THE ULTIMATE ETHOS: CHALLENGES, COOPTATION AND SURVIVAL
DURING ULTIMATE’S ADOLESCENCE

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Ultimate is the fastest growing field sport in America. Created in 1968, forty-five years later the sport was still on the periphery of the mainstream but reached new heights in 2013 – two professional leagues, over 800 college teams and a broadcasting deal with ESPN – and the discussions throughout the sport’s history have never been as relevant. Self-officiation and the Spirit of the Game are the main tenets that make up the ethos of the sport and its community. These unique aspects differentiate Ultimate’s predominate culture from that of mainstream sports culture. This study shows the countercultural ties and survival of the ethos during the adolescent period of Ultimate’s evolution (1987-2010). It examines the progression of the community’s established grassroots culture and the governing body of the sport alongside the influx of young players with mainstream sports attitudes who bolstered certain organizers’ attempts to alter Ultimate in the hopes of gaining “legitimacy” through adding third-party officials, commercialization and corporate sponsorship.
Ultimate Frisbee\textsuperscript{1,2} is a sport on the fringes of mainstream sport and its presiding culture. Some may not even characterize Ultimate as a sport, instead relegating it to a hobby or a game. Regardless of its peripheral position in the mainstream sports culture, Ultimate is the fastest growing field sport in America.\textsuperscript{3} When Columbia High School students in Maplewood, New Jersey developed a game to play after class in 1968, future historians would connect their invention to the assassinations, war protest, and drug experimentation of 1968 thus codifying a link to the counterculture of the time. Ultimate’s contestation of mainstream authority fit that milieu, but in sports history, its significance stemmed from ways the game countered a mainstream trend that emphasized competition, athletic prowess and precision training. Unlike other games that increasingly relegated less athletically talented people to spectator status, Joel Silver, one of the main innovators of the sport, remembered in 2006 that Ultimate was an all-inclusive sport for anyone who wanted to play.

\textsuperscript{1} Frisbee is a registered Trademark of Wham-O toy company; I capitalize Frisbee, but do not place the trademark symbol. Henceforth I refer to the sport as Ultimate. Also, I use the terms Frisbee and disc interchangeably unless noted otherwise.

\textsuperscript{2} Ultimate is a field sport consisting of two teams of seven vying to score in each other’s end zones. It combines aspects from soccer, football and basketball. The field is like a football field, but the dimensions are smaller across (40 yards), have a larger end zone (25x40) and a 70-yard field in between the two. The disc must be caught in the end zone like football. Similar to soccer, the disc can move in any direction and there is no stoppage in play, excluding after a point is scored. And finally a player must establish a pivot foot when controlling the disc, as in basketball. Team play is tantamount in Ultimate, because an individual cannot score unassisted like the aforementioned sports, they must pass or receive the disc to or from a teammate.

This inclusiveness created a diverse community that is at once unified in its love for Ultimate and divided on the future direction of Ultimate. In this paper I present the struggles in the Ultimate community to uphold the ethos that has colored the history of the sport. In the next section, I establish the countercultural ethos of the sport through its most unique aspects – self-officiation and the Spirit of the Game. I differentiate the eras of Ultimate’s evolution thus far - infancy (1968-75), childhood (1975-87) and adolescence (1987-2010). I explain how the UPA organized an “insolvent” community with no central direction and provided competitive outlets for players. This was one of the first challenges to the countercultural ethos and I continually discuss the dualism on the direction of the sport present in the community throughout its history. The role of self-officiation and the Spirit of the Game in Ultimate have always had proponents and doubters and in the third section, I focus mainly on the debates and discussions that took place in the adolescent period that concerned these main points of contention. Most developments in Ultimate began as grassroots efforts and the developments, challenges and grassroots organizing that occurred in the adolescent period are covered in the last section.

I argue that the Ultimate Players Association (UPA), the national governing body that rebranded as USAUltimate (USAU) in 2010, held on to the ethos of the sport while responding to and co-opting some of the challenges to their sovereignty even as players from traditional mainstream sports integrated into the Ultimate community. Today, Ultimate is caught at a crossroads. USAU is fending off the attempts of new “professional” leagues to divert the elite level of Ultimate and they have provoked USAU to put more resources and emphasis into their highest levels in order to compete. The debates on the direction of the sport, Spirit of the Game and self-officiation are at an all-time high. In the
conclusion, I present the current environment of the Ultimate community and provide a look into the future of Ultimate based on my study.

Tiers of Agency

There are three horizontal tiers of agency in the Ultimate community: the institutional level, the teams, and the players. These tiers are completely interactive with each other rather than being stacked on top of one another or valued in order. First, the institutional tier is comprised of the UPA/USAUltimate and its various challenging ventures. Throughout this work I cover the development of the UPA and how it used its large amount of agency to further the sport and maintain the ethos of Ultimate as it grew into the governing body of Ultimate. This tier is also comprised of tournaments, local leagues, other governing bodies and the challenging institutions to the UPA which I cover in the third section. The significance of the second tier is that the teams – specifically their leaders, captains and decision-makers – hold a certain agency in regards to deciding in which venues to compete. This tier is most applicable in the decision-making involved in choosing what tournaments or leagues in which to participate. It is smaller in scale and influence than the adjacent two, but its importance is seen in their continued participation to support the various options for play. This tier’s decisions on where to play is briefly touched on in the second section concerning the debates in the community, but is mostly presented in the third as teams were relied upon for the existence of some leagues throughout the adolescent period. Players as the third tier have been important because their participation and support was crucial for the success of any venture in the community. Players hold the most agency for change by choosing where to play, what team
to play for, what to vote for and support in UPA surveys and elections and what opinions to express in the *UPA Newsletter*, Rec.Sport.Disc, internet blog and by word of mouth through the community. The focus of the section on the popular debates over commercialization, third party officiation and the Spirit of the Game remain mostly in this tier. I evidence the importance and interactivity of these tiers throughout the paper.

State of Scholarship

The academic discourse on Ultimate is rather limited. The most seminal work, *Ultimate: The First Four Decades* is not totally academic in nature, but provides a comprehensive history of the sport of Ultimate. Tony Leonardo and Adam Zagoria, two players who have been immersed in the community since the 1980s, researched mostly through word of mouth, oral history and email correspondence. I use their work to help establish the countercultural aspects of the Ultimate community in the first section. They focus much of their work on the UPA’s guidance of Ultimate and the developments and happenings in those divisions. They also show the evolution in game play and the community throughout its existence. The book is a bit biased though on its accounts of central figures in this paper – Mike Gerics and Todd “Toad” Leber. As I explore in later, Leonardo was called out for his misrepresentation of Toad in the book and his online feud with Mike G is also criticized about his historicizing of Mike G’s contributions to the sport.4

Kristin Walters’s dissertation, *Ultimate Spin: Contesting the Rhetoric, Countercultural Ethos and Commodification of the Ultimate "Frisbee" Sport, 1968-2008*, is the most complete

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4 Gerics and Leber are better known in the community as Mike G and Toad, respectively. Throughout this work I refer to them and a couple others as how they are known in the community.
academic work on the history of the sport. She contends that even though “Ultimate’s founders and enthusiasts attempted a paradigm shift, they were unable to escape the dominant ideologies of mainstream sport.” She employs the use of the alternative sports model created by Michael Messner which states that even though “marginal” sports present alternatives to conventional choices for competition, the sports on the periphery, like Ultimate, are pulled to the center, the mainstream, over time through commercialization. She states that the “influx of new players and the growing control of the UPA” has “further exacerbated” the pull to the center. I amend her argument by showing that the increased arrival of younger players to the game at the more competitive organized levels has and will continue to counter the alternativeness of Ultimate to mainstream sports culture, but the institution of the Spirit of the Game and most importantly the dedication to the principles of self-officiation by the UPA throughout the adolescent period have kept the ethos of Ultimate intact. I address the challenges from the mainstream culture in the last two sections to help explain the push and pull between the central mainstream attitudes and the peripheral ideals in the Ultimate community.

