of the ball must be above the sidewall when it's in the pocket.
- ✓ **Field size:** In men's lacrosse, the field measures 110 yards long and 60 yards wide. In women's lacrosse, the field is a bit bigger: 120 yards long and 70 yards wide.

## Lacrosse: A Player's Game

Although you can get a ton of enjoyment from lacrosse by coaching or watching the sport, the most thrilling way to participate is by playing the game yourself. If you're not shooting and scoring, you're hustling for ground balls, checking the opposing stick handler, or making big saves. If you're a lacrosse player, there's *never* a dull moment.

Each position in lacrosse requires different skills — for example, attackmen need shooting ability, midfielders need speed, and defensemen need toughness — but every lacrosse player needs strong stick skills and good hand-eye coordination.



Whether you're an attackman or a long-stick midfielder, the main attribute you need to play lacrosse is not really a skill at all: You need to work hard and hustle all the time. So many good things in lacrosse — getting a ground ball, making a big check — are a direct byproduct of doing just that.

## *Playing offense: Stick skills and shooting*

Good offensive skills start with the stick. You won't be able to shoot the ball hard and with accuracy if you aren't an adept stick handler. As we cover in Chapter 5, the best way to improve those skills is through practice.



We all like to work on things we're already good at. In lacrosse, you need to do the opposite. If you're dominant with one hand, you should strive to improve your other hand. Being able to pass, catch, and shoot with either hand is essential in beating your defender and, ultimately, the goalie.

Dodging is also crucial. Think of dodging like ball fakes in basketball. They're moves that allow you to get past a defender, often including faking one way and going another. Dodges are crucial — especially for midfielders, who have more of the field to operate on offensively.

In Chapter 6, we offer some shooting drills and exercises you can use to take your skills up a notch. In addition, we examine the differences in shooting techniques from close range to the goal, as well as from the perimeter.

## *Defending: The do's and don'ts*

Hard hits and checks often garner the most attention, but effective defense includes many things that rarely — if ever — draw oohs and aahs from the crowd.

Specifically, we're referring to assets such as communicating with your teammates, using good footwork, and playing with your head. Granted, these attributes aren't exactly glamorous, but they are the keys that make for a strong defender. We break down all this — and more — in Chapter 7.

In addition, we take a look at specific ways to defend offensive players — both when they have the ball and when they don't. We also give you some drills that will help you develop your defensive agility, as well as other key defensive skills.

## *The goalie's goal: Keeping the ball out of the net*

Keeping the ball *out* of the net is the goalie's job — and it's a tough one. In fact, there's no position quite like the goalie on the field. After all, who else is willing to stand in the line of fire of shots coming directly at him — from all angles — often at speeds as high as 100 miles per hour? Yes, indeed, goaltenders are a breed apart.

In addition to needing mental strength, goaltenders need plenty of other attributes to stop the ball from crossing the goal line. We examine the basics of goaltending — from proper stance to following the ball — in Chapter 8.

## *Possession is nine-tenths of the (lacrosse) law*

Offense, defense, goaltending, specialty teams . . . these are all critical to winning lacrosse. But the possession game is the most important of them all. Period. That's because you can't score if you don't have the ball.

From faceoffs and ground balls to rides and clears, the possession game is complex. We take a look at all it in Chapter 9, starting with the faceoff. Lacrosse is one of the few sports where you can score and then get the ball right back again — that's why faceoffs are so crucial.

## *Using specialty teams to your advantage*

When one team has a player advantage for a period of time following a penalty, that's known as a *man-up opportunity*. Whenever this situation occurs, there are two specialty teams on the field — the man-up team (the offensive team that has the advantage) and the man-down team (the defensive team that is shorthanded).

In box lacrosse, man-up opportunities are known as *power plays*, the same term used in ice hockey.

In Chapter 11, we talk about what makes for effective players on specialty teams — both when you're a man-up and when you're a man-down. We also take a look at the best kind of shots to take when you have a player advantage. Finally, we outline some especially effective man-up plays.



## *Getting physical*

Being the best lacrosse player you can be starts with being in the best possible physical condition, so that you're in a position to succeed when game time comes. In Chapter 12, we pinpoint specific steps you can take to ensure that you're at your best physically, including ways to improve quickness, agility, and strength, with some weight-training pointers as well.

Being the best player you can be also involves being mentally ready. In Chapter 12, we cover goal setting, relaxation, visualization, self-talk, focus, and getting energized.

## *Coaches' Corner*

When a team executes its game plan effectively, coaching looks easy. But the reality is, coaching is hard work — and if you've coached for more than a few minutes, you already know that.

The best way to get your team to succeed is to put it in position to do so. That means putting players at the right spots at the right times. It also means finding the right style of play to match your team's strengths and weaknesses. (See Part III for more on the fundamentals of coaching lacrosse.)

You also need to develop your coaching style for both the offense and the defense. We tell you the most effective offensive and defensive schemes to employ in Chapters 14 and 15, respectively.

Your players have to be physically prepared before the start of each game, but they have to be just as prepared mentally. To help your players play intelligent lacrosse, scouting is critical at the higher levels of the sport — usually starting at the varsity level in high school and becoming more intense at the collegiate and professional levels. For example, is the opposing goalie stronger on high shots or low ones? Is the opposing team's best attackman adept at shooting with his off hand? This kind of knowledge is vital. In fact, effective scouting can make the difference between a win and a loss. (We give you tips on scouting in Chapter 13.)

Another key part of coaching is making sure your players are ready to play. Are they confident? Are they motivated? Are they focused? These are just some of the questions you need to ask yourself before each and every game. (Turn to Chapter 13 for more on motivating your players to succeed.)

## *From a Fan's Perspective*

If you're a fan of lacrosse, you're in good company: There are more lacrosse fans today than ever before, and that number is only growing.

In lacrosse, the action is constant, which means that you have to keep track of many different elements simultaneously — from offense and defense to specialty teams and goaltending. (We tell you specifically what to look for in Chapter 16.) There's never a dull moment in a lacrosse game.

If you're almost anywhere in North America these days, there should be a lacrosse game near you, whether at the youth, collegiate, pro, or recreational level. In Chapter 17, we take a look at the premier high school and collegiate programs playing the game today. We also cover tradition-rich minor-league box lacrosse in Canada, and we touch on the spread and growth of the international game. We tell you where — and when — you can follow the action, from the youth level to the pros.

Pro lacrosse now has both box and field versions. We tell you what you need to know about both those leagues in Chapter 18, as well as provide online sources for news and information.

So go out and catch the action! That's especially good advice if you're relatively new to the game. There's no substitute for watching as much lacrosse as possible to familiarize yourself with the rules and the unique aspects of the game. And you have plenty of opportunities to do just that: There are more outlets providing coverage of the game than ever before. Turn to the appendix for more on where you can watch some of the action on TV.