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## The Business of Lacrosse: Panel highlights growth of sport at New York City event

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**NEW YORK** - It's a matter of when, not if lacrosse will become a mainstream sport, according to a panel of experts at the New York Chapter of the National Sports Marketing Network on Friday at Dave & Buster's in Times Square.

Representatives from US Lacrosse, ESPN, Major League Lacrosse, the National Lacrosse League and Reebok spoke to a group of sports marketing professionals about the dramatic growth of the sport in recent years. More than 425,000 players participated on organized teams in 2006, according to the most recent US Lacrosse Participation Survey, up 68 percent since 2001.

The business potential accompanying that growth was evidenced by last week's announcement that ESPN extended its three-year old relationship with the MLL through 2016. The network will televise 11 games in high definition on ESPN2 this year, including six in prime time. Last year's broadcasts were primarily tape-delayed games on Tuesday afternoons.

"We believe in ESPN and we're thrilled that they believe in us," said David Gross, commissioner of the MLL.

"We think we can make some money off this thing," said Andy Sippel, senior vice



NLL Commissioner **Jim Jennings** said during a panel Friday that he does not consider the MLL a direct competitor.

president, sports and product management for ESPN. ESPN, the longtime broadcaster of the NCAA men's championship, is turning to lacrosse more and more. Its newest network, ESPNU will televise more than 25 college games this spring, including all eight first-round games of the NCAA Division I men's championship.

"We see lacrosse as a key thing to helping [ESPNU] get full distribution," said Sippel.

ESPN's relationship with the MLL provides the network with content for a variety of its media outlets targeted towards a younger demographic.

"People coming to ESPN.com to watch highlights is a big part of our business," said Sippel.

The market only figures to get bigger. Gross said his league, which added four new franchises in 2006, expects to add two more for the 2008 season. Jim Jennings, commissioner of the National Lacrosse League, said his 13-team indoor league expects to expand to 24 teams within the next four years.

Jennings also said the NLL is about a month or two away from formally announcing its own outdoor league. The league's board of governors voted to move forward with the outdoor version three months ago.

"It's good for our business and it's good for our owners' business," said Jennings. "We're not competing head-to-head with the MLL. We plan on playing in the fall."

Reports about the NLL's outdoor league have been rumored for more than a year.

"Without [an official announcement], it's hard to react," said Gross. "Until they take the field, I won't believe it."

Jennings sees the outdoor league as a chance to employ players fulltime.

"When that happens, good things happen," said Jennings.

Even if they don't compete head-to-head, can two outdoor professional leagues co-exist? Gross said his league is not profitable yet, and the NLL doesn't immediately expect attendance as high as it draws for the indoor game.

"The sport has so much room to grow; I don't see it as a cannibalization," said

George Daniel, president of the NLL's New York Titans.

The NLL version of the outdoor game could be considerably different than traditional field lacrosse. The MLL has made adjustments to the field game, including the addition of a shot clock, but nothing as dramatic as rebound nets behind the goal to keep the ball in play after shots, something the NLL is reportedly considering.

"When you change the game -- I think it's just marketing, it's not the game of lacrosse," said Dave Kotowski, president of the MLL's Long Island Lizards.

"Lacrosse has reached this position of opportunity," said Steve Stenersen, executive director of US Lacrosse. "When we talk about lacrosse at a professional level, we're talking about entertainment. How the sport is adapted - we'll just have to wait and see."

It will be interesting to see what plays out over the next several months. There have been no discussions of a merger between the two leagues.