Blaine Robbins is a former elite player in Seattle and earned his PhD in Sociology at the University of Washington. He published two important pieces on the sociological contingencies in players’ interactions in Ultimate in 2004 and 2012, respectively. His more relevant work to my study is “Playing with Fire, Competing with Spirit,” explores whether the argument that “third-party agents” or observers are needed “to promote cooperation when groups are large and spatially diffuse,” as the Ultimate community is, is relevant in

6 Walters, 39.
Ultimate. Most important to my work is his enumeration of the “costs” in governing the organization and play in Ultimate. They are “the costs of regulating team and player eligibility, (2) the costs of coordinating competition; (3) the costs of negotiation and bargaining foul violations; and (4) the costs of detecting and controlling malfeasance.”

Robbins may be a bit narrow in his wording on the third cost. Bargaining and negotiating have very similar meanings and in respect to Ultimate, they are the same. Not only that, he substantiates that observers cannot interfere with the third cost; only active referees can remove bargaining and negotiating violations from players. He also explains how centralized theorists (those that are for the introduction of referees to the sport) present that governing bodies should maintain cooperative competition in Ultimate while Ultimate players already rely on private-decentralized control and “informal social mechanisms” prevalent in the culture of playing Ultimate to cooperatively compete.

Peter Doyle presents a sociological study on how communication in Ultimate (on the field and in the community) is countercultural to the norms of participants’ interactions in mainstream, third-party officiated, sports. He employs sociologist Jurgsten Habermas’ theory of communicative action for his assessment of what makes Ultimate and its community different from the mainstream sports culture. The history of how Habermas came up with communicative action in society is important to it now being a countercultural phenomenon, especially in sports. Prior to the industrial revolution, communities had relied upon reciprocity in communication norms in order to achieve mutual need for the betterment of the community. “Communicative action occurs when

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two or more participating actors engage one another with practical attitude expressed through rational speech embodying an inherent understanding of each other’s ends.\(^8\) Doyle argues that because of self-officiation and the Spirit of the Game, communicative action is utilized in game play and thereby translated into the community. It is “how communicative actions between participants influence both the culture and self-officiation.”\(^9\) Ultimate’s creation of “a management system based on trust and assumption that Ultimate players want to act morally in the context of one another” is the place in which communicative action fits. This represents Ultimate’s ethos in the game and its culture as being counter to that of the mainstream sports culture. Participants are more-or-less morally obligated to communicating with an open understanding that other participants’ opinions matter so that the game (and in a larger scope, the community) can maintain proper flow and essence of the culture. This is not always the case, and later, I delve into the problems that occur in the community with regards to the moral stance in Ultimate.

Within the Ultimate-playing community, there are different levels of play. The level at which a player participates has much bearing on where his/her interests lie for the sport. In all divisions, there are elite, mid-level and lower-level teams and players.\(^10\) In club,
the elite compete at the highest levels and on the biggest stages – the UPA/USAUltimate Club Championships, WFDF World Country and Club Championships, the World Games, and elite regular season tournaments – and in college, as the division has grown, the top teams are considered to be elite. This group’s interests are mainly focused on formatting the game so that it is the most organized, fair, and visible that it can be to crown to best of the best. The mid-level is the local to regional competition in the club circuit as well as the more competitive local league players. Mid-level club teams are not as skilled collectively as elite, though they may have individuals that are comparable. Lower level players are those that mostly play grassroots Ultimate – local organized pickup, local recreational leagues, and pure informal pickup. I make note, throughout my examination of the debates, of how concentrated the main issues are to implementation at the elite level and how any changes in self-officiation standards or commercialization affect the elite teams and players most. Many mid-level players were concerned with the debates on self-officiation, spirit and commoditization, they understood that change could affect them, but knew that they would not reap as much benefit from any institution of third-party officiation or commercialization as the players above them. Lower-level players were not as concerned with the direction of Ultimate as long as there was still Ultimate to be played. This is, of course, a general overview of sentiment for the levels; there are plenty of wide-ranging opinions throughout all the levels that are converse to their peers.

competition was definitely more light-hearted than the Open division (in which I attended College Nationals in 2008), but skills were high and the younger teams that we played, there seemed to be more foul calls and chippy-ness between the teams (my team was the oldest average team as I attended with a group of players in their mid to late-thirties that was core of a finalist Mixed team in the early 2000s).
What Exactly is Spirit?

