



The National College Athletics Association's announcement of new stick specifications to be implemented in 2010 caused much debate within the lacrosse world. Since the Men's Lacrosse Rules Committee made its decision in February, many questions and concerns have emerged regarding the equipment modification.

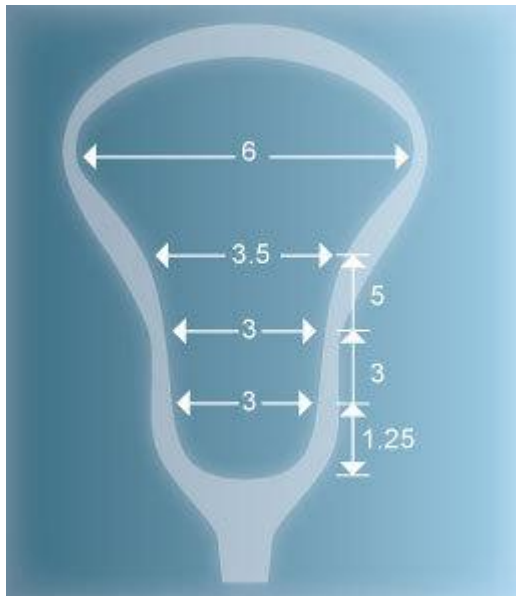
Beginning January 1, 2010, all lacrosse stick heads used in NCAA play must meet a new set of dimensions, according to an NCAA press release referring to the rule change. Measuring from the throat up, at the 1.25-inch, and 3-inch marks the stick must be 3 inches wide. At the 5-inch mark, the stick must be 3.5-4 inches wide on that front and 3.5 inches wide on the back. At the head's widest point, it must be 6-6.5 inches on the front, and 6 inches on the back. All of these measurements are minimum dimensions, so heads may exceed these specifications and be wider, but they may not be more narrow.

The change was made to promote the free dislodgement of the ball, said Ty Halpin, the NCAA's associate director of rules administration. The hope is to even the playing field between offensive and defensive players.

"It's much harder than it used to be to get the ball out," Halpin said. "We don't want it to be because of the equipment... It certainly makes sense that if you widen the opening of the crosse the ball will come out more easily... The other key piece is balancing offense and defense in the game."

The NCAA hopes to also promote safety with the new rule, Halpin said. If it is easier for a defender to dislodge the ball, then he won't have to be as forceful while checking the attacking player, decreasing relentless slashing in pursuit of the ball or just from frustration.

Warrior Sports announced in September a lawsuit against the NCAA, challenging many of the NCAA Rules Committee's claims and hoping to prevent the new specifications from going into effect in 2010.



Warrior contends that the NCAA produced little data supporting the theory that a wider head would promote freer dislodgement of the ball, said Tom Burns, a Warrior product manager. The company was also alarmed that this was the third rule change since 2007 involving sticks. Retooling and redesigning for the production of new heads to meet these specifications will be an expensive and time consuming process that Warrior feels is an unfair burden.

"The majority of heads that we've studied in the market do not comply to 2010 standards," Burns said. "This rule impacts everyone in the industry."

With so much uncertainty surrounding the new specs, consumers have been left in a quandary over the legality of current equipment, Burns said.

"One of the big things with this 2010 rule is just the amount of confusion out there," Burns said.

That uncertainty begins to clear as more leagues and governing bodies vote on the adoption of these rules. While the NCAA's ruling will affect all varsity collegiate programs, the trickle down to the high school level might not be that dramatic.

"The revised stick specifications adopted by the NCAA do not apply to the high school level as the [National Federation of State High School Associations] has adopted no changes in stick specifications," said Kent Summers, the assistant director of NFHS.

“Thus, lacrosse played using NFHS lacrosse rules will be unaffected by the NCAA rule change...We have discussed it the past two years, and they did not favor the revision on either occasion.”

According to a survey conducted by NFHS of state associations from 2006-2007, 71,524 boys played high school lacrosse at 1,588 schools in 22 states that participate with NFHS. According to US Lacrosse's numbers from 2007, nearly 120,000 boys play high school lacrosse. While they may not all be recognized or accounted for by the NFHS, most play under NFHS rule, so most players will not be affected by the change.

Some leagues that do not participate with NFHS rules follow NCAA rules instead, such as the highly touted Maryland Interscholastic Athletics Association. The MIAA has made no official decision yet, but they will likely stay on par with NCAA rules, said Bob Shriver, head coach of The Boys' Latin School in Maryland.

“We will likely adopt the new rules,” Shriver said. “Our league, the MIAA, typically will adjust some of the NCAA rules to meet our particular concerns...We may not adopt a rule like that because of money implications. So, if the new stick rule is out, we may allow our kids a year or two to make the change so the financial impact isn't so severe.”

If a league or association will adopt the rule, most will not make a concrete decision until meetings either following the 2008 season or preceding the 2009 season. But, if the NFHS maintains its decision not to adopt the new specifications, which it seems inclined to do, most high school boys will be able to continue using the same equipment through 2010.

Manufacturers are faced with a challenge and some tough decisions now when approaching the concerns of producing heads for 2010 NCAA play. Roughly 8,700 men play lacrosse in the NCAA at the DI, DII, or DIII level, according to statistics compiled through the lax.com database. Almost 2,400 of those players at the DI level, where many programs are sponsored and receive equipment for free or for a markedly reduced price. That leaves a very small market for manufacturers to pursue with 2010 NCAA sticks.

Weighing that against the much larger market of youth and high school players who can continue to use equipment manufacturers are currently producing, some companies may decide it is better to not make heads for 2010 NCAA play and focus on other markets.

“We don't anticipate that happening,” Halpin said, “and in conversations with manufacturers, many have asked if a stick that meets 2010 specs would be allowed for use in play. That makes us think that some are planning to release 2010 sticks early.”

Despite Warriors objections to the new ruling, if it does remain in place, they intend on creating something to meet the new specifications, Burns said.

“Warrior will make sticks available to both sets of standards,” Burns said. How expansive of a line they explore for 2010 NCAA play will be a decision many manufacturers will need to make in the coming months.

States that have lacrosse programs recognized (and thus governed by) NFHS are: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia.