

SportsLetter Interviews

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Jake Steinfeld

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who love lacrosse and those who've never watched a lacrosse game. Indeed, part of the reason why North America's oldest indigenous sport remains a niche sport is that, for decades, it never managed to escape the East Coast "ghetto:" on Long Island, in upstate New York, around Baltimore. About the only thing many sports fans know about lacrosse is that Jim Brown, the great Cleveland Browns running back, was a collegiate All-American at Syracuse University.



That's begun to change. According to a 2005 Sports Illustrated article, lacrosse is the "fastest-growing game in the U.S. at every level." Wrote reporter Alexander Wolff: "The number of youth-league players in the U.S. aged 15 and under is estimated to be 186,000, more than twice what it was in 2001. The explosion is similar at the high school level, where no other team sport has anything close to lacrosse's rate of growth. Two African-American midfielders, Johns Hopkins's Kyle Harrison and Ohio State's Regina Oliver, are among this season's best college players, a striking development in a sport long associated with pedigreed preppies. Equipment sales are rising by at least 10% annually, and a 2004 survey of 400 sports-industry executives identified lacrosse as the pro niche sport most likely to bust out."

In 2001, Jake Steinfeld, a former body-builder who is best known for his "Body by Jake" fitness empire, co-founded an outdoor professional league. This summer, Major League Lacrosse begins its sixth season by adding four cities located some distance from the Atlantic Ocean: Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Nearly doubling the

number of MLL franchises by adding teams in unproven, Western markets is a calculated gamble, but the eternally optimistic Steinfeld believes the expansion will help define MLL's future.

Steinfeld hasn't strayed far from his fitness roots: he serves as chair of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness in California (appointed by a former body-builder named Arnold Schwarzenegger). Recently, as the ten MLL teams began training camp, Steinfeld sat down with SportsLetter at his offices in Brentwood, Calif.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: When did you first get interested in lacrosse?

Jake Steinfeld: I grew up on Long Island, which is a hot-bed of lacrosse. I played lacrosse at Baldwin High School, and then I got into Cortland State and played there. I was a face-off guy and on the fourth mid-field. As one of our original players in the league, Casey Powell, so eloquently said, "Geez, Jake, I thought there were only three mid-field lines at Cortland." [Laughs.] I played three months and then I retired. We were scrimmaging Syracuse, at Syracuse, outdoors in March. I did the face-off, went off to the sideline and stood there like an ice-sculpture. I said, "What am I doing here? I'm going to California to become a body-builder."

SL: How did you come to start Major League Lacrosse?

JS: I've been very fortunate. The fitness business has been great to me. It's given me the opportunity to do all kinds of things in my life, one of which is to create Major League Lacrosse. In 1998, I was doing a magazine called "Body by Jake" with [publisher] Hachette Filipacchi. At the same time, John Kennedy was doing a magazine called George, and Ralph Lauren's son David was doing a magazine called Swing for Filipacchi. The three of us went to Detroit to pitch the automobile companies to buy ad pages. Going back to L.A., I was thumbing through "Swing" and I saw a picture of a guy holding a lacrosse stick. I read this article about this young guy named Dave Morrow, a hot-shot player who became an All-American at Princeton. All that was great, but what got me

excited was the fact that this guy had started a company in his dorm room called Warrior and was positioning lacrosse as a lifestyle.

I picked up the phone and called him up. We had a conversation and I asked him a couple of questions: “Is there such a thing as pro outdoor lacrosse?” and “Is there a governing body for the outdoor game?” He said, “No.” And I said, “There is now.” That was May of 1998. He came out to L.A., and we sat down and discussed the state of the sport. I asked him, “Where is the sport growing?” And he showed me on a little map the little pockets — places like Columbus, Atlanta, Houston, San Diego, Denver — where the sport was growing. He showed me that it wasn’t just an East Coast thing anymore. I immediately brought in Tim Robertson — he had founded the Family Channel, where I did a sit-com — and the three of us launched Major League Lacrosse. Dave gave us legitimacy inside the lacrosse community. To this day, there’s nobody smarter about the sport of lacrosse than Dave Morrow. There’s not even a number-two guy.

SL: What has been the most difficult challenge?

JS: The toughest thing is attracting the fan-base, getting people to come to a Major League Lacrosse game. It takes time to bring in the casual sports fan to come and watch a professional lacrosse game. You gotta put it out there, and if you have a good product, it will last.