What spirit means in Ultimate is defined in many different ways, depending on the level of play, and it is not exactly anything. Geographic location, sports background, from whom one learned the game and how one acts as a competitor all contribute to one’s idea of spirit. The Spirit of the Game clause was written by Dan “Stork” Roddick and first instituted as a clause in the 8th edition of the rules published in 1979. He intended for the growing community of players to be taught that it was the “guiding principle” of the sport and what was expected of their conduct in play. As new players were introduced to the sport, they found a game that was athletic, fun, different and full of exciting plays. Over-competitiveness had to be quelled so that the self-officiated game would not get out of hand and have anarchy rule the more competitive divisions.

Spirit can mean many different things to the growingly diverse community of Ultimate. According to a survey I conducted online, in Ultimate, spirit is a “vital,” “cool, ambiguous component” that is “integral to the sport” and many see it responsible for the “creation of [Ultimate’s] awesome culture.” It is “sportsmanship” at its pinnacle, based on “fair play, honesty and respect for your opponents,” while placing “a premium on personal responsibility.” It is a “foundation of the game” and without which “we are just another sport.” Spirit represents “something to strive for on the field and in life” and is “a very unique part of the game.” “It is essentially the Golden Rule.” At the lower levels of Ultimate, there is definitely less emphasis on competition and more focus on having fun. At

11 See Appendix, p. 128, 132, 125, 123, 124.
12 See Appendix, p. 127, 125, 128.
13 See Appendix, p. 126.
14 See Appendix, p. 127.
party tournaments many teams will conjure up cheers and sing for the other team after a
game as a sign of respect for playing and as social interaction. A player that played at a
competitive level, but not the highest argues that “spirit does not mean singing a song to
the other team after a game,” it is “playing the game with integrity instead of the less
competitive (sic) spirit level of Cumbaya.”

Jim Davis’s (an elder statesman in the Dallas Ultimate community, who was on the
first-ever College Champion Stanford squad and has competed all over the world) take on
spirit is:

For me, plain and simple, it is integrity in making honest calls in a self-officiated
game, as well as how you handle questionable calls by the other team. All the other
stuff people mention is fine and dandy, but nothing is on the line when you are doing
does and handing out party gifts. When two teams have worked and trained all
year to play in a competitive tournament and a game comes down to a single call,
that’s when integrity gets tested.

Integrity, respect, and fair play are all great concepts for a self-officiated game “but [playing
with spirit] takes active engagement” and that is not always the case, especially as the
stakes are raised and competition becomes fierce, because it is “inherently personal and
therefore subjective...no two spirits are alike.” Some believe that “it should be what
makes this game great, but we the players let it down all the time.” John Borgmeyer, a
mid-level competitive club Mixed player since the early-Nineties stated that “good spirit in
a summer league game is different than good spirit in high competition.” David Nernberg
agrees, he equated spirit with “sportsmanship” and explained “different levels of play and

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15 See Appendix, p. 142.
17 Kenny Dobyns response to “Ultimate Thesis Survey,” also see Appendix, p. 127.
18 See Appendix, p. 129.
19 See Appendix, p. 126.
styles of tournament require one to act accordingly. There will be a much different vibe in league play, versus warm up tourney play, versus regions or nationals with observers and something on the line.”

