

RE:LAX

with Lacrosse in WNY

2024-25 Bandits
Season Preview
See Page 8

Lacrosse: A worldwide game with local origins

Bandits celebrate back-to-back titles

A Bandits fan's 10-year journey

Pro players lead double lives

A Note from the Editor:

Hello reader! Thank you for picking up the first copy of RE: Lax, a magazine dedicated to bringing you coverage of lacrosse in Western New York.

I came up with this magazine because of my love for the Buffalo Bandits and Western New York, a community with a rich lacrosse tradition.

With RE: Lax, I hope to reach people who may not be familiar with lacrosse and get them interested in the game.

Of course, it's an easier sales pitch when our local team has won back-to-back championships, something I'll probably never stop gloating about.

Even though I never played, I became a huge fan of the indoor game as a kid and my love for it has only grown over the years.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you all for joining me in appreciating this fun-filled sport and the region I'm fortunate enough to call home.

I hope you enjoy RE: Lax, and Let's Go Bandits!

- Matt Volz, Editor in Chief of *RE: Lax*

CONTENTS

Page 3	Lacrosse: A worldwide game with local origins
Page 4	Buffalo what? Back-to-back champs
Page 6	Matt's Bandits fan journey over 10 years
Page 8	Bandits look to snatch third straight title
Page 10	Pro lacrosse players lead double lives

Front cover: Photo taken by MATT VOLZ | Editor in Chief

Back cover: Image property of the Buffalo Bandits

Lacrosse: A worldwide game with local origins

MATT VOLZ
Editor in Chief

Lacrosse is a game that's known by many different names.

Those who invented it referred to it as "Deyhontsigwa'ehs," which translates to "they bump hips."

It is also often called "the Creator's game," as its earliest players believed that playing could be a form of ceremonial healing, and it would also be a way to thank the Creator of the world.

For some traditional groups, these beliefs are still held to this day.

According to the Indigenous Values Initiative, a missionary named Jean de Brébeuf came up with the name lacrosse after witnessing a game in 1636.

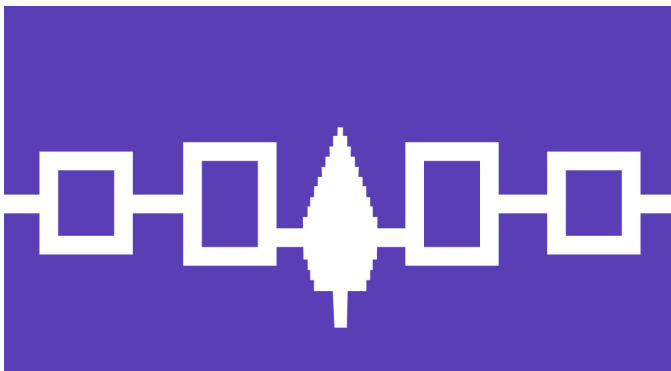
It's never been confirmed, but it is believed that de Brébeuf thought the stick resembled a bishop's crozier or staff, hence the name "lacrosse".

The game was created by the Haudenosaunee, a confederation of six Indigenous Nations based in New York State.

The name Haudenosaunee means "people of the longhouse," a reference to the type of homes they traditionally lived in.

Originally, there were only five Nations: Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk.

The Tuscarora Nation, originally from what is now North Carolina and Virginia, came to be when many of the Tuscarora people fled north after the Tuscarora War in the early 1700s.



The flag of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

The Six Nations have played the game for centuries, and it became a favorite of those who colonized the area as well.

It gained popularity in parts of Canada, too, and it was referred to by some as Canada's national

game for a period of time in the late 1800s according to the Indigenous Values Initiative.

As a result, the state of New York and the Canadian province of Ontario are some of the biggest hotbeds for lacrosse in the world.

In the National Lacrosse League (NLL), the Buffalo Bandits, Rochester Knighthawks and Toronto Rock are three of the most consistent leaders in fan attendance each season.

Buffalo led the league in attendance in 2024, selling out KeyBank Center for nearly every game in the regular season and playoffs.

Many Indigenous players in the NLL are from these areas, including Tehoka Naticoke of the Bandits, the three Thompson brothers of the Georgia Swarm, their cousin Ty of the San Diego Seals and several others.

These players, along with several others, identify strongly with their Indigenous identity.

During international lacrosse events, such as the World Lacrosse Championships which take place every four years, Indigenous players will play for the Haudenosaunee Nationals team.

