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A couple of East Coasters expand lacrosse in Utah

Number of high school teams in state is growing

By Steve Ashton

For the Deseret Morning News

The Waterford School in Sandy has a well-earned reputation for churning out top-notch graduates who head to the East Coast to attend some of the finest universities in the United States. These students are eager to learn and full of new ideas as they embark on their new adventure in higher education.

Occasionally, however, the East Coast returns the favor and sends a new idea back to the West with one of their own.

Such is the case with Ithaca, N.Y., native Bob Capener, who came to Utah in the early 1980s to accept a teaching position at the newly created Waterford School.

Capener, who played soccer and lacrosse at Cornell University, found himself in unfamiliar territory when he discovered that there was virtually no trace of lacrosse to be found anywhere in Utah at that time.

"I came from upstate New York where I played lacrosse since I was about 11 years old. Back in those days upstate New York, Washington, D.C., and Long Island were really the three hotbeds of lacrosse activity in the country," he said.

"When I arrived in Utah, I found that there was really no place that lacrosse was played at all."

Assuming that his lacrosse days were at an end, Capener assumed his role as physics teacher and soccer coach at the school.

His assumption about lacrosse, however, was wrong.

"Something strange happened after I started teaching at the school. As soon as the other faculty members and students found out that I had played lacrosse at Cornell they began pushing me to start a team at the school," Capener said.

"I was a little hesitant at first, but eventually we formed a team. Then I found out that a group of Judge (Memorial High School) hockey players had started a small lacrosse club at their school, so we arranged to get together with them a couple of times a year to scrimmage. Both teams were so rudimentary at that time that we were constantly stopping the scrimmages to explain the rules of the game."

Waterford and Judge remained the two lone high schools fielding lacrosse teams clear until the mid-to-late 1990s when another East Coast transplant arrived on the scene to take the game to the next level.

Mason Goodhand, the current head coach at Westminster College, arrived in Utah from New Jersey in the late 1990s with his job as a pilot for Delta Air Lines. Goodhand had extensive experience

coaching lacrosse as an assistant at the University of Utah, the Air Force Academy, Arizona State University and California State University-Sacramento.

After living in Utah for a short time, Goodhand surveyed the skimpy lacrosse scene in the state and decided that the time was right to give the sport a shot in the arm.

Goodhand approached Capener and Craig Morris, Capener's successor as head coach of the Waterford team, about starting a league in the state.

"Mason approached Craig and I, because Waterford was a useful starting point to get a league created since we had arguably the most established lacrosse program in the state at that time. Craig and I wanted to help out, so we started helping with clinics and things like that to get the game some exposure," said Capener.

"After Mason took over, a lot of schools were added in a short amount of time, since people started finding out what a fun game lacrosse is. Kids and parents both enjoy it," he said.

Most of the growth in lacrosse has happened outside of the Utah High School Athletic Association as lacrosse is still not a sanctioned high school sport. However, that hasn't slowed the growth of school sponsored teams.

The recent creation of the Utah High School Lacrosse League has helped the sport flourish with 40 high schools now officially sponsoring a team. The UHSSL is run entirely by volunteers, but has been instrumental in bringing legitimacy to the sport.

"Prior to the Utah High School Lacrosse League being created, there was no official state champion crowned. Back in the old days when Waterford and Judge would play, the winner of our match was the unofficial state champion, I guess," said Capener with a chuckle.

Waterford took home back-to-back state championships in 2003 and 2004.

"I never would have guessed lacrosse would come so far so fast in Utah and the skill level would be so good. We have a couple of kids every year now who go on to play lacrosse at the college level," said Capener. "Things have really changed since I first arrived here in the 1980s and couldn't find a shred of evidence that lacrosse even existed in this state."

► Who's playing lacrosse?

Utah High School Lacrosse League

BOYS

Division A - North

Bonneville

Bountiful

Highland

Judge Memorial

Oakley

Olympus

Park City

Skyline

Viewmont

West

Division A - South

Alta

Bingham

Brighton

Jordan

Juan Diego

Mountain View

Murray

Riverton

Waterford

Division B - North

Bear River

Box Elder

Fremont

Logan

Mountain Crest

Northridge

Roy

Sky View

Weber

Woods Cross

Division B - South

Copper Hills

Cottonwood

East

Lehi

Lone Peak

Orem

Pleasant Grove

Timpanogos

Timpview

Wasatch Academy

West Jordan

Utah Lacrosse Association

GIRLS

Conference A

Bingham

Jordan

Murray

Olympus/Highland

Orem

Skyline

Timpview

West

Woods Cross

Conference B

Alta

Bountiful

Brighton

East

Juan Diego

Judge

Lehi (Alpine)

Park City

Waterford

West Jordan

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