Editorial

Currently, lacrosse finds itself in a most exciting phase of development, especially in the State of Texas. Players, improvement, and the overall level of competition are at an all-time high. Personally, my lacrosse career at Coppell started in 1997 and ended in 2000. Since that time, I went on to play at the next level doing a post-graduate year in the New England prep schools’ Founders League (one of the top leagues in the country which includes schools such as Avon Old Farms, Taft, Loomis Chaffee, Deerfield, Westminster, etc.) and then at the Division I level at Butler University. Butler was in the Great Western Lacrosse League along with Notre Dame, Ohio State, Denver, Air Force, and Fairfield. Since then, I have returned home to Dallas, and 2015 will be my tenth year back watching the game develop here in the Great State. In 2005, I used to wonder what the game would look like in ten years. Well, here we are, and my expectations have been exceeded. In addition, with the good comes the interesting, and there are parts of our game that exist in this day and age that simply were not on the radar in the late 1990’s, mainly, the accelerated recruitment cycle. As a Texan who matriculated prior to the madness of hyper-recruiting, I have seen the stages of the process materialize. In this editorial, I will attempt to cover how the process and landscape has changed, how players are affected, and, finally, I will explain to the players in this State how great they are, regardless of matriculation. That is where the focus should be.

How has the process changed?

To see a brief history on the entire State, please refer to our Texas Lacrosse History section. The truth is that in the beginning of the recruiting era, the 1990s and early 2000s, few players matriculated. Texans were less highly looked upon in terms of skill and ability. Coaches saw the athleticism, but players were looked at as projects more than anything. Two of the main players early in the game to matriculate were Jeff Fellows (Jesuit / Navy) and Greg Bice (St. Mary’s Hall / Ohio State). Both of them helped give much needed respect to the Texas Lacrosse player at the next level. They forged the trail by playing at a high level and, more importantly, finishing out their careers. At that point in time, with very few players matriculating, players really did not know until their senior years if it was going to happen. For many, including yours truly, taking a PG (Post Graduate) year really provided an opportunity to matriculate and compete at the next level. You could actually get recruited during the summer of your rising post graduate summer. That was fourteen years ago!

Youth programs all over the country and especially in Texas have really spurred the growth of the game, though. Shocker. Playing at a younger age has increased the overall skill level of many players. At first, these youth programs only existed in certain programs (basically, the privates) like St. Johns, Jesuit, St. Marks, ESD, and Highland Park. There just was not a ton of youth lacrosse going on, and those who had it produced better players early on. Youth programs have increased the athleticism of the Texan at early stages of development and created a larger pool of possible recruiting targets. Lacrosse is appealing to a young athlete. Pads are similar to football, and you get a stick. Once the skill involved is understood, players often become obsessed and cannot put the stick down. Thus, the pool grew, and grew with quality. When the best football players started playing lacrosse, the sport expanded exponentially in terms of popularity. Lacrosse is now getting a substantial portion of the best athletes.

Not many necessarily believed in the matriculation of the Texas player. I never doubted it. I was able to matriculate, while many of these kids had been playing longer and could probably be classified as better athletes. Therefore, I thought they could matriculate, too. Thus, an initial increase in the possible matriculation talent pool presented itself.

In 2015, the player pool has gone bonkers. It is humungous, and everyone is dialed into the dream. The number of quality players has exploded. It has become harder to differentiate as lots of players can shoot hard, many are ambidextrous, defensemen are huge, and athletes are plentiful. What also looms large is the entitlement of recruitment. As kids play more and more, they expect a return on the investment of their time and parents, of their dollar. Fourteen years have changed everything, and said course will not be going in reverse.

The Psyche of the Recruited Athlete

Remember when lacrosse was just fun and full of hard work? I do. You played and worked on your game, most of the time by yourself, to be really good for your school team. The next level was a dream that very few of us realized, but not everything started and stopped there.

In the 1990s, opportunities were limited as were places to train. You put in work on your own, and the level of overall interaction with others in the State, even with other programs and peers, was minimal, at best. There were a couple of camps in the State and, really, just one select team. If you wanted to play at the next level, you really had to work harder, longer, without real return other than your regular season results. Players had the dream but would have no idea how they stacked up until very late in the game. Players did not have the opportunity to know how good they were until very late. There was less chance of burnout back in the day, as players were just searching for more opportunities for development. There just were not enough, and many yearned for more. This allowed everyone the opportunity to focus on themselves and their game. There was not a psyche for a recruited player as players just did not experience recruitment their entire high school period. The period was more defined.

Jump forward to now. Players need to be mentally strong, because the process is tough. Overall, players should still be focus on themselves and their game. The fragile psyche is, however, real. Players are good to great. How good to great is relative as most of the kids who have the recruiting bug are rising sophomores and juniors. How good are you relative to your counterpart on the East Coast? The pool is massive as we discussed earlier, and everyone is dialed into social media and the Internet, so everyone feels the pressure. Kids on the East Coast are going (already committing). Why aren’t I? You could be the best player at program X. You could be the best player in a program’s history and could even make some All Star games in the summer along the way. You were invited to some prospect camps, but that does not mean that you are going to matriculate. Early recruiting forces people to chase the commitment, and it is no longer good enough to just be a great High School player. If it is not accompanied by the commitment, accolades, or the affirmation of the collegiate recruitment, the player somehow takes on the mindset that they are less valuable. Who are you talking to, what looks are you getting? These are often the questions fielded by the aspiring collegiate lacrosse player. Being recruited can be fun, but, for more and more players, the process starts to move towards being a burden. As sophomores, players need to be focused on improvement, especially coming out of Texas. Very few of our guys are playing lacrosse at an A+ level in terms of execution. There is certainly more that they DO NOT know rather than what they do know.

Where should the focus be?

Control the controllables! Players who care to matriculate, this is what you should focus on most! Understand the process, and understand where you fit in. The first step is managing your expectations. Parents, this should be your first step as well. Although we would love to see everyone matriculate, realistically, we know that is not going to happen. I know plenty of players who are great that have not made it to the DI level. It is really, really hard. Areas where you should immediately focus your attention are grades, first and foremost, athleticism, skill, and putting yourself in a position to succeed. If you are not a Division I athlete (meaning best of the best in terms of speed, strength, quickness, skill, size, or a combination of those attributes), getting to DI is going to be tough. Players are bigger, faster, stronger, and better than ever before. Before the athlete aspect, you should be a student. How good are your grades? Are they great? Those will be looked at first. If you are not serious about the classroom, you are not serious about the next level, as those are the first barrier to entry. You must focus on your improving your academics and developing your athleticism, and you must excel in both. Once you are working on those parts of the puzzle, consistently, without a desire to relent, you will be in a position to be recruited.

Controlling the recruitment process is impossible due to the fact it is variable and, to some extent, a function of taking advantage of opportunity and luck. Things you must do: Make your film, create your list of schools (post expectations management with you and your parents), put yourself in a position to be seen, be diligent in self-promotion and reaching out to coaches. Tell coaches where you will be competing and try to establish contact. Understand the weather patterns of potential schools and if you can handle the cold. Do you like snow? Visit a variety of schools to understand what you like and what you do not like about them.

This is a great place to start in terms of the recruiting controllables, but understand that there is no set system. It is always a function of variables, so take care of the other controllables *before* you enter this arena.

Not Recruited? You are still great!

“A means to an end versus a means within itself.” What does that mean? Well, playing lacrosse should not be a means to a scholarship. Playing lacrosse should be done for a variety of reasons. Increase your social awareness, learn how to compete, learn how to deal with adversity, learn about yourself, learn how to work hard. In terms of playing lacrosse, you should always strive to improve at lacrosse first and foremost. When playing, try and compete against quality opponents, have great experiences, and test your limits.

However, matriculation cannot be a parent’s, player’s, or coach’s sole focus! We are developing lacrosse players, so that the overall level of play in the State increases. We are not selling a dream; we are developing a culture. When players tie their ability to their recruitment, they are doing themselves a disservice. You could honestly be the best player ever from program X, and, just because you did not matriculate, you consider yourself somewhat less worthy. Get over it. You ARE great. We believe you are great. That needs to be enough! Enjoy your time playing lacrosse. There are much worse things in the world. Chances are you will still attend a great institution, get a wonderful education, and have an exciting time. Enjoy your time competing as it may be limited. Above all, believe in your ability as we believe in it!

In addition, truly realize that you are playing the game in the most competitive period of lacrosse ever, statewide and nationally. That cannot be argued. The number of players competing, the athleticism, and the skill is astounding. If you are able to garner a spot to compete at the next level from our State, cherish it and make us proud. Furthermore, you HAVE to finish. You must, it is important for everyone before you and even more important for every single player after you. Know what you are signing up for, cherish it, and, above all, honor your commitment. As we stated before, you are doing a great job. We appreciate you IF you are putting in hard work and making a valiant effort to compete and “do things the right way.” Good things will happen in life if your approach is based on diligent effort. Keep up the good work!