The Haudenosaunee may be more commonly known by another name: Iroquois.

Iroquois was the English name that was given to the Six Nations. As Indigenous people were forcibly assimilated into American society, they began to lose many aspects of their culture, and the name "Iroquois" was a symbol of that.

In 1983, the international lacrosse team was formed, and they went by the name "Iroquois Nationals," as most people knew them by the name Iroquois rather than Haudenosaunee.

The team website explains that as the years went on and society progressed, they felt it was time to rebrand themselves with the name they most identify with.

So, in 2022, they began play under the Haudenosaunee Nationals name.

Lacrosse is one of the few international sports with nationally recognized Indigenous teams.

This provides Indigenous players with the opportunity to play for their heritage and honor those who came before them.

They're honoring those who created what has become an international game, a game that began right here in our own backyard.

Buffalo what?

Back-to-back champs

MATT VOLZ
Editor in Chief

In the sports world, Buffalo is often seen as a city of losing.

The Bills brought home back-to-back American Football League (AFL) championships in 1964 and 1965, but in the Super Bowl era, the city hasn't had any football or hockey championships to celebrate.

As a result, outsiders often see the city as a sports disaster.

Don't tell that to the Buffalo Bandits, though.

This past June, the Bandits stormed through the National Lacrosse League playoffs to reach the finals for the fourth straight season and bring home a second consecutive championship.

The Bandits reached the NLL Finals in 2019, losing to the Calgary Roughnecks. After that season, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the championship wasn't played in either 2020 or 2021.

When the league's playoffs returned in 2022, the Bandits again reached the NLL Finals and lost a winner-take-all game to the Colorado Mammoth in Buffalo.

The 2023 playoffs played out almost the exact same way they had in 2022. Buffalo swept the Toronto Rock in the Eastern Conference Finals to reach the championship series, and again, they were staring down the Colorado Mammoth.

In the same fashion as 2022, the Bandits won Game 1 at home before dropping Game 2 in Denver, setting up a winner-take-all third game at KeyBank Center.

However, it was different this time. The Bandits steamrolled the Mammoth, 13-4, to bring home their first championship since 2008 and the fifth in franchise history.

As a lifelong Buffalo sports fan, the championship felt like an 800-pound weight being lifted off my shoulders.

I couldn't make it to the championship game, as I was doing play-by-play for a local baseball team, but I watched from my living room as my team, finally, celebrated a championship.

I'll admit, as the final seconds ticked off the clock, I dropped to my knees and cried tears of joy and relief on my kitchen floor.

My Bandits journey began when I was about 10 years old, and my family was visiting some friends in Buffalo. We had never been to a lacrosse game before, and we watched as the Bandits defeated the

Minnesota (now Georgia) Swarm, 12-9.

I remember seeing current team captain Steve Priolo get into a fight in that game, and from that moment on I was hooked.

One of my favorite Bandits-related memories was from my second Bandits game.

Again, we were visiting our friends in Buffalo, and we had gotten some sort of ticket package deal that was sponsored by McDonald's.

We had 14 of us going to the game, so we all needed to eat obviously.

Next thing we knew, we had hundreds — yes, hundreds — of Chicken McNuggets and fries sitting on the table in front of us.

I think one of my friends ate nearly 50 McNuggets by himself.

It was the coolest and most disgusting thing I've ever seen to this day.



The table filled with McNuggets and fries, taken March 21, 2015.

Photo by ERICA VOLZ | Special to RE: Lax

Although my Bandits game trips don't include an obscene amount of fast food anymore, I still love going to the games.

I became a first-time season ticket holder last year, and it's been one heck of a ride.

That ride became even more fun once the playoffs rolled around.

Buffalo opened the playoffs at home with a single-elimination quarterfinal game against the aforementioned Swarm.

My sister and I were at the game, and boy, were our hearts tested.

In a back-and-forth game that featured both teams coming back from three-goal deficits, the Swarm and Bandits were tied 9-9 in the final minutes.

After a Josh Byrne shot ran off the goalpost directly below us, the Bandits stood tall on defense and gave the offense one more shot to score and win.

Dhane Smith, the high-scoring Bandits legend, took the ball down the length of the field. As the fans implored him to shoot the ball, he took one more shot and buried it.

Fans erupted in celebration, as did the Bandits who came flying off the bench to congratulate Smith.

Then came the replay review.

The video board clearly showed the clock hitting zero before the ball crossed the goalline, meaning the game was headed to overtime.

In the sudden death period, the two teams went back and forth for roughly four minutes until Byrne beat Swarm goalie Brett Dobson to send Buffalo to the next round.

This time, the celebration was for real, and the arena swelled with joy as the Bandits were moving on.

They were moving on to face a familiar opponent, as the Toronto Rock awaited in the Eastern Conference Finals for the third straight year.

Unlike the two previous years, the semifinal series began in Toronto, as the Rock had a better regular season record.

Nobody would have believed that after watching Game 1.

The Bandits steamrolled their rivals from across the border, and Toronto didn't even get on the board

until there were less than six minutes left in the third quarter.

Following the 12-4 win, the series shifted to Buffalo with the Bandits only needing a win in front of their fans to advance to the finals again.

However, the Rock came to play early, holding an 8-4 lead in the fourth quarter.

That's when the Bandits' barrage began.

Buffalo rattled off six consecutive goals to take the game, 10-8, and the series as well.

Waiting in the wings were the Albany FireWolves, a young team trying to prevent a second straight banner from hanging in the KeyBank Center rafters.

Experience proved to be key in this series, however, as the Bandits took Game 1 in Albany to set up another chance at a home series clincher.

I was there for Game 2, having bought my tickets before the finals even started.

I always wished I'd be there to see one of my teams win a championship, but I didn't believe too much in that possibility.

As the time on the clock wound down and the Bandits held a multi-goal lead, I started to let myself believe.

Could I, the ever-tortured Buffalo sports fan, really witness a championship?

In the final seconds, the arena swelled with noise and the goal horn blared, signifying Buffalo's triumph.

As the NLL Cup was raised by my team, I was in tears.

I had watched them win it the year before, but being there to witness this one in person felt like something out of a movie.

I thought back to that 10-year-old version of myself who hoped he'd see any of his teams escape mediocrity, but wasn't sure it would happen.

The Bandits made that dream twice as real.



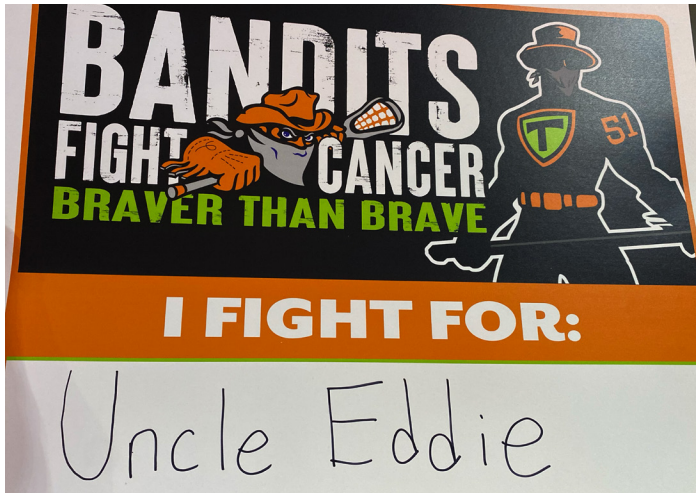
A young Matt Volz with his parents, Dave and Kelly, at a Bandits game.

Photo by KELLY VOLZ | Special to RE: Lax

Matt's Bandits journey...



... 10 years in the making



Bandits look to snatch third straight title

MATT VOLZ
Editor in Chief

As the breezy fall transitions to the bitter cold winter, thousands of fans will fill KeyBank Center to watch their favorite team.

They're not wearing the blue and gold of the Buffalo Sabres, though.

These fans are donned in the black and orange of the Buffalo Bandits.

The Bandits typically draw some of the best crowds in the National Lacrosse League (NLL), nearly selling out the 19,070-seat arena for each game.

Last season, they averaged a league-best 16,974 fans per game, making Banditland one of the league's most difficult environments for opposing teams to play in.

The fans have good reason to come out in droves, as the Bandits enter 2025 with their eyes on a third straight championship.

The organization is one of the most successful in the league, with six championship banners hanging in the rafters.

Head coach John Tavares won four of those titles as a player for the team, and has led the Bandits to their last two from behind the bench.

Buffalo is led by two key forwards, Josh Byrne and Dhane Smith.

