



Why Women's Lacrosse is Not Played With Additional Protective Equipment

Four guiding principles form the foundation of women's lacrosse:

- Honor the origins of the game
- Commitment to the core values
- Maintain relevance of the game today and in the future
- Respect all participants.

Respecting these guiding principles, the game today continues to be one of finesse and speed, using minimum equipment and prohibiting intentional body contact. Since 1931, the rules for women's lacrosse as written by the United States Women's Lacrosse Association (1931-1998) and US Lacrosse (1999- present) have evolved to maintain the spirit of the game and to ensure the safety of the players at all levels.

- 1) **The women's game is different than the men's game.** In terms of its history, rules, penalties for contact and equipment – it's different enough that some leaders in the game have even offered that women's lacrosse would be better served if it was not even called lacrosse at all.
- 2) **Women's lacrosse is a safe sport.** The women's game has been played in the United States without helmets since 1913 and until 6 years ago, without any protective equipment. It is one of the fastest growing youth sports for girls. According to the NFHS' Concussion Rates by Sport and Type of Exposure, 2008-09 High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study, women's lacrosse ranks 5th for head/face injuries behind soccer, basketball, softball and field hockey – the lowest rate amongst all field sports reviewed and 3rd for concussions behind soccer and basketball.
- 3) **Helmets do not prevent concussions.** But for those who want additional protection on the field, according to the US Lacrosse rulebook, women are permitted to wear soft helmets – which may help lessen the severity of head trauma and facial lacerations. More comprehensive and conclusive research is needed in the area of concussion prevention in youth sports, in order to make the case for additional rule changes that include more protective equipment in women's lacrosse.
- 4) **Additional protective equipment does not address the unsafe playing conditions that manifest when inconsistently trained coaches and umpires are on the field teaching and enforcing the rules of women's lacrosse.** No helmet will change the fact that no state association in the country requires sport-specific coaching education training for high school level coaches or mandates that high school assignors use only US Lacrosse trained umpires on the field.

Safety Concerns in Women's Lacrosse

While inadvertent contact with the ball or stick provides a risk of injury in the sport, women's lacrosse has relatively low overall injury rates compared to other collegiate and high school sports. Rules based on the guiding principles of the sport maintain a sense of safety and fair play in the game. Recent injury surveillance studies such as the 2008-2009 NFHS High School Sports-Related Injury Study demonstrate that women's lacrosse players are not becoming concussed at any greater rate than female athletes involved with other sports where the players head is not protected by a helmet. Admittedly, the research and data we have on concussions and head injuries occurring amongst youth/ high school girls lacrosse players is limited, but that has not stopped the rule making body, US Lacrosse, from evaluating and

altering the women's rules. Umpire mechanics have been modified to ensure that checks to the head are severely penalized, and USL also emphasizes the importance of safety within its coaching education and training certification programs. US Lacrosse is concerned about the increased physicality seen within the women's game at the high school level, and the potentially elevated risk of serious injury that may be incurred by those players who are not coached to play the game safely or as a result of rules that are not consistently enforced by umpires.

US Lacrosse has made several significant modifications to the women's game within the past 10 years in order to address concerns regarding player safety.

Safety Related Women's Lacrosse Rule Changes Made Between 2005-2009:

2005

- Change the parameters of the legal pocket - ball must be above sidewall thus making pockets less deep.
- Goalie helmet must meet NOCSAE standard.
- Eyewear is mandated.

2006

- Added hard boundaries.
- Goalie must wear padded gloves.
- Strengthened wording on crosse-to-body and body-to-crosse contact.

2007

- Goalie must wear padding on shins/thighs.
- Mouthpiece wording strengthened - must fully cover upper jaw teeth.
- Team will play short handed once the fourth card is received.

2008

- Strengthened wording on illegal use of the crosse - may not lower the head of the stick below the shoulder and initiate contact.

2009

- Team will play short handed from the first card received. Player or coach ineligible for next game if they receive a red card.

At the youth level (below high school), specifically the Full Checking (FC) level, **any check** to the head is a mandatory red card.

Other changes related to safety that have occurred within the past 15 years include the addition of the restraining line to reduce the number of players in the critical scoring area and limiting the number of players around the center circle to open up play on the draw. The past few years we've also implemented various points of emphasis for the season, so while no specific safety related rules were added or changed, we did stress such things as the need to use cards more often to modify behavior, strict enforcement of the rules that prohibit stick to body or body to stick fouls, strict enforcement of the rules that prohibit rough, reckless checking and carding those fouls as well as slashing fouls.

Safety is a Priority in Both the Men's Game and the Women's Game

Men's lacrosse is a contact sport, where the body is regularly checked as a course of game play. Because contact to the head or body is illegal in women's lacrosse, and fouls are called if a seven-inch imaginary sphere around the player's head is breached, the hard helmets have not been required or deemed necessary. Several rules unique to the women's game are in place relative to player safety.

They include:

- The "bubble" rule as noted above;
- No pocket in the stick, making it easier to dislodge the ball with a check to the stick;
- Mandatory cards (penalties) for slashing, dangerous play and dangerous follow through;
- Penalties for any offensive shot taken in an uncontrolled way or without regard of an opposing field player (dangerous propelling);
- Penalties for any defensive field player guarding the goal with any part of the body which denies the attacker the opportunity to shoot safely in a free space (obstruction of free space).

Where Do We Go From Here?

The Women's Division of US Lacrosse is committed to increasing efforts to improve the safety and maintain the integrity of the women's game by doing the following:

- 1) Comprehensively review whether current US Lacrosse rules are adequately addressing safety concerns in game (protecting players).
- 2) Review and improve the equipment review process for sticks and other equipment needed in the women's game. Consider whether or not we need to develop additional equipment interventions in order to offer additional protection to players concerned about incurring a serious head injury.
- 3) Ensure that our education and training curriculum is emphasizing safety and the unique differences between the men and women's game to coaches and umpires.
- 4) Review current lacrosse specific injury-related research and recommend areas of further study that would allow us to quantify the incidence and severity of injuries occurring at the high school and youth level.
- 5) Develop and disseminate "parent and new-to-women's lacrosse education" targeted messaging that better explain the rules and differences between the men and women's game.
- 6) Work to educate and encourage state associations, youth league administrators, tournament organizers and assignors to require their women's lacrosse coaches and umpires receive or have been trained or certified as women's lacrosse coach or umpire.