Now, if you look across the landscape of start-up sports businesses that have succeeded and that have failed, the ones that succeed are the ones that have the best players and that have reasonable expectations. Case in point: XFL. That league had millions upon millions of dollars tossed at it, a national television deal. They made a bold statement that this is going to be better than the NFL. So, people checked it out for two games, and then the floor fell out. It wasn’t for lack of marketing — they marketed great. But the fans looked at the product and said, “This is not better than the NFL.” So, that went away. I bring up the XFL because they launched the same time as we launched. As did the WUSA. The WUSA had all the cable operators lined up. It was a very emotional time, coming off the U.S. team’s victory in the World Cup. I think that the league should still be around. Unfortunately, the business plan was mired in a lot of different challenges — I think they paid the women too much, too quick. They

didn't take the time to grow the product, and their expectations weren't reasonable. They got caught up in the moment.

SL: How have you tweaked the rules of lacrosse in MLL?

JS: We looked at the way the game is played at the high-school and college levels. And, as a pure fan, I thought the game was too slow. You get games that are 4-3, where teams slow down the pace and take the life from the game. Dave agreed with me. I'm a big fan of basketball. I remember when they implemented the three-point arc. The purists had heart attacks. Same with the shot-clock, though that was before my time. So, we took those two concepts and tried different things. We experimented with a 45-second shot clock. Now, we have a 60-second shot clock. Everybody loves it. It speeds up the offenses, but it gives them enough time to set up their plays.

We also implemented a two-point arc [located 15 yards from each goal]. In 2000, we put on Summer Showcase — a six-city tour. The first game was in Columbus, Ohio, at Crew Stadium. We had the two-point arc outlined on the field. Forty of the top players in the world come running out onto the field, and all they wanted to do was take a two-point shot. In the beginning, it was a novelty. But now, it gives the offenses an opportunity to spread the defense and open up the crease area — whereas in high school and college it gets bunched up in there. It adds another dimension, and the game's never over until it's over. You can be down four goals, but you can bang two two-pointers and you're back in the game.

We also re-designed the uniforms. They always talk about lacrosse being the fastest game on two feet. I agree. But it had the slowest-looking uniforms. So we've gone through a few different iterations. Tommy Hilfiger did last year's version of the uniform. We liked how that looks, so we're going to continue with that. It helps to bring the game to this new generation without angering the purists.

SL: Why do you think lacrosse is booming at the youth level?

JS: Why it's growing so rapidly is that kids are looking for something new, something fresh. Soccer's great, baseball's great, football's great. But

kids are saying, “I want a sport to call my own.” Lacrosse is different — it’s action-packed, where a kid isn’t standing out in right field, looking around at the action.

Case in point: Brentwood Middle School, around here, where I send my kids. They started a lacrosse program in the middle school this season. Forty kids came out and decimated the baseball team. We’re hearing stories like that from around the country. What’s exciting — at least for the first couple of seasons — is that the sidelines are so quiet because the parents don’t know the rules yet. [Laughs.] It’s also a sport where size doesn’t matter. A small, quick guy can play attack and with some snazzy-type moves be very successful against the bigs.

SL: Last spring, Sports Illustrated did a feature story about the growth of lacrosse — how much did that help the sport?

JS: I think, honestly, it was a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing to put the sport out there so that casual sports fans can read about it. I think it was a curse in the sense that the sport has a long way to go. In some ways it’s not as healthy as people crack it up to be. There’s a lot of dysfunction, and people need to understand that in order for it all to work, they have to work together. I’m a big believer in being inclusive, not exclusive. Unfortunately, this is a sport where there are factions.

SL: Do you think that lacrosse will break through at the collegiate level?

JS: I know that, because of Title IX, there are more DI [Division I] women’s programs exploding. That’s incredible — my daughter’s playing and she’s pretty good. It’s not there yet with the men’s programs, although there are a lot of club teams, but I think it’s coming. The youth movement and Major League Lacrosse and television coverage will help. As more and more kids get introduced to the sport and play it at the youth level and love it, they will bring it to the colleges. With enough push, it’s a matter of time.

SL: This season, MLL is jumping to ten teams from six. Is that too much, too soon?

JS: We could have done this after season one or after season two. We

decided to wait to do it because we wanted to get the best possible sports operators in the business as our owners: Pat Bowlen in Denver, Phil Anschutz in L.A., the Crown family in Chicago, and a great guy in San Francisco who prefers to go nameless.

Secondly, we wanted to make sure there was enough talent on the field. We didn't want to water the talent down. Think about it: we had six teams, 18 guys per team. Every guy — from number one to number 18 — was a one-, two-, three-, or four-time All-American. Every guy. Now, with ten teams, we still have the best players, but this spreads out the talent. And, you know, by bringing the sport to these new markets — L.A., S.F., Chicago, Denver — we're taking the sport into places where kids don't see DI lacrosse action every day.

SL: What are your plans for future expansion?

JS: We'll probably add two more teams by 2008. In 2010 or 2012, we'll add two more. We're looking at several different cities because we get inquiries from markets every day: Pittsburgh, Miami, Atlanta, Portland.

SL: Historically, the sport has been East Coast-centric. How do you change that mentality as you expand west?

JS: Well, this is why we partnered with the best possible ownership groups. Like in L.A., with AEG. In 2000, I said, "I'm going to put a team in L.A., but only when it's right. And I only want to be in business with Phil Anschutz." You gotta be with the big dogs, and Tim Leiweke and AEG are the preeminent sports operators in the L.A. market. So we become important by association.

I was driving past Staples Center [operated by AEG] after taking my kids to Dodger Stadium, and the board said, "Get Your Riptide Tickets." That's heavy. Or you go out on the 405, driving past Home Depot Center [operated by AEG], and you see the big sign saying, "The Riptide Are Coming."

And, by the way, this sport was born for the West Coast. When we have games at Palisades High, or out in Malibu, and the Pacific Ocean's right

there, it's awesome, baby! [Laughs.]

SL: More than any western city, Denver has shown a keen interest in lacrosse: why has that market exploded?

JS: I don't know why, but it's just such a healthy place to live in. I mean, when you fly there you want to jump on a mountain bike and go out trail riding, and then you want to go hiking. The sport and Denver just seem to be a good match. Outside Denver they got the Vail Shootout, which is a huge event every summer, and the university [of Denver] has built a lacrosse stadium. We haven't played a game in Denver yet, but our season-tickets sales have been great.

SL: Last year, your average attendance was about 4,200. What are your projections for this year?

JS: : I hope that we hit close to the 5,000 mark. I think that would be gangbusters for us. Our business plan has always called for 5,000 fans. We've never walked in and said, "We can do 22,000 fans."

Look, we have a long road ahead us. We don't have any stars in our league yet. Not one guy in our league sells a ticket. It's not like when Michael Jordan comes to town — instant sellout. We're marketing the game. We're marketing Major League Lacrosse. If stars come out of that organically, fantastic.

SL: Has any of the franchises turned a profit yet?

JS: We've had a few teams turn a profit. I'm losing money, but that's what it is. Right now, this isn't about making dough. This is about building a good product for the future.

SL: How has your celebrity helped or hurt MLL?

JS: If I was playing, it'd be hurting it. [Laughs.] I try to use what I've got — and that's my contacts with sponsors and owners and through my experience in television. What I'm good at is getting people together, getting people fired up.

If there's a negative, it's that I'm too passionate. If you listened to our game of the week broadcasts in the first couple of seasons, I would go into the booth during the last quarter and I would get too excited and make a lot of noise. So, I took myself out of that and now I sit with my family. [Laughs.]

SL: You've attracted sponsors like Starbucks and Tommy Hilfiger: How would you define the MLL brand?

JS: American sports fans love hitting, scoring and speed. This brand of lacrosse has it all. Period. Look, we've created the pinnacle of the sport. We can safely say that we have the best players in the world playing in Major League Lacrosse.

SL: What about the indoor pro league: does that help or hurt MLL?

JS: They're winter, we're summer. I think we can co-exist nicely. I don't really follow them, but our co-owner in Rochester, Steve Donner, is also president/CEO of the indoor franchise there. That MLL team has a new outdoor stadium that was built specifically for the Rattlers and the A-League soccer team. It's the first stadium that one of our guys built.

We've been fortunate because of the new facilities built by Major League Soccer — MLS is building beautiful stadiums and [MLS commissioner] Don Garber has been truly helpful.

SL: You have a deal with ESPN, with a game a week on ESPN2, but MLL doesn't receive any rights fees. Are you happy with the deal?

JS: They don't pay us, but we don't pay them. Other leagues pay through the nose to be on television. Look, I've been in business with ESPN for many, many years. I was on ESPN for, like, eight years with the fitness program. They've been great to me, and they immediately embraced Major League Lacrosse with open arms. Right now, I don't think we deserve more than one game a week. What I'd love to see are more cameras to cover the sport, and pre- and post-game packages to really build interest in the game. But that takes time to develop, and you gotta earn your spot. I feel real confident that what you'll see next year

compared to what you've seen will be a marked difference.

SL: Where do you see MLL in ten years?

JS: The one big thing is television. I think we need to solidify a strong TV partner that has a vested interest in the future of the game and in the future of the league. With that, we'll sleep well at night because if you have television exposure, sponsors come. If sponsors come and market the sport, then people come to the games.

SL: Lacrosse has been in the news because of the scandal at Duke University. How has that affected MLL?

JS: Obviously, it's an unfortunate situation. In a very demented way, it brings attention to the sport, so now at least people know what lacrosse is because it's a big news story. Other than that, I don't think it affects us in any way.