Byrne was the league's best player in 2024, as he was named Offensive Player of the Year and was awarded the MVP awards for both the regular season and the NLL Finals.

Smith, a two-time season MVP and 2023 Finals MVP, is already one of the top offensive players in NLL history at age 32.

Byrne and Smith ranked first and second in the league in points last season, respectively.

Buffalo's forward group is aided by the return of a few key contributors from the past two playoff runs.

Chris Cloutier, Chase Fraser and Kyle Buchanan all signed one-year deals to return to the team, providing a secondary scoring boost behind Smith and Byrne.

The transition and defensive units have some mainstay players returning, too.

Alternate captain Nick Weiss and veteran Paul Dawson were both brought back for one more season.

Weiss returns for his 10th season with the Bandits, while Dawson is set to begin his first full season in Buffalo after coming over from Colorado in a



The Bandits raise their 2023 championship banner, Saturday, Dec. 16, 2023.
Image property of the Buffalo Bandits.

midseason deal that shored up a struggling Bandits defense.

Captain Steve Priolo is also back for 2024-25, as he signed a three-year contract extension over the summer.

Capping it off is 42-year-old goalie Matt Vinc, who is coming back for his 19th NLL season.

While most everyone is returning, the team did see a few departures.

Defenseman Justin Robinson was traded to the newly named Ottawa Black Bears in exchange for a 2028 sixth-round pick that would become a fourth-round selection if he were to make Ottawa's final roster.

His brother, forward Brandon Robinson, was traded to the rival Rochester Knighthawks in exchange for transition player Thomas Whitty in September.

Whitty, a 25-year-old native of St. Catharines, Ontario, recorded 81 loose ball recoveries and blocked 14 shots with Rochester in 2023-24.

















Overall, the core from Buffalo's last two championship runs is still intact, and they should be in contention for a third straight NLL Cup.

The Bandits open the 2024-25 season on Saturday, Dec. 7 at 7 p.m. as they face the Knighthawks in Rochester.

Their home opener will also be against Rochester on Saturday, Dec. 28 at 6:30 p.m.

The 2024 championship banner will be raised before the home opener as part of a championship ceremony.

2024 2025 SCHEDULE

 KNIGHTHAWKS SAT DEC. 7 7:00 PM	 BLACK BEARS FRI DEC. 13 7:00 PM	 KNIGHTHAWKS SAT DEC. 28 8:30 PM
 ROCK FRI JAN. 10 7:30 PM	 WINGS SAT JAN. 18 7:30 PM	 FIREWOLVES SAT FEB. 1 7:30 PM
 ROCK FRI FEB. 14 7:00 PM	 SEALS SAT FEB. 15 7:30 PM	 SEALS SAT FEB. 22 10:00 PM
 RUSH SAT MAR. 1 8:00 PM	 ROUGHNECKS SAT MAR. 8 8:30 PM	 ROUGHNECKS SAT MAR. 15 9:00 PM
 DESERT DOGS FRI MAR. 21 7:30 PM	 FIREWOLVES SAT MAR. 22 7:00 PM	 WARRIORS SAT MAR. 29 7:30 PM
 MAMMOTH SAT APR. 5 9:00 PM	 THUNDERBIRDS SAT APR. 12 7:30 PM	 SWARM SAT APR. 19 7:30 PM



BACK-TO-BACK NLL CHAMPIONS



HOME



AWAY

Image courtesy of the Buffalo Bandits.

Pro lacrosse players lead double lives

MATT VOLZ
Editor in Chief

On Friday or Saturday nights, National Lacrosse League (NLL) teams battle each other in front of thousands of fans.

The league has grown significantly since its inception in 1986, when the four-team league was known as the Eagle Pro Box Lacrosse League.

And although the NLL brands itself as “the next major league,” this major league has an interesting quirk.

The majority of its players have additional full-time jobs.

One of the main reasons is salary, or lack thereof.

Specific financial information about the NLL is scarce, but information on the league’s tax filings is available on ProPublica.org, an investigative journalism platform.

In 2023, the NLL reported a revenue of roughly \$12 million, the highest in league history.

\$12 million might sound like a lot of money, but spreading that among 14 teams who then have to pay players, staff and other expenses doesn’t result in high payrolls.

According to a 2017 article published by Paul Lane of Buffalo Business First, the average annual salary in the league was less than \$20,000 at the time.

Using the Bureau of Labor’s inflation calculator, that’s around \$25,000 as of November 2024.

