



This season's team includes, front from left, Luke St. Marie, Kalub Padilla, Asa Schweitzer, Aiden Johnson, Colton Wolfe and Hollis Schweitzer; middle row, Emery Panches-Mickelson, Abby St. Marie and Adalyne Johnson; and back, Garrett Caribou, Sam Eddy, Kelton Bournazian, Brennen Wilson, Jaden Weber, Landen Kendall, Trip Baker and Salem Schweitzer. Landon Wharton, Sage Mills, Dayton Wilson, Tyler Robertson, William Finch, Jamie Whiting, Jadin Caldwell, Michael Faigl, Josh Knieper, Billy Peterson, Dylon Peterson and Jordan Kachnowski are also on the team.

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failing, because that's part of the process. They learn from mistakes.

The players already are finding the training is paying dividends. Jaden Weber, 15, has seen big improvements from beginning to the end of the season.

"I couldn't catch the ball at the start of the season. I couldn't hold the ball in my cradle," Weber said. "Now I can catch it, throw it — just like a lot of our team."

## 4. Making it official

Even though Lopes Lacrosse has its legs under it, it still is an unsanctioned club to US Lacrosse. In order to compete in an actual league, the team now must travel to a different state.

For example, the lacrosse programs in Jackson and Cody have to travel to Montana to play games. The only way the lacrosse team can become a sanctioned sport in Wyoming is if all the teams in the state are a part of an association like US Lacrosse.

"It's a very big thing. The idea behind the association would be to have the national backing," Baker said. "It's having the legitimacy of saying we are an established team, in an established association — in Wyoming, for Wyoming."

Baker believes two years is a realistic goal for when to expect an association like US Lacrosse to be established in Wyoming.

## 5. Statewide league

There now are other lacrosse programs around the state. With the backing of US Lacrosse, the sport in Wyoming could start to resemble the varsity programs



Trip Baker, 11, rips a shot at the goal while Luke St. Marie tries to get his stick in the way at practice.

## 6. The 2017 season

This season is coming to a close. Even though it was a tough spring as far as weather, Lopes Lacrosse has made strides. A couple events that Baker had planned for were canceled due to weather, but they were still able to introduce the team to competitive lacrosse.

Lopes players attended a clinic in Jackson Hole. Baker said his players were like sponges at the clinic, learning a ton. A couple weeks later, he and the team returned to Jackson for a tournament.

Baker said the young athletes, most first-timers in lacrosse competition, played well.

## 7. Who can play

One of the beauties of lacrosse is that basically anybody can play. The game is almost identical from the boys

game to the girls, and there are several age groups for kids to fit into. For assistant coach Casey Schweitzer, it's a bit of a



the new sport. Lopes Lacrosse now has several boys and girls, and players from 8 to 15. The program has a 9-U and an 11-U team. Baker said there will be plenty of kids next year to field a 15-U team.

According to Baker, this is a sport that is inviting to kids with all different sports backgrounds and

the 11-U team (11 years old and younger) won two games, drew one and lost one. The 9-U team played a couple more games, and also fared well, winning four out of six.

"Across the board, I couldn't be happier," Baker said. "They completely exceeded all of my expectations. Other coaches were telling me 'you have some kids that can play lacrosse.'"

Baker is still trying to schedule another competition with the Cody club before the season ends, since both of the previous trips were canceled by weather.

Baker also wrote a curriculum for the BO-CES lacrosse clinics, which will be scheduled this summer.

## 9. The benefits

Before the kids learn how to be great lacrosse players, their coach wants to make sure they learn how to be great people.

"The drive for me is to make quality individuals who will do well in the community, and happen to be lacrosse players," Baker said. "I want character first and athletics second, because one is a direct result of the other."

There's a saying that Baker grew up with. The team will start using it to break the huddle with the chant of "Head — Heart — Win." It's a simple concept — "If you use your head, and use you heart, then we win," he said.

Skills and talent are small parts of what this head coach looks for. He wants commitment, class and hard work from his players.

## 10. Supporting cast

Baker got the ball rolling for Lopes Lacrosse, but he now has two assistant coaches, Casey Schweitzer and Sid Gressette.

Schweitzer is originally from North Dakota. He went to high school there and then attended Valley City State on a wrestling scholarship. He's never played lacrosse, but he has multiple years of experience as a physical education teacher and a wrestling coach on his resume, and is picking up this new sport in a hurry. Before Baker gets to practices, Schweitzer is the one running things, getting the players warmed up and handling conditioning drills.

Gressette is more ex-



that already exist.

Cody and Jackson currently have the most established clubs in the state, as they already have multiple teams. There is a club in Gillette, and it's in the same boat as Lopes, having just started. On top of the four programs that are established, there are groups from Riverton and Thermopolis on the verge of launching a program.

Even with as few as six teams, Baker thinks it would be easy to split it into two conferences, have a state tournament with teams ranked by record, and play for a state championship. If everyone played each other twice, that creates opportunities for 10 regular-season games plus playoffs, which already would create a decent spring season.

Traveling to places like Gillette may seem like a bit of a jaunt, but programs in Cody and Jackson already are traveling over six hours to play in the Montana leagues. Having an association in Wyoming is attractive compared to constantly leaving the state to compete.

...and a blessing.

He and his wife have nine children, including six foster kids. Especially when so many of them play sports, coordination can be an issue. With lacrosse, though, he says it's great to be able to bring both his boys and girls to the same practice. It helps that they love



Abby St. Marie, 10, left, and Emery Punches-Mickelson, 9, show that girls have no problem playing lacrosse.

all different body types.

"There's a position for everybody," Baker said. "You've got the collision and the hitting aspect of football and hockey. You've got the footwork and the skill of soccer, and the plays in lacrosse are very similar to basketball, too."

perienced with the game than Schwietzer. He played lacrosse at a Virginia high school and then at Clemson University.

Baker said Gressette knows the game well, and even though "he doesn't have a dog in this fight," he's shown great commitment to the kids on the team.

"Having two dedicated and passionate individuals who are willing to take the reins and go ... it takes a big load off," Baker said. "It'll be my pleasure to hand over teams to both of them once we have enough kids."

Baker also has had the help of several parents. He said he is appreciative of how they were willing to do anything from buying a piece of equipment when it is needed, to volunteering time for team-building activities during practice.

The club also got some help from Sweetwater County School District No. 1. Eastside Elementary school gave Lopes permission to practice on its field.

## 8. Gearing up

The First Stick Grant provides gear for Lopes Lacrosse. The old adage of "look good, play good" isn't always

the case, but the team suits up in some of the nicest lacrosse gear in the country.

The grant provided Baker with 20 new sets of Adidas gear, including sticks, gloves, pads and helmets. In return for being able to use the equipment, Baker must review the quality of the equipment for US Lacrosse. If all goes well, Lopes will get 10 more sets next year.

The gear also will ease some safety con-



cerns parents may have. Baker said that all the gear is high quality, and that head safety is the top priority.

"With the helmets, it's a very established company," Baker said. "They're very, very high-end. There's no

scrimping on those."

Baker expects that once some players get past their first year, they will want to buy their own gear. Once that happens, he will have several sets of gear for players who are new to the game and program.

Rocket-Miner stories and photos by **Miles Englehart**