Some see that the concept can be “over-hyped” and the community “sometimes make[s] more of [spirit] than is necessary and makes us [the community] feel self-righteous.” This responder prefers to use spirit as a “proxy for good sportsmanship” choosing rather to teach to younger players the virtues of playing sportsmanship based on morality. Another responder “rank[s] skills, strategy, [and] teamwork, meeting new friends and competing to improve myself above” spirit and many would agree that those elements foster and represent spirit. The sentiment is repeated in another response as one being sure to “play fair, don’t be a dick, but try and beat your opponent down.” Some in the community would frown upon that statement and claim that person as unspirited; however, one can empathize that respect is built into that mindset on the sport and is the most important aspect of the Spirit of the Game. Respect fuels spirit and many teams or players that do not show any form of respect to their opponents are reviled in the Ultimate communal discussion. Of course, there are exceptions and objections to this. Some even claim to not be “a big believer in the spirit of the game,” especially if they compete nearly exclusively at the most competitive levels, “it does exist at the lower levels even among a few players at the highest level, but the higher the stakes the lower the spirit.”

Many see spirit “at risk of disappearing as the sport becomes commodified,” professionalized and geared toward the mainstream – a notion that is aligned with the

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20 See Appendix, p. 124.
21 See Appendix, p. 126.
goals of showcasing the highest levels of competition. For example, many responses correlated that already at the more competitive levels, spirit is “lacking” because it is “too easy to abuse” and for a player competing for something like a title it is “tough to be consistent in heat of battle.” There is a correlation in the abuse of spirit (i.e. making calls to improve chances of winning, lying about calls or just being belligerent and/or dishonest in a self-regulated game) at the higher levels where the prize for winning is greater; whereas in an informal game, where score is not the concern of the majority, cooler heads mostly prevail. There is an inverse relationship between the levels of play and the levels of spirit. Many play with deference to how the competitive environment feels more-or-less. In playing pick-up, one may try to discourage travel and foul calls (unless the foul was very egregious and prevented a play from occurring) because it takes away from the informal atmosphere of just playing to play. Even at the competitive level if a team was at a tournament where they were expected to contend for the title and were playing a lesser team, more times than not they would usually refrain from making calls, because it could be disrespectful to make calls if you were up by 10 in a game to 15. Some in the community would argue, semantically, that spirit is based on respecting opponents and not making calls because the team you are playing is “unworthy” of the same play a better team would get is unspirited.

Spirit’s Value in the Community

The Ultimate community is so diverse that the definition of spirit in Texas could be almost opposite in relation to that in Seattle. Different communities within the whole have

22 See Appendix, p. 124.
unique characteristics of their own. For example, North Carolina players are known to be much more aggressive, physically during play and verbally all the time. The northwest boasts a tradition of very communal-based Ultimate. One of the biggest and furthest-reaching Ultimate organizations, DiscNW, runs girls, boys, and mixed youth leagues for high school and middle school; corporate mixed leagues; competitive leagues for men, women, and mixed; and recreational leagues for men, women, and mixed. There is much emphasis placed on the Spirit of the Game in playing Ultimate there and this has translated to the elite levels as the club teams there are reputed to be “spirited” teams. Sockeye, one of the best teams of the 2000s (winning three titles in that time) have fun on the sidelines in order to never lose their positive energy mojo no matter the score or circumstances and mostly adhere to honest game play. Throughout the paper I focus on grassroots efforts that stemmed from some of these regions, mostly North Carolina. The stigma these communities hold have formed the reputations of its players and determined the success of their ventures.

Self-Officiation

Glenn Burr, a recreational player in the Dallas Ultimate community, who primarily competes on “fun” teams at tournaments sees that self-officiation “asks people to compete at the highest levels and integrity without regard of victory or loss,” but “for the most part, man[kind] can’t adhere” to these ideals.23 Similar to Burr, another responder suggested that Ultimate players “are not worthy of the responsibility.” Daniel Kehler, as if prompted by that statement, places self-officiation at “the core of ultimate” and applauds “the notion

that we [the Ultimate players] were mature enough to sort out what was right on our own, that people did not have to cheat to win, unlike other sports.” 24 David Nernberger, who began playing in high school 20 years ago, explains:

