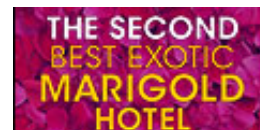


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HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

## HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS; In Field Hockey, a Twist on Title IX

By MIKE WISE

**HOLYOKE, Mass.**— Before a smattering of about 50 people in the stands at Arthur H. Roberts Field, the leading scorer for the junior varsity field hockey team at Amherst-Pelham Regional High School swerved through the opposition, keeping the ball on the nub of the stick, churning forward. Several parents rose from their seats, their voices laced more with venom than with enthusiasm.

"Get him! Get him!"

Bradley Bell was finally detained along the right sideline, but Bell, a freshman in a burgundy skirt, had already made his presence felt, wristing two goals and assisting on another in a 4-0 victory over Holyoke High School.

"He'll be playing varsity soon," Amy Bottke, the former varsity coach at Amherst, lamented. "That means a girl will have to sit down."

As another splendid season of October foliage unfolds here in western Massachusetts, an intermittent debate has begun anew. The sunlight dies before 6 p.m., the hues from burnt-orange, mustard- and sienna-colored leaves poke through on the horizon and, in another rite of fall, boys compete on girls' field hockey teams.

Bell is among almost a dozen boys playing on six teams in the regional high school leagues, where the Division I varsity champions of the last two seasons, Southwick and West Springfield, had boys on their rosters.

A passion for field hockey runs deep in Massachusetts, with more than 8,000 students playing each year.

Julia Hunter, a senior co-captain on the Amherst varsity, is tolerant enough to accept Bell. But she added, "In some ways, it feels like Title IX has been used against us."

This fall, the issue has produced a seething opinion piece published in five area newspapers, subsequent hate mail and a threat by a junior varsity coach not to put her girls on the field against

Amherst if Bell competes the next time they play.

After the playoffs in November, two coaches plan to submit a realignment proposal at their annual meeting: one league for all-girls' teams, another for teams that include boys.

Another less controversial, if delicate, issue of sex has also emerged: the clear admission by fervent women's sports supporters that boys are indeed stronger and faster.

"Sheryl Swoopes is great, but she's not going to challenge Michael Jordan," Bottke said as she leaned over a chain-link fence separating the all-weather track from the stands at Holyoke High School. "Carl Lewis against Marion Jones? It's a joke. It's silly. We're different biologically. We have baby makers in our gender. They don't. Enough already. Put them on different teams."

### What's a Boy to Do?

The problem is, there are no boys' teams. Among the 18 states with field hockey programs, Massachusetts is one of only three in which boys compete at the high school level. (California and Maine are the others.) Men's field hockey thrives in other countries, but the sport has traditionally been played by girls in the United States. Either because of custom or state law, most American boys do not compete.

On one side of the debate here, boys are viewed as physically dominant, enough so that they dramatically alter competition for girls. Even for boys not as talented or as physical as their female teammates, some coaches and parents argue that they should not play because they would be displacing girls from teams, thereby reducing the opportunities afforded girls and women under Title IX, the 1972 legislation that prohibits discrimination in educational programs that receive federal funds.

Just because girls are allowed to go out for the boys' football team, the critics say, does not mean that boys should be allowed to compete on the girls' field hockey team.

"Typically, adding a girl to a boys' team doesn't have the level of impact when a boy plays on a girls' team," said Janet Ryan, the mother of Megan Horrigan, an Amherst player. "It's not a level playing field. We almost hate to say to our daughter, 'Boys are stronger and faster than you are,' but they are."

But other coaches, parents and players maintain that without a comparable boys' team, boys have a right to play field hockey and do not significantly change the way the game is played.

"I understand the whole reason behind Title IX in its original form was to provide girls equal opportunities to play sports," said Katie Zacarian, a former Amherst player who is now the starting goalkeeper at Harvard University. "But I think when you create a policy like that, you have to apply it equally. The inclusion on a team should be based on merit, not on sex."

Dave Bell, Bradley's father, said fairness required that his son be allowed to play. "We don't want

to make waves, we just want Brad to continue playing hockey," he said. "When you create a policy like that, you have to apply it to everybody."

The rules of the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association are clear: "No student shall be denied in any implied or explicit manner the opportunity to participate in any interscholastic activity because of his or her gender."

Rule 43 of the association's handbook permits schools to establish separate teams. But if only one team exists, additional language in the handbook allows for mixed-sex competition. If an all-girls' team refuses to play a team fielding boys, it is subject to a forfeit unless the school can demonstrate a specific safety reason to justify not playing. To simply say a boy is bigger and poses a physical danger does not qualify as a reason.

"The language says there can't be a gender-based distinction," Sherry Bryant, the assistant director of the state athletic association, said. "We have to let them play."

Bryant estimated that about 20 boys play field hockey each year in the state, most of them in western Massachusetts.

