Lacrosse is new recruiting tool for private colleges
By Karen Farkas, The Plain Dealer

PAINESVILLE, Ohio -- The only reason Julia Kudla visited Lake Erie College was because it offered lacrosse.

At the time, the then-senior at Souderton High School in Harleysville, Pa. wasn't even sure where Painesville was.

"I didn't really know much about the Cleveland area," said Kudla, who was contacted after Lake Erie's lacrosse coach saw her play in an East Coast tournament. "I was pleasantly surprised when I visited the campus."

Lacrosse has become the latest recruitment tool for private universities in Ohio and other Midwestern states. Relatively inexpensive to start, the sport is growing in popularity at high schools. By offering the chance to play at the next level, colleges hope to attract students who otherwise wouldn't have considered those campuses.

Kudla, 21, is now a junior at Lake Erie, where she has been a top lacrosse player since her freshman year. The marketing and sports management major is a prime example of why the college added the sport in the fall of 2009, said President Michael Victor.

"The holy grail in enrollment in tuition-driven institutions are the proverbial full-pay students," he said. "And the number of high school students graduating in the general area is declining so you need geographic diversity."

The college's men's and women's lacrosse programs have drawn smart students from middle-class families in states from across the country, Victor said.

"It's been a tremendous success," he said.

A number of other colleges have also added lacrosse to their men's and women's varsity lineup.

Hiram College will offer the sport this upcoming school year.

"For us it was a real simple decision," said Timothy Bryan, assistant to the president at Hiram. "More and more of our students are asking for it. Most (lacrosse players) are very sound academically and come from very good schools. It is a buyer's market and they are looking for a great education and to continue in a sport they love."

Most of the colleges in Hiram's athletic conference, which includes many Ohio schools, already offer the sport. But Lake Erie's two teams and Notre Dame College's women's team, which began in 2005, have had to travel out of state to find competition. That will soon change.

Ursuline College, Baldwin-Wallace College, Walsh University, Otterbein University, University of Mount Union, Wilmington College and Defiance College are among schools that have begun or will begin programs in the next few years for one or both sexes.

According to US Lacrosse, the national governing body of men's and women's lacrosse, the sport is one of the fastest growing team sports in the country.
In 2011 more than 680,000 players participated in lacrosse on organized teams, an increase of 60,000 players from 2010, the organization said.

More than half competing are age 15 and younger. The number of high school players increased 7.8 percent to 275,300 and the 34,000 varsity and club players on the collegiate level represented a 4.6 percent increase.

Brian Logue, director of communications for the Baltimore organization, said it the sport has seen a steady growth since 2000.

"In the last five years, college growth in the Midwest is really big," he said. "Because the sport has grown so much at the high school level, more kids are looking to play in college. At private schools it is a big thing to get them to come there. These are kids with good academic backgrounds and from families that are better able to pay for college and not need as much aid."

Logue said the cost to a college to add the sport is fairly low since it is played in the spring on a football field and players need minimal equipment. Women wear a mouth guard and goggles and have no contact during play unlike men, who wear helmets, gloves and other padding. Each team has about 25 members.

Baldwin-Wallace College will offer men's and women's lacrosse as a club sport in the upcoming school year and as a varsity sport the following year.

"Our conference has talked about it for quite some time," said Kevin Ruple, B-W's sports information director. "It is a natural for us, not only for the standpoint of diversifying the options for students but as a trend for growing admission. With the growing depletion of the number of students in Northeast Ohio we have got to reach out to other areas of the country when marketing the institution."

Women's coach Kim Russell traveled to Indiana last week, already recruiting for the class entering in the fall of 2013.

Like officials at other local colleges adding lacrosse, she is bringing high school teams and lacrosse clubs to campus for games and camps. Russell also has organized a weekend in July when top high school players from nearby states will play at B-W in a warm-up to an East Coast tournament.

"It is a great recruiting tool for me," she said in a phone interview last week. "Girls will see the campus and I will see them play."

Russell, who played lacrosse at the College of William & Mary, began the lacrosse program at Magnificat High School in 1996 and coaches in the Ohio Premier Lacrosse Club of Cleveland. The Delaware native is thrilled with the growth of the sport in Ohio.

"The appeal of lacrosse is that it's an athlete's game," she said. "It is fast, takes a lot of skill and is strategic. It combines all the best of soccer, basketball, field hockey and ice hockey."

Baldwin-Wallace, like Hiram, is in NCAA Division III, so can't offer athletic scholarships. Lake Erie, a Division II school, can.

Victor, the Lake Erie College president, said more high school students want to play lacrosse than there are programs. The majority of students on both rosters at his school are from out-of-state.

Kudla, who has an athletic scholarship, said she looked at a number of colleges, wanting strong academics, but was unsure if she would play field hockey or lacrosse.

"Once I visited Lake Erie it solidified," she said. "I would play lacrosse in college and focus on the academics. I really fell in love with the school."