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## **USFHL National Championship to Showcase Best of Local Clubs**

*By Matt Dougherty, NFHCA Director of Communications*

The United States Field Hockey League (USFHL) National Championship will take place from July 28-30 at Spooky Nook in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with eight men's and eight women's teams competing to be crowned as the best adult team in the country.

Kendra Lucking, the non-profit director for the USFHL, has been busy coordinating the event which will allow the best adult teams from local leagues the opportunity to compete to be the 2017 USFHL National Champions.

"When chatting with adult leaders in field hockey over the past two years, we identified that the first step in us coming together and growing the game for adults nationally is to have a competition for the strongest teams to compete to be national champions. USFHL is designed to serve all levels of local and national adult field hockey, but our first step needed to be a men's and women's adult championship. In the first year we wanted to keep it small so we could work out the kinks. We'll kick off with something special so people will want to come back."

The USFHL National Championship is not a pay-to-play tournament, and teams had to qualify from their local leagues. Confirmed teams in the women's tournament include Rovers Greenwich FHC (N.Y.), Lancaster United (Pa.) Baltimore Field Hockey Association, DC Dragons, NCAFH (North Carolina), Miami Surf, Olympic Club (Northern California) and Steelstyx. The men's event will feature Greenwich (N.Y.) Field Hockey Club, DC Dragons, Miami Surf, Philly Premier FHA, Midwest Warriors, Texas FHC and SE/USA. Additional teams will be confirmed as the event draws closer.

"There are a lot of strong leagues providing great adult field hockey thanks to passionate local leaders who put in a ton of time of effort for adults to continue playing the sport, often with little thanks and credit. A primary goal of USFHL is to support them through technology, marketing, events, and coming together to strengthen the pipeline and the national community" Lucking said. "Some notable successful leagues providing top hockey include NEFHA in New York, the Federation in Southern California,

and BAFHA & NFHCA in Northern California which offers separate men's and women's competition. Texas offers a competitive men's league and PFHA in Philadelphia has a strong women's league. Other successful co-ed leagues include NEPL in Boston, Triangle in North Carolina, BFHA in Baltimore which is the oldest field hockey association, and DC Dragons. Perhaps the most exciting thing for me to see this year were formations of new leagues for example in Florida and Georgia in the Southeast and also WFHA, VA Beach, and Triangle formed leagues to provide localized cost effective options for their athletes. Many of the leaders from these communities are on the advisory board of USFHL guiding the organization's next steps."

The USFHL National Championship will be played the weekend before the 2017 Men's and Women's Pan American Cup, which takes place at Spooky Nook from August 4-13. The Pan Am Cup athletes will be practicing at the site while the USFHL National Championship is being held.

"Making it the weekend before the Pan Am Cup will provide an exciting background so it can be special even though there will only be 16 teams this year," Lucking said.

In addition to the tournament, the USFHL National Championship weekend will include a convention, social and North vs South all-star game. Lucking says a goal for 2018 is to double the participation. Many communities were excited about the opportunity but were not able to submit teams in 2017, but have plans in place so that teams can qualify from their area in 2018. She hopes to see growing competition at the local level as the national championship event develops.

"Teams had to be selected through local competition, and we are utilizing local hockey to be able to compete in nationals," Lucking said. "This is a competition of the best teams in the nation, not the best all-stars or someone who has friends that could come in. There are rules behind local participation so it truly is a competition between the best teams. We want to spotlight the club teams to grow local participation since we don't have huge adult club participation in the United States compared to some other countries."

Vernon Vassou, the co-captain of DC Dragons, said his team is excited for the challenge of competing against other top squads around the country.

"The national tournament provides the DC Dragons an opportunity to compete at a national level, and exposes our players to a higher standard of hockey," Vassou said. "To represent the DC Metro area is a great honor and a source of pride. We have reached out to players throughout our region to have good representation."

Lucking said the USFHL is a non-profit that is dedicated to growing the game, and doing so at the adult level will keep players engaged after they have completed collegiate competition.

"Whenever players graduate, a lot of times they get questions on how to get plugged into the game," Lucking said. "We are organizing, providing structure and growing in one place so adults know the website or place to go so that they can get plugged in to play."

Prospective players can go to [USFHL.com](http://USFHL.com) to find out more about the organization and what is going on at local levels throughout the country. Lucking said the website is key so players will have a central location to get information and not just rely on word of mouth.

"When we work together the adult community can get coverage and marketing through the big field hockey organizations," she said. "Players can then get plugged in locally where local organizations would not have that power by themselves."

Lucking has helped start, coach, and managed a number of youth field hockey clubs in San Francisco, and believes that building the adult game will have a lasting effect on youth in the sport as well. Once adults are engaged in the game in their local

communities, Lucking hopes to see a family sport dynamic and a stronger pipeline for athletes for a trickle-down effect to get more youth engaged and involved in field hockey.

Lucking hopes to see the championship not only grow from year one to year two, but to continue to blossom as the local leagues develop and field hockey participation picks up across the country. She hopes that post-collegiate players from all different levels will be engaged in continuing their careers after graduation.

“The first year and probably next year is starting out with the most competitive teams, but in the future we want to break into tier one and tier two to pull in more fieldhouses and rec leagues at a different level to really see growth, particularly with men,” Lucking said. “Tier one and tier two would support the broader type of athlete and get more engaged with adults so they are giving something back. That way you would have the social tournaments as well that are really popular in other countries. Also in two-to-three years we want to support indoor field hockey for adults and also have more fundraising through corporate sponsorship and events for the local leagues to help mitigate the costs for athletes.”

She added, “When I let myself get very excited about the potential of adult growth, I think ten years from now when clubs from youth through adult are larger there can be more partnering with colleges and other facilities for more access to the astroturf surfaces since that is what adults want to play on and is probably the biggest limiting factor in growing the game for adults.”