Bell, 14, is already 5 feet 10 inches and 220 pounds. Like many of the boys who take the field each week this fall, he consciously walks the line between showing his dominance and trying to fit in. On Oct. 11 against Holyoke, his performance helped bring the Amherst junior varsity's season record to 12-0.

Bell grew up playing field hockey in South Africa, where the sport is popular among boys. He played on a youth national team until his family left so his mother and his father could pursue doctorates in education at the University of Massachusetts. He is often razed by classmates because he has to wear a skirt, and he has heard his share of off-color remarks from parents in the stands.

Asked why he does not compete on the varsity with his skill level, he said: "I guess I could be playing for them, but I like the J.V. team. If I stay here, there won't be any negative vibes from the varsity team."

His father said: "I probably would have felt the same way as many parents if my daughter was on the team. But Brad is as gentle as a lamb out there. He could probably run and score 20 goals. But he wants to take the least-disruptive route."

Bottke, the former varsity coach at Amherst, said, "I think it's great that Brad passes and fits in, but he shouldn't have to be aware of his delicacy."

Boys playing girls' field hockey is not a new phenomenon in western Massachusetts. Brenda Kurle, the Amherst junior varsity coach, said she believes she competed against the first boy 24 years ago. About 15 years ago, Northampton fielded four boys on the girls' team.

"This has been going on awhile," said Ann Simons, the coach at Longmeadow High School. "It's just picked up steam again."

### Dissent and a Proposal

Bottke has taken up the latest crusade. Bell declared last May that he was going to play this fall. Bottke resigned as Amherst varsity coach in August, though she insisted that there was no connection; her full-time job as a real-estate agent did not allow her to continue coaching, she said.

In her editorial published in the summer Bottke contended that boys playing on girls' teams represented a "major injustice to high school athletes." She noted that three of four teams in last year's western Massachusetts semifinals fielded boys, including the eventual champion, West Springfield.

Bottke and other critics say some of the boys employ intimidation tactics around the goal. Players in field hockey use Kevlar-wrapped wooden sticks and a baseball-size, industrial-strength plastic ball -- a ball nearly as hard as a cue ball in billiards.

In an all-girls' game between East Longmeadow and Longmeadow High Schools this season, an East Longmeadow player broke her jaw, lacerated her lip and lost three teeth when a Longmeadow player inadvertently struck her in the mouth following through on a swing.

"The dynamics of the game change when a boy is on the field," Colleen Rafferty, a junior player at Longmeadow, said afterward. "If a girl has a free hit, I will be much less resistant to go up and block the ball. I'll give her maybe 5 yards. If it's a boy, I'll give him at least 15 yards. I just know it has a higher chance of being a harder shot, going up and injuring me."

But some coaches insist that the inclusion of boys changes the game less than many people think. "There are bad aspects, and I can see where Amy is coming from, but you would not believe how much more open-minded and tolerant these kids become once they play together," Maryann Pelligrinelli, the varsity coach at Holyoke, said. "I tell my players: 'The only difference is, you shave your legs. Go out there and play. Don't make excuses.' I will say that Amy and the others might not have a problem if the boys weren't any good."

Pelligrinelli and other coaches say boys from West Springfield and Southwick were verbally abused the last two seasons after victories. At one match, where "Go home, Sissy!" and "The football field is over there" were some of the tamer retorts, several parents were ejected from school grounds.

Diane Lussier, the coach at East Longmeadow, and Simons, the Longmeadow coach, are adamant about boys not playing with girls. They plan to propose a realignment with two leagues, one with all-girls' teams and one with mixed-sex teams. The coaches are not confident that the athletic directors of the 22 field-hockey programs in western Massachusetts will approve the proposal.

"I've had plenty of boys ask me to play," Lussier said. "I've always said, 'You can have a tryout.' I will not tell them that they may never get off the bench. I feel very strongly that they are denying a girl an opportunity to develop their skills."

Hunter, the Amherst varsity co-captain, said she used to have major problems with the idea of boys playing field hockey. "Then Brad came out for the team," she said. "At first, I was like, 'Oh, no, Amherst is going to be one of those teams that wins with guys.' But since Brad has been on the team, we've all gotten used to it and we like him as a player. He plays for the love of the game, not because he wants to run over the girls."

"But I'm still not for it."

At the year-end Amherst team banquet last season, a special plaque was made for Hunter, an aggressive midfielder who takes great pride in physically shadowing male opponents. "Boy Basher," the plaque read.

"I love that title," Hunter said. "That's my way of saying: 'I belong here. You don't.' "

Photos: Bradley Bell is one of the 20 or so boys playing field hockey in Massachusetts. (Mieke Zuiderweg for The New York Times)(pg. S1); Bradley Bell, left, with his junior varsity field hockey teammates. "He'll be playing varsity soon," Amy Bottke, the former varsity coach at the Massachusetts high school, says. "That means a girl will have to sit down." (Mieke Zuiderweg for The New York Times)(pg. S3)