That number has likely increased over the last seven years, but not enough to be a full-time livable salary, especially for a professional athlete.

Lane said that even the top players in the league made less than \$38,000 at the time.

Outside of financial reasons, the league’s schedule allows for players to have jobs during the week.

Box lacrosse is a sport with heavy contact. It’s similar to football in that way, but with less trauma to the body.

As a result, they only play one game a week, usually on Saturday nights but sometimes on Fridays.

Pro football players also play just one game a week, but they make more than enough money to hold them over on off days and during the off-season.

That’s not the case for lacrosse players.

To compensate for the lack of compensation, many of these players hold down additional, full-time jobs during the week.

For example, Bandits goalie Matt Vinc is a full-time physical education teacher and a youth lacrosse coach.

His former teammate, Rochester Knighthawks forward Brandon Robinson, also coaches youth lacrosse.

Both of them often have players in the stands on game night, cheering their coaches on as they play.

Sometimes, working outside of the NLL is a family affair, too.

Bandits defenseman Paul Dawson and his brother, Dan, a now-retired forward who formerly played for the Toronto Rock, are firefighters in Brampton, Ontario.

In a 2022 video on the NLL’s website, the Dawson brothers compared playing pro lacrosse to being firefighters.

“There’s goals, there’s rules and there’s things we need to do to accomplish [our goals],” said Paul. “So, I get to bring what I learned from firefighting into my team, which is cool.”

Dan compared the necessity of everyone doing their job between the two things, saying, “You can’t have off days ... You have to hold your weight.”



**Brothers Paul (left) and Dan Dawson (right).
Image property of the Brampton Fire
Department, courtesy of NLL.com.**

Holding down a full-time job outside of lacrosse doesn’t only apply to players, either.

It can also apply to coaches, such as Bandits head coach John Tavares.

In addition to being the NLL’s all-time leading scorer and the coach of a team that has won back-to-back championships, Tavares is a math teacher.



Bandits forward Josh Byrne celebrates a goal against the Albany FireWolves, Saturday, May 18, 2024.

Image property of the Buffalo Bandits.



Josh Byrne attempts a shot for the Carolina Chaos of the PLL.

Image property of the Premier Lacrosse League.

He teaches at Philip Pocock Catholic Secondary School in Mississauga, Ontario, roughly an hour and a half drive from downtown Buffalo.

In an interview with Channel 7 WKBW in 2020, Tavares compared teaching to coaching, describing his classroom as being similar to his team.

"I think there's a strong correlation between what it takes to be a good athlete and what it takes to be a good student," he said.

Some players may not have other full-time careers, but they play for other teams in other leagues during the NLL offseason.

The Premier Lacrosse League, or PLL, gives many box lacrosse players the opportunity to do so.

The PLL is an outdoor field lacrosse league whose regular season runs during the summer, allowing players to gain professional experience in both the outdoor and indoor games.

Some Bandits players have also played in the PLL, including forward Josh Byrne and transition player Ian MacKay, who currently suit up for the Carolina Chaos during the summer months.

Bandits defenseman Cam Wyers is also in the PLL as a member of the Utah Archers.

The PLL provides an opportunity for box lacrosse players to stay in shape during the offseason, but that's not the only reason for some players to participate.

The league's pay is also pretty close to that of the NLL, if not greater.

Like its indoor counterpart, the PLL does not release information about specific player salaries.

But as of 2023, the average player salary in the PLL was close to \$28,000, according to information

from online platform Inside Lacrosse.

In fact, the base salary for drafted rookies outside of the top three picks is \$25,000, significantly more than what the NLL offers.

So although playing in one of these leagues may not be enough for a livable full-time salary, playing in both of them or holding another job can fill the void.

Also, both of these leagues are growing. At least for the NLL, revenue has steadily increased over the last several seasons.

According to ProPublica, the indoor league's revenue in 2023 was six times higher than what it was in 2016, just seven years earlier.

It's also important to remember that other major leagues had humble beginnings, too.

The NLL is only 38 years old, while the PLL is much younger as it was established in 2019.

Even when the National Football League (NFL) was 38 years old, players were taking trains and buses to games and receiving minimal compensation for their efforts.

Will lacrosse eventually get to the same level as those other major leagues? Only time will tell.

But for now, players get to carry on everyday lives while professionally playing the sport they love.