The main issue with self officiating in high level events is how different people view the game, contact, infractions, and the rule book. Do we utilize technicalities to our advantage or let them slide to facilitate game play? Do we call every little touch, or let it go until it actually affects play? An official usually has one way of calling things so you begin to understand. Players are all over the place. 25

This view correlates with the notion of “it’s like having 14 officials on the field” that many self-officiation detractors and supporters mention. Some will pose that regardless of self-officiation being “imperfect (like any other system)” it is still “an inextricable part of Spirit” and the game “which [we] value greatly.” 26

The nuances of the Ultimate community allow for self-officiation to be somewhat enforced socially, but it is not always the case as there are more and more players that would rather win and be excommunicated socially than be a loser that knows everybody. Doyle’s application of reciprocity explores the differences in self-officiating standards at the various competition levels in Ultimate. He argues that “moral reasoning is requisite to the efficiency and reciprocity of interaction” in a self-officiated game. He also draws the comparisons of conflict apparent in sports to those in life. Unique to Ultimate are the similarities in “conflict...in every facet of human life, most instances of which we are the arbiters of the conflicts we create.” 27 One of the subjects in his study, Jack (pseudonyms used), speaks of playing against a team that is playing the game physically and Jack

27 Doyle, 27
responds by giving them “the same recipe.” This example of reciprocity notes that if a team is playing physical and not calling fouls on certain plays, the other team recognizes that and plays to that level. But not everyone adheres to reciprocity and many only respond negatively. Roger, another subject wants to ensure “reciprocity of the players’ competitive ethic” as “necessary...to perceive his give opponent is playing fair.”28 But the different interpretations of the rules and the fact that under self-officiation the 14 players on the field are also the 14 officials leads to diminishing the rapport between teams. “Therein lies the problem—each athlete is competing under the assumption that his or her opponent interprets the rules as (s)he does and intends to compete under the same moral and behavioral standard.”29

Observers – Ultimate’s Third Party Officials

Observers are passive third party officials unique to Ultimate. They are employed only as arbitrators on the field. Experiments with passive third party-officiation were undertaken throughout the Eighties and there were even tournaments that tried full-on referees. An Observer is like a passive-referee who represents “an intermediary between the rules of the sport and the action of [the] sport.”30 Today, USAU observers operate under a formalized system that allows them only to make active calls on whether the disc was up or down, the catch was in-bounds or out-of-bounds and if the teams are not on the goal line

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28 Ibid, 71.
29 Ibid, 71.
30 Doyle, 25.
when receiving the disc or pulling it. Aside from game play, they are mostly utilized to keep the game moving and to limit downtime – keeping time between points, timeouts and half time.

Doyle explores the effect of third party officiation on the moral reasoning of players in his study. He attaches importance to reciprocity in play under self-officiation; however, he also contends “third party officiating allows for moral deficit and instrumental reason to seep into the performative attitudes and actions of the participants.” Performative attitude is when someone adheres to participating in the communicative practice for the proper management in a self-regulated sport. The counterpart, represented by third party officiation, is the objectivating attitude, which “is adopted by the nonparticipant observer who is external from the action of the sport.” From this, one may argue that introducing more power to observers challenges the ethos of self-officiation. Observers, though, are a special breed of third party officiation. They still allow for players to use communicative action in the resolution of calls because they only rule on an infraction once the players defer to them. Contrarily, the role of referees “suspends communicative action and promotes instrumental reason” or denies the ability of players to talk about a call and reinforces the tactics a player may take to win regardless of the morality of his actions or the perception of his/her opponents.

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31 Observers are still a hot topic in the community today. As a participant-observer, I have played, coached and captained in observed games. I advise players not to go to observers on anything but travels. The natural course of self-officiation should take precedent before inviting a third party official to the discussion. As players, we should focus on the game we are playing, that is Ultimate, and self-officiation is a tenet of this sport. Once we begin to place more energy into the goings-on with a third party individual we lose focus on what is integral to the game – competition through cooperation with the opposing team.

