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POSTED: Tuesday, Aug. 23, 2011

LACROSSE: Estrada elevates sport to new level

DAVID RASBACH - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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When Nicholas Estrada and his friends first got into the sport in fifth grade, Bellingham was hardly a hotbed for lacrosse.

But nobody has had a better opportunity to watch it grow than Estrada, 16, who was part of the Whatcom Warriors' first elementary team, worked his way up through two middle school programs and is now on the high school team. He's one of only a handful of Warriors to go all the way through the program.

In addition to his time with the Warriors, Estrada is in his second year playing long stick midfielder for the Burnaby Mountain Selects' Junior Elite, one of Canada's top developmental programs designed to help prepare some of the region's best lacrosse players for collegiate careers.



Estrada is the only non-Canadian in the program, which is coached by Brent Hoskins.

"It's an interesting thing (to be the only American in the program)," Estrada said in a phone interview. "I don't want to be derogatory or anything, but I do find myself getting into their habits. They're a different country and have different habits, and I adapt to that. I do try to show them what Americans can do in this sport. It's been a great experience. I really enjoy the kids I play with and learning from coach Hoskins and the rest of the coaches up there. Plus traveling is a big plus. They don't call me 'America,' or anything, but they do call me 'Bellingham.'"

That's a label Estrada said he's proud to wear.

"I wouldn't have wanted to grow up anywhere else," the junior-to-be at Bellingham High School said. "Lacrosse is the fastest growing sport in the U.S., and I've really seen it growing here."

In fact, Estrada has done all that he can to

help the sport take off in Whatcom County.

In addition to his time playing for the Warriors, Estrada helped the girls' program gain a foothold in the area by refereeing games.

In addition to that, Estrada was an assistant coach with the Chumash, a three-on-three

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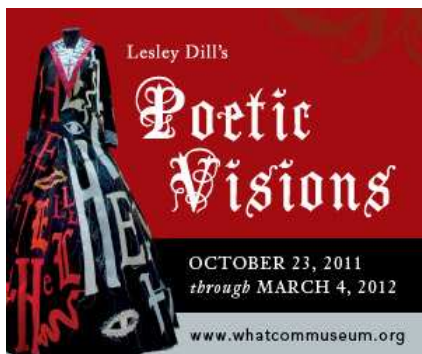
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summer lacrosse program intended for area players from first through eighth grade. The program was coached by John Heritage.

"It's neat to be able to help younger lacrosse players," said Estrada, whose 14-year-old brother Adam and 12-year-old sister Jacqueline also play lacrosse. "Some of them have never picked up a lacrosse stick before. It feels good to give back to the sport that I love and the Whatcom Warriors' program after having been a part of it for so long. Hopefully some of the kids I have helped will stick with it through the middle school and high school programs and maybe someday go off to college to play lacrosse. It would be great to look back and know I had a hand in that."

Chances are Estrada has had some coaches that are going to know that same feeling.

"I think he's not only got the skill level and the ability to move on (to play lacrosse in college), but he's also got the drive and the commitment," Hoskins said in a phone interview. "That's a huge part of what it takes to be a successful student athlete."

As the co-coach of the Simon Fraser University men's lacrosse program, Hoskins certainly should know what it takes to reach that level.

"Long stick midfielder is a position that involves a lot of transition up and down the field," Hoskins said. "Most of the time, the long stick midfielder matches up with the other team's top midfielder. Nick is strong and fast and he matches up very well with the top players on any other team we face. Any time he steps on the field, he's going at top speed, and he's constantly challenging the other team to respond to his intensity. He's huge defensively for us, but he also plays a role for us in transition to spark our offense."

The on-field awards Estrada has earned the past two years certainly attest to his abilities.

In 2011, he received the Whatcom Warriors' Leadership Award. In 2010, he was selected to the Washington High School Boys' Lacrosse Association Division II Skagit All-Conference team and was the Conference Rookie Groundball Leader. He also was selected the Warriors' Midfielder of the Year.

But Estrada's on-field accomplishments are only half the story, as his 3.7 GPA at Bellingham has earned him the Burnaby Mountain Selects Scholar Athlete Award for the second straight year.

For a program that requires players to attend a study hall and posts grade-point averages and SAT scores online to help college coaches recruit its players, that's a pretty big accomplishment.

"Our focus is helping to open doors for our players to collegiate institutions," Hoskins said. "We place importance not only on athletic abilities, but on academics. Nick is definitely is a leader on the field and a leader off the field for us."

In turn, the Burnaby Mountain Selects give him a chance to showcase those talents for college coaches across the continent.

Last month, the Junior Elite team traveled to Syracuse, N.Y., to compete in the Syracuse University Summer Shootout, and Estrada later went to the TOP 205 West recruiting camp in Boulder, Colo.

"It's been a great challenge for me to go up against some of the top players in those types of areas where lacrosse is much bigger than it is here," Estrada said. "It helps me learn what areas of my game I need to work on to improve, and what areas I can help other kids in our area improve on."

To help give himself an opportunity to progress even more this year, Estrada said he has decided not to play football for the Red Raiders this fall, something he has done the past two of years.

"I've decided I want to get more serious about lacrosse and not risk injury during football," Estrada said. "I want to put my athletic focus towards lacrosse."

To help him do that, Estrada said he plans to play box lacrosse, a faster, indoor version of the sport that resembles hockey on turf and emphasizes athletic, ball-handling and physical skills. The box lacrosse season, which is hosted by the Everett Stealth professional club, runs through September and October at the Sportsplex in Bellingham.

"I just want to keep playing and working on my game, and see where that takes me the next two years," Estrada said.

Early indications are it could definitely take him far.

And that would be something for the growing lacrosse community in Whatcom County to be proud of.

"Nick came from an area where lacrosse is still in its relative infancy, compared to other areas in the U.S., and even here in the Vancouver area," Hoskins said. "It's definitely growing in the high school and community programs in Washington and Whatcom County, but it was definitely a pleasant surprise to find somebody of Nick's abilities there. His first season was a pleasant surprise, and he's continued to grow and progress in his second season. I think if he continues to develop and grow, the sport can take him just about anywhere he wants to go."

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