



Vineyard U-15 team member Jackie Hegarty (right). *Ivy Ashe*

## Vineyard Athletes, From Youth Leagues To High School, Flock to Lacrosse

By IVY ASHE *Thursday, May 17, 2012 - 4:46pm*

On a Wednesday afternoon at the regional high school, the varsity and junior varsity sports teams are just finishing their practices. At the same time, cars pull up alongside the chain link fences ringing the fields and younger athletes step out, opening trunk doors and pulling out duffel bags of gear. The bags, and the windbreakers worn by some of the kids, are emblazoned with the same two words as those on the jackets of the high schoolers leaving the fields: Vineyard Lacrosse.

Lacrosse is no stranger to Island shores—it's been played here since 1995, when Betsy Dripps, with help from Joanne Maxwell and Marianne Neill, founded the first high school girls' club team. Dave Brodsky founded the first youth program here a year later, the same year the boys' high school club team started under the direction of Peter Ferrini. The boys' team remains the only Vineyard squad to ever host a state championship, falling just short of a state title in 2003 (Ipswich beat the Vineyarders 6-5). The girls' squad, meanwhile, has missed the state tournament only once in its 17-year history and just locked up another Eastern Athletic Conference title.

Modern lacrosse evolved from a game (often referred to as stickball) played by Native American tribes in the Northeast, and is the oldest team sport on the continent. But in spite of the history attached to the

game, lacrosse remained a niche sport for years, constantly in the shadow of more recently homegrown sports like football and baseball, and struggling to gain appeal outside of the region where it was conceived.

Today, high school boys' varsity coach Chris Greene said, "It's the fastest growing sport in the country. Nothing's touching it."

A 2010 survey by U.S. Lacrosse, the parent organization for the US national lacrosse teams, found that overall participation in the sport had jumped from 253,931 players in 2001, the first year such numbers were taken, to 624,593 players in 2010. Of the latter number, nearly half are youth players. Massachusetts has the third-highest number of youth players in the country, behind Maryland and New York.

Tom Pierce, director of the Martha's Vineyard Youth Lacrosse program, and Bob Hayman, director of the Martha's Vineyard Girls' Youth Lacrosse, can attest to that growth. This spring, both the boys' and girls' youth programs maxed out during registration, with 75 and 55 players, respectively, taking to the fields.

And as in other regions, the youth program here feeds into the high school. At the high school level, the boys' squads field 47 players between varsity and JV. The girls' program, still led by Mrs. Dripps, drew 46 players to preseason tryouts.

"We kept thinking, 'Well, 46 kids...surely someone will drop out,'" Mrs. Dripps said. "And that hasn't happened. This is a testament to the kids who come out."

"All of those freshmen, whether they've played youth or never picked up a stick before—they're all still here," she said. "And that tells me they like it. They're not giving up on it."

Mrs. Dripps and her coaching staff—which includes two former Vineyard players, Kurstin Meehan and Jessie Wilcoxson—are looking into creating a freshman-only team for next season to accommodate demand. "Kids get their friends involved," said Mr. Hayman, whose two daughters, Lee and Addy, play on the U-15 and U-13 teams. The girls are, additionally, both dancers at RISE. "We picked up ten dancers this year," said Mr. Hayman. "They love it, and it's different; they get the word out."

Lee is also part of a group of U-15 girls who started playing five years ago, thanks to the recruiting efforts of Edgartown School teacher Megan McDonald, a former high school player and youth coach.

"The kids just loved Megan," recalled lacrosse parent and girls' league treasurer Gayle Poggi, whose daughter Sara started playing at the same time as Lee. "She was trying to round up some kids to play lacrosse; they were all like, 'Yeah, we'll do it!'"

Once Sara Poggi started playing lacrosse, older sister Taylor also took up the sport and is now a starter on the high school varsity team.

This year, word-of-mouth proved crucial for turnout in the boys' youth program.

"I was a little dismayed after registration because my U-11 program [the boys' program has three age



Boys' varsity team ready for action.

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Betsy Dripps founded first Vineyard high school team in 1995, and remains coach. —

divisions compared to two for the girls] was very small,” Mr. Pierce said. Enter the hockey Travel Mites, fresh off a championship season on the ice and ready to take up a new spring sport.

“First Joey signed up, and then Joey talked to Johnny, and Johnny talked to Ben, and the next thing you know I had to cut it off because I had all these kids,” said Mr. Pierce. “Eighty percent of them had never picked up a stick until this year.”

The youth leagues on Martha’s Vineyard are instructional programs (the U-11 team scored their first goals of the season just two weeks ago); it can take a while to master the skills of throwing, catching, and cradling the ball in the pocket of their lacrosse sticks.

“It’s a learning league,” said Mrs. Poggi, “So it’s kind of funny sometimes...you’ll see the coach or ref [stop] in the middle of a play and they’ll just start talking to the kids about the play.”

“I really enjoy watching the kids grow and learn the game,” said Mr. Hayman, “And then watching them get really good at the high school level.”

Of current players Madison Hughes, Molly Wallace, Issy Smith and Jennie Lindland, he said, “They were all kids that I coached, And now they’re all rock stars at the high school and they’re having a great time. It’s really fun to see them continue and...still have that passion from 4th or 5th grade.”

Last fall, Madison, a senior at the high school, became the first Vineyard lacrosse player to sign with a Division 1 lacrosse program, and will play at Central Connecticut State University next year.

Division 3 lacrosse programs, meanwhile, remain the common destination for the high school players, with former athletes playing at Bentley, Utica, Holy Cross, Ithaca and Wheaton, to name a few.

“There are a fair amount [of Vineyarders] playing at the college level, or at the club level in college,” said Mrs. Dripps. “That’s what I love—whether high school is the end of their experience or whether they go on, they love the sport and they love playing it.”

Some former Vineyard players return to pass on that love.

“I used to coach all the coaches that are in the [youth] program,” Tom Pierce said. “They’re a great guys; for a bunch of twenty-somethings to love the game that much—they’re not parents; they’re not really used to [managing] kids, but they want to be out there and teaching the game. It’s sort of inspirational for me that they do that.”

Just why lacrosse has become so popular is not documented, but Mr. Pierce, among others, attributes it to just about every element of the sport.

“Once you get lacrosse into your blood it’s sort of hard [to get it out],” he continued.

“It’s got the physicality of football, the game skills of basketball, the checking of hockey [in the boys’ game] and the athleticism of soccer,” Mr. Pierce said. “But unlike soccer, you get a lot of scoring.”

“I think a lot of kids from other sports can get drawn to it very easily,” Mr. Greene said. His current roster includes players who are also starters on the high school’s basketball, hockey and football teams. “They can take something that they already love and apply it.”

Mrs. Dripps’ roster also includes a number of three-sport athletes.



Vineyard’s Jennie Lindland, right, rocks against Wayland. —

“I don’t want to deplete the other sports that are going on,” she said, adding that the Vineyard is somewhat different in that student-athletes here do not choose just one sport and focus on that year-round, as is becoming common practice at the high school level.

“If they can play a sport and be part of a team,” she said, “it’s just such a good thing.”

Added Mr. Hayman: “I wish I had played it.”