

Pro lacrosse team settles on Chesapeake

Team shifts identity with Annapolis owners in place

By BILL WAGNER, Staff Writer
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During its nomadic existence, the Bayhawks professional outdoor lacrosse franchise has played in five different venues and listed both Baltimore and Washington as home city.

A new ownership group thinks the Bayhawks finally found the right location to hold home games after some success at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium last summer.

However, the fact the team was still known as the Washington Bayhawks during the 2009 season didn't make much sense. After taking over as primary owner, Annapolis resident Brendan Kelly quickly corrected that situation.

Kelly announced last night that the 10-year-old Major League Lacrosse organization would henceforth be known as the Chesapeake Bayhawks. Kelly, who recently received formal approval from the MLL to become owner and president of the Bayhawks, said the name change was consistent with the team's efforts to build a regional fan base.

"We want the team name to encompass the entire region. It's important that we touch the markets of Baltimore, Washington, northern Virginia and the Eastern Shore," Kelly said.

Kelly announced the name change along with several other initiatives during a press conference at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium last night. Minority owners John Lamon and Chris Kelly along with general manager Spencer Ford also participated in the presentation, which attracted an audience of almost 100 supporters.

Kelly, who is founder and CEO of the Annapolis-based placement and consulting firm Smartlink, revealed last night the creation of collegiate alumni contests to precede most of the Bayhawks' regular season games. Former players from various schools will be invited to participate in alumni games between Maryland-Johns Hopkins, Virginia-North Carolina and Washington College-Salisbury among others.

"Our goal is to create a real connection between the college and the pro game. These alumni games should be a lot of fun," said Kelly, who also plans to hold a "Women's Night" designed to raise funds and awareness for breast cancer.

Lamon, who was inducted into the Anne Arundel County Sports Hall of Fame for his lacrosse exploits, jumped at the opportunity to become part of the new ownership group. The former University of Maryland All-American served as an assistant coach with the Bayhawks last season.

"I told Brendan when he first contacted me that I thought we could raise the bar and raise it significantly," said Lamon, who will serve as director of corporate sales for the franchise. "We have a daunting task in front of us. We need to increase attendance four-fold in order to be successful. We are going to work tirelessly and passionately to get the job done."

Lamon, who will remain part of the coaching staff, said the Bayhawks have already signed agreements with corporate partners and vowed to help create a stadium atmosphere that is "electric."

Chris Kelly was named director of youth sales by his younger brother and announced last night that pre-game clinics would become a staple of the Bayhawks experience. Youngsters will get a chance to mingle with and learn from the professional players during the hour-long clinics .

"We need kids in the area to feel a personal connection with our players and the team. We want to get kids on the field before, during and after the games to meet and get to know the Bayhawks players," Chris Kelly said.

All three owners admitted marketing efforts and fan outreach will fall short if the product on the field is not top-notch. Ford, a former Major League Lacrosse standout, will be charged with creating a roster that can compete for the championship. Second-year head coach John Tucker will have the responsibility of developing a winning team.

"To build this thing, we are looking for guys with character. What matters is the name on the front of the jersey, not the back. We want first-class people at every position who will fight for the guy on their left and the guy on their right," Ford said.

Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium will host the MLL Championship Weekend for the second straight year and Ford vowed to have the Chesapeake Bayhawks part of it. He thinks the team has already made some great moves, including acquiring two-time MLL champions Jeff Zywicki and Nick O'Hara in a trade with the Toronto Nationals.

Zywicki, an attackman out of Massachusetts, has scored 87 goals in 39 career games since joining the MLL in 2006. O'Hara, a former All-American at Duke, is one of the most versatile defenders in the league and noted for his ability to jump-start the transition game.

Ford thought it was notable that a handful of Bayhawks players, including star midfielder Kyle Dixon, attended last night's press conference. Dixon, an Archbishop Spalding product and former Midfielder of the Year at Virginia, said the players are excited about the new ownership group.

"Brendan Kelly and John Lamon are top-notch people and successful businessmen who know the game of lacrosse inside and out," Dixon said. "There has already been a positive change in the atmosphere surrounding the team. As players, it's nice to know that things are going to be done right and the owners are going to give us every opportunity to be successful."