32 Doyle, 25.
Doyle contends that athletes from mainstream sports that first played under "the bureaucratically founded external officiating system...do not have the existing need to treat others affably or even respectfully" because the "framework...distances the actors in the game from the ownership of the game." Which translates to a permeation of “rational morality and sustains the win-at-all-costs culture of [mainstream] sports.”

Observers serve to uphold the ethos of Ultimate through arbitration. They are the balance between self and third party officiation. In the UPA's system they are passive, still allowing for communicative action between players. Not to say that instrumental reason is not still present in self-regulated games though, such as players that abuse the rules or the nuances of the contest/no-contest and do-over rules in their favor. For the most part, the more objective calls (in/out, up/down, offside on pulls) are taken care of by observers today. Though Observers are employed at times at the top levels, self-officiation and the Spirit of the Game are still present in Ultimate at all levels. Until complete autonomy on making calls is relinquished from the players, Ultimate at the highest levels will continue to retain its countercultural characteristics. The attempts to challenge the sports ethos are covered throughout this paper.

The Cultural Ethos of Ultimate

Ultimate’s most unique aspects – self-officiation and the Spirit of the Game – form the countercultural ethos of the sport while the creation and spread of the sport’s most competitive outlets both extended and challenged countercultural aspects that make Ultimate distinctive and hard to integrate with mainstream sports culture. There has been

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33 Doyle, 26.
a tension present in the Ultimate community’s multi-faceted support of the promotion of Ultimate since its inception. To understand the tension, I provide a sports history intervention into how Ultimate countered mainstream sports culture trends throughout its infant stage (1968-1987) to establish the countercultural aspects of the ethos of Ultimate I follow with an analysis of how Ultimate players have marshaled the countercultural identity in the community. Then, I address the first seven years of the Ultimate Player’s Association (UPA)’s governing of the competitive levels of Ultimate as a time when the game was slowly coming out of its infancy to assert that the UPA provided an organized extension of the grassroots beginnings of Ultimate by upholding the application of Spirit of the Game and self-officiation while the UPA’s promotion of the most competitive level simultaneously constituted one of the original, and the largest, institutional challenges to Ultimate’s countercultural ethos. The self-admitted non-jocks who invented the game in 1968 at Columbia High School challenged the physical contest offerings PE teachers controlled and/or interscholastic leagues governed. They creatively invented an alternative sport that took game play elements of some of those mainstream sports, subtracted a ball and added the Frisbee. The choice of a Frisbee was loaded with countercultural associations. This toy was an object of “abandon and spontaneity” that was “as appropriate to [the] Age of Aquarius [as] the yo-yo was to the 1930s.”


The Sixties were very, very good to the Frisbee. It became the unofficial flying object of the revolution, a toy bursting with Zen. What gathering of hippies would have been complete without one? What self-respecting counterculture male, publicly
disdainful of establishment sports, wouldn’t try to impress girls with the power of his Frisbee flip, the sureness of his catching hand?35

This addition of the countercultural beacon represented a fulfillment of the phrase inscribed on the Pluto Platter (one of the earliest known flying disc toys), “Play Catch, Invent Games.” Had it not been for the efforts of people like the kids at Columbia High School the Frisbee may have gone the way of the hula-hoop, as just another novelty from the Fifties and Sixties. The “joy of tossing it in the air...just for the heck of it” may have lost its zeal, just as spinning a large hoop around your waist did, without the stipulations of games attached.36

The Ethos of Ultimate

David Zang, author of Sports Wars: Athletes in the Age of Aquarius, explains that in the late sixties and early seventies “some youth voluntarily stepped off the competitive treadmill, opting instead for the more esoteric satisfactions of hiking, climbing or tossing a Frisbee.”37 One of the founders of the “Ultimate” game that involved Frisbees, Silver, who is now a Hollywood producer who is credited for such films as the Lethal Weapon series, The Matrix series and Die Hard, described their newly created Frisbee pastime as “a kind of anti-establishment game and sport” and that their diligence in the organization of the sport was sort of a “gag.”38 They had the school custodian pictured as the “Commissioner of

37 Zang, p. 24
Frisbee.” They created monikers and storylines that played out, just like any other creative young minds would with a game. Silver likened it to a “Naked Gun movie” and that “it seemed funny to us...to take this game so seriously.” 39

Ultimate is a profound name, though no one individual is fully credited for the nomination. Silver’s recognizable name and celebrity status gives him a lot of assumed credit in directing the early years of Ultimate, but it was uncovered through a rather flippant mention by Silver in an interview by Willie Herndon that Jared Kass, a college-aged camp counselor who taught Silver a type of Frisbee Football game in the summer of 1968, planted the concept of Ultimate in Silver’s mind. Kass recalled:

I just remember one time running for a pass and leaping up in the air...and just feeling the Frisbee making it into my hand...and feeling the perfect synchrony and the joy of the moment...and as I landed, said to myself, ‘This is the ultimate game. This is the ultimate game.’ ...it’s not that the game came from me; it’s that the game came from the joy of life, and that was a moment when I was lucky enough to discover it. 40

Eventually the “anti-sport” became an obsession for the students and they began to promote it both locally and regionally. Silver and Buzzy Hellring, another student at CHS, typed up the first edition of the rules (currently in the 11th edition) in 1970. They asked for and received the first form of sponsorship for Ultimate – a box of Frisbees from the Wham-O distributor in New York, who was keen on what was going down in Columbia. And what is a sports team without jerseys? They made shirts and sweatshirts with the team name and emblem for the Columbia High School Varsity Frisbee Squad (CHSVFS). These were the first steps in the direction to conforming to the sports mainstream. Irv Kalb, one of the

39 Leonardo and Zagoria, p.7
“second-generation” of players at CHS, recalls in an article in one of the first UPA Newsletters that “the team set two distinct goals: first, to spread the sport by organizing teams in other parts of the country, and second to convince the “Frisbee community” that Ultimate should be ‘the’ Frisbee field sport.”41

Ultimate was certainly not the first Frisbee field sport ever played. Soccer and touch football were popular among kids and as already mentioned the Frisbee was one of the toys of the time. Naturally Frisbee Football, Frisbee Soccer and other forms of running and throwing with a Frisbee were conjured up by kids everywhere. Walters explains in “Ultimate Spin” that the Midwest Disc Sports Collection holds more than sixty letters addressed to Wham-O and the International Frisbee Association (IFA) from various students and physical educators “testifying to the increasing prominence of Frisbee sports in schools across America in the late Sixties.”42 It was not that Ultimate was an absolutely unique game in the matter of game play, but the rules and manner in which it was played were codified, and CHS students spread Ultimate up and down the East coast and, in a short time, across the United States.

As new players were introduced to the game, some began to realize the remarkable potential for a sport that was fun, exciting and rewarding. A younger crew of CHS students started a game on a street corner in Columbia because, typical of high school social dynamics, the younger underclassmen were intimidated by the older Frisbee team. Outstanding in this group, was a tall, athletic kid with the best disc skills in town, Irv Kalb.

42 Walters, “Ultimate Spin,” 83
At the time, he had felt some disdain towards the vision for the game the older players played in the high school parking lot, where the Varsity squad practiced. Kalb saw that this game could be more than the “counterculture sport…the anti-jock sport. That didn’t fit with me at all. My view was this was a real sport that can be played real competitively.” He knew that it could be very stimulating athletically, and it contained all the necessary elements that constitute a competitive sport.43 The “Richmond Avenue Gang” challenged the Varsity squad to a scrimmage. RAG lost the match but not without earning some respect from CHSVS for their Frisbee-ing skills. In one of the earliest indications of the spirit in the game of Ultimate, Varsity invited the gang along for practices and as the new additions were integrated, the Columbia High School “squad” officially became a “team.” In less than a year, the first interscholastic game was played with CHSFT beating Millburn, a high school down the road, very handily. The dualistic nