

In our identities of concerned coaches and parents, Team Minnesota has become aware of the current disagreement in our state's youth organizations regarding returning to a "grade based" system (instead of an age based system) to divide youth players. Given that our organization works with over 30 coaches, who have playing experience at 10 different NCAA institutions, and coaching experience at 17 local high schools, we thought our observations on this issue might be of value when our community associations discuss this issue.

In short, it is our belief that a return to a grade-based system for creating teams would be a positive move for youth development in this state, one that will remove a current division between our associations (whether to allow 9th graders to play U15), while maintaining congruence with the developmental models used in many of the "hotbed" states and their leading programs. Some have argued that returning to such a system will hinder the development of Minnesota lacrosse players. We do not agree with that argument, as will be discussed below. Some discussion points follow:

1 – Many states currently run summer youth leagues by grade. In fact, in the two original hotbed areas (Long Island and Baltimore), it's still run that way. The Long Island Lacrosse League – one of the oldest such leagues (it began in 1994) – plays by grade. http://lilacrosseleague.com/boys_summer.html More importantly, Hero's Lacrosse which was established in 1976 and is the oldest and most widely recognized lacrosse organization in the Baltimore region organizes their teams by grade. <http://www.heroslacrosse.com/summer.html> Note also that Hero's lumps their 9-12 graders together for summer league play – treating 9th graders as HS players. Given the continued parade of uniquely talented players coming from these areas, I'm confident that their using grade based summer leagues is not hurting their player's development.

2 - The current juniors/seniors in MSHSL teams played in a grade based system and were/are successful. Current graduation year 2015/2016 players' last year in YLM was as 8th graders on 7th/8th grade teams. The 2015/2016's may be the most advanced/most talented group in the state's history as a group. Why do we say this? Go look at the number of 2015/2016's that have made all-Conf/All-state/All American, as underclassmen, let alone the number that have committed to NCAA lacrosse. We don't see that such a grade based system impacted them in any negative way.

3 – Select teams already divide by graduation year. Look at the large select team organizations in hotbed areas all of their teams – even their youth - are set up by Graduation year (i.e. GRADE), not age. For examples, see Team 91- <http://boys.team91lacrosse.com/> and Triple H/Dukes <http://www.triplehlacrosse.com/> We are certain that those teams, and their players, are not suffering by playing with and against boys of their grade. Furthermore, select teams at the HS levels are all set up by grad year, because then college coaches know what they are looking at – and don't have to guess at the grade of each player. Team Minnesota currently uses "age based" divisions, based upon YLM's divisions, but would prefer to move to a graduation year system, and has begun to move to that model. And in reality, our organization's youth teams are set up by graduation year because we have limited u15 to only 8th graders, and we offer U13 (7th), U12 (6th) and U11(5th) teams. Other local select teams run similar graduation year teams for middle school players. A change by YLM to grade/graduation year teams will not impact us in the slightest.

TEAM MINNESOTA - is committed to providing an unmatched learning experience for student athletes and families, as well as the continued regional expansion of the game of lacrosse. Team Minnesota is focused on improving players decision-making and fundamentals via positive coaching and playing top competition. As that player continues to improve, Team Minnesota provides a vehicle for that player to explore their college options and provides advice, as requested, on how and where to pursue their college ambitions.

4 – Grade based play will not be harmful to select team organizations. Why? Because almost all such organizations set up their teams that way now. Some parents have asked about how the difference in defenseman sized poles at 5/6th grade v. U13 level might impact those players. One of Team Minnesota’s partners was a NCAA defender (Harvard), who played for one of the winningest HS programs in the country (Ward Melville HS). When asked, it was his opinion that the difference in learning to use a long pole and mid-sized pole at U13 v. 5th/6th respectively is negligible at best. Many great defensemen moved from midfield to defense at 9th grade, and learned the pole mechanics within weeks. The biggest parts of becoming a great defender are learning how to move one’s feet, having great stick skills and understanding your role off the ball. Proficiency at such skills does not depend on using a mid-level or full long stick.

5 – Ease of Enforcement. Getting birth certificates, and the like, is time-consuming, raises data privacy concerns for the organizations and thus makes it harder on the volunteers that help our sport grow. Checking what grade Tommy or Susie just completed, is simple and raises no privacy concerns.

6 – Allows for the growth of the game into Middle Schools. While this is likely a few years away for many schools in MN now, dividing players by grade removes an impediment for Middle Schools to add Lacrosse as a middle school sport, and allows for a seamless transition should a middle school wish to adopt the sport and provide school backing during the spring.

We are all aware that one of the biggest issues facing the youth lacrosse community in this state is how to handle 9th grade players that fit the u15 limitation. YLM never had this issue when it divided by grade. We presume that it is considering going back to that system to eliminate this issue. Yet some associations are balking. When making up your own mind on this issue, please ask yourself “Why is this an issue?” Who stands to gain if our youth organization is divided, and thereby, weakened over this issue?

Minnesota Lacrosse has rapidly surged from being a lacrosse community that was “just starting” to one that routinely produces high-level players and can compete at the highest level HS tournaments and beyond. YLM (and the coaches/administrators/parents/players that have invested thousands of hours in it) is one of the major reasons (as is MSHSL varsity recognition) for that accelerated development curve. Few, states have anything like it, and it should be recognized for the benefit it provides. We encourage those that truly have Minnesota Lacrosse’s best interests at heart work together to solve this issue and others that may confront them in moving forward on youth issues.

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