

SPORTS GROUPS ADAPTING TO VARIOUS RESTRICTIONS

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great, safe game," said Blaine McCauley, HHMLA president. "We want to teach them the skills and dynamics of the game and help them fall in love with it."

The association has been running a Try Lacrosse program, offering two free skills sessions and a stick to help attract new players to the game.

Lacrosse is fortunate that it has two versions of the game, box (indoor) and field (outdoor). The girls field lacrosse program was able to host a couple of tournaments since starting up in June.

But for now, box lacrosse will have to wait.

"We're more building for next year, when we can run the programs we have in the past," McCauley said.

The Burlington Centaurs rugby club took a similar approach prior to COVID-19. Realizing that most players are not exposed to the sport until high school, the club was striving to grow the sport at younger age levels.

It started an elementary school touch rugby program for students in Grades 4-6, and it was an immediate hit.

"It was so popular, we had to do a lottery the next year," said Centaurs' president Nick Manz.

But with school sports sidelined for a second year due to COVID-19, he fears they may have lost that momentum.

"We've had to go back and start from scratch," said Manz, whose club held camps for kids ages 6-12 throughout July.

As for returning players, games will take a little longer with players having not played a game — at least the contact version — in almost two years.

Gymnastics was another sport delayed by restrictions on indoor activities. Milton Springers general manager Linda Massel said the club tried to get a jump on its startup by offering summer camps with outdoor activities and games on mats.

The move to Step 3 allowed the Springers to move back indoors, with limited capacity to allow for physical distancing.

"We're trying to go with a cautious approach that feels comfortable for (everyone)," Massel said, noting the majority of their



Graham Paine/Metroland

The pandemic has severely hindered the Centaurs' efforts to grow the game of rugby at the younger levels.

participants are under the age of 12.

Physical distancing does create a unique challenge, as gymnasts often need spotters. Massel said with their gymnasts off for such an extended period, the early focus is on conditioning and skills.

"Spotting will be minimal in the first few weeks," she said. "It is a sport where that safety component is needed so we'll follow all the guidelines, with our coaches being masked and using hand sanitizer."

Massel said though current restrictions will not allow them to offer all the programs they have in the past, they are working to accommodate as many as possible.

The Oakville Soccer Club opened registration for its summer programs in late March.

Following a year in which there were no leagues or games, only skill development clinics,

"Minor sports were necessary for the summer to feel normal."

— Jason Lopez

there was a strong appetite for the game. But then the province went back into lockdown.

"Registration didn't slow down, it stopped," said the club's executive director Katryna Indewey said. "It's been a wild ride over the last year. Everything changes so much; it's on, it's off, reduced capacity, cancelled. With a club this size, you do as much planning as you can, but there's only so much you can do."

In previous seasons, permits for fields would be in place a year in advance, registration would have started in January. This sea-

son, when the club finally got the go-ahead to return to play, all the administrative work that would normally be done over four months — carding players, setting travel schedules — had to be completed in a little more than two weeks.

Indewey said while there are always a lot of new players in the youngest age groups, there was an influx of new players in the under-9 and older groups. The club continued to receive calls about registration even after the season started.

Georgetown resident Jason Lopez said he had no reservations about signing up his seven-year-old son Desmond for soccer and baseball.

"Minor sports were necessary for the summer to feel normal," Lopez said. "You can see it on their faces. They are running around and loving it. You can't recreate this online, being with kids their own age, interacting with their peers. This is what

they missed out on."

McCauley said he's not surprised to see parents and players raring to return.

"We've had a great response to field and we're thriving with the outdoor game which has been encouraging."

"For box, after a year-and-a-half, we're anxious to get it going," McCauley said. "Socially, emotionally and physically, sports help keep kids healthy."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: Minor sports are back, but it certainly hasn't been easy. We wanted to examine the many challenges facing local sports organizations as they return to the field.



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