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It's fast. It's finesse. It's fearless. It's Lacrosse

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Caption: (Color) UT lacrosse club midfielder David Yam, at right, join teammates to get psyched up before the game.; UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE LACROSSE CLUB

(Color) UT defenseman Mike Arlen, right, checks the ball from The Citadel's Brian Murphy. It is legal in men's lacrosse to hit a player anywhere above the waist.; UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE LACROSSE CLUB

(Color) The ball gets by UT sophomore goalkeeper Joe Weatherly during a home game against The Citadel last month. Photos by Margaret Bentlage/News-Sentinel staff; UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE LACROSSE CLUB

Illustration: photo (3)

Wynne Brown/News-Sentinel staff writer

Sabrina Neeley looks around the field with a smile. "It's good to have a crowd of spectators here," she says.

The "crowd" -- maybe 25 people in all -- lounges comfortably in the early spring sunshine along the edge of the University of Tennessee intramural field.

What appears to be a bunch of crazed undergraduates is racing up and down the artificial turf whacking enthusiastically at each other with sticks. Occasionally, a hard rubber missile, the size and shape of a tennis ball whizzes by, providing good reason for the players' masks, helmets, mitts and shoulder, elbow and arm pads.

Welcome to the world of lacrosse.

Gradually, some sort of order emerges. There are two teams, each fielding 10 players, divided into three attackers, three midfielders and four defenders, including the goalie.

The sticks have a woven pouch on the end, and players "cradle," or swivel, the stick back and forth, to keep the ball in what seems an impossibly tiny pocket in the pouch. They also scoop, catch and pass the ball and "check," or hit, each other's sticks and upper bodies to keep opponents from shooting into the goal.

Crazed it may well be, but lacrosse is also a game of speed, aggression, coordination and finesse.

Neeley remembers when no one at all came to the UT Lacrosse Club games.

Her husband, Grant, was assistant coach, and because she accompanied him to games, it fell to Sabrina to keep the books, meaning she tracked goals, penalties, time-outs and the clock for each game.

"Often there wasn't anyone there but the team, the coaches and me," she said.

In an era of ESPN and multimillion dollar contracts, what attraction could a game have that brings so few spectators?

It is precisely that lack of crowd appeal that draws many players, said Buff Grubb, the club's head coach. "Lacrosse is a very tight fraternity of people. It becomes a very small world."

According to Ed McGinley, assistant coach of the UT club, some of the allure is that the game combines qualities of several sports. "It's a melting pot of four major sports: the finesse of basketball, the hitting of football, the quickness of ice hockey and the playmaking of soccer."

What about the women?

Women's lacrosse is a very different game than men's. No protective equipment is worn, and players can only check each other's sticks, not bodies.

In the Southeast, Clemson, Georgia and Auburn all have women's club teams, and Vanderbilt has a NCAA Division I team. No women are playing lacrosse at UT, but it hasn't always been that way.

Kara Lipski, a UT broadcasting student, played attack and midfield on the men's club team in 1995-96 when she was a freshman.

"It was great!" she said. "I'd played lacrosse since I was 12, and I have an older brother, so I knew and understood both games.

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The switch wasn't a big deal."

"Of course, I do remember one tournament ... I didn't really think anyone would notice I was a girl. I've got long hair, but I had it up, and you wear so much padding you can't really tell much. ...

"But the first thing I heard was someone yelling, 'First one to knock down the girl gets a free case of beer!'

"My teammates were great, and I stayed up."

Lipski tried to get a women's team started her sophomore year, but "then I got involved in other campus activities." However, she said, Farragut High School has a girls' team, and she's hoping to have time to help out next year.

Ready to grow

March Madness it may not be, but the sport of lacrosse has come a long way from its beginnings as an Iroquois Indian game that combined entertainment, endurance training and religious celebration.

In the Northeast, lacrosse has long been a major college sport: There are 34 NCAA Division I men's teams in the Northeast region, 15 in the Southeast and five in the West.

But the sport is spreading, even at the high school level.

Chris Kelley, coach of the Farragut High School lacrosse club, coached in St. Louis and says the number of high school teams there has grown from one in 1992 to 16 in 1997.

So far, in this area high school lacrosse is only at Farragut, and the West Knoxville team has to travel to Nashville, Chattanooga and Memphis to play.

Grubb says 50 percent of the UT club is native Tennesseans, and each year more of the team is familiar with the game from high school.

His UT team, part of the South Eastern Lacrosse Conference, is ranked 15th in the country. They're seeded third in final tournament of the season, which will be Friday, April 17, through Sunday, April 19, in UT-Chattanooga's new Max Findley Stadium. Their first game will be 8 a.m. Saturday.

Ten high schools will also have a chance to play at the tournament, and Farragut's first game is scheduled for Saturday as well.

Grubb doesn't have any illusions about filling the stadium's 20,000 seats, but he and McGinley both feel lacrosse has the potential to kick soccer aside.

"There's more goal scoring, and I think it's a much more exciting game. It'll also be much more attractive to TV audiences," McGinley said.

There are a couple of hurdles before lacrosse hits the big-time.

One, at the college level, is that eligibility has been tightened up, and only undergraduates can play, which eliminates many graduate students who might have had experience playing for other schools.

Another hurdle is that in other parts of the country, lacrosse is a spring sport. Here, soccer fills that spring niche and tends to overwhelm lacrosse -- and take up all the fields.

But the lacrosse enthusiasts remain hopeful.

"All it needs is one more team to pop up -- Bearden, Webb or West -- and high school lacrosse will take off here, too," promised McGinley.

Lacrosse for life

Lacrosse isn't just for high school and college students.

Both John Cockfield's father and grandfather played, and he was on teams in Maryland, Charleston, S.C., and here at UT. He started the Farragut High School club several years ago and even built their goals. Now he's president of the Smoky Mountain Lacrosse Club, which is made up of former students and anyone else who wants to play. More than half the players live in Chattanooga.

"There's not a huge growth, but we're getting there. And the quality's improving," he said, adding that Atlanta now has five men's club teams.

Grant Neeley, who used to be assistant coach of the UT club team and played for the Smoky Mountain Lacrosse Club, is now assistant professor of political science at Texas Tech in Lubbock.

He's also coaching the lacrosse club team.

Sabrina Neeley will be joining her husband as soon as she finishes her doctoral work at UT, so lacrosse is likely to continue to be a part of her life as well. "It used to be just concentrated in the Northeast, but it's growing so much elsewhere now," she said.

"It's really picking up speed."

For more information about lacrosse in general, take a look at e-lacrosse, an online lacrosse magazine, at <http://www.e-lacrosse.com/welcapr.htm>

For information about lacrosse in the Knoxville area:

* The Smoky Mountain Lacrosse Club includes current and former college players and people interested in starting. John Cockfield is president of the club and can be reached at 681-3695, or by pointing your Web browser to <http://www.vic.com/~jwc/>

* The University of Tennessee Lacrosse Club players must be full-time undergraduate students. For more information, call the club's head coach, Buff Grubb, at 458-8547 or 1-423-746-1313.

* To find out more about the Farragut High School boys' lacrosse club, call Chris Kelley, the coach, at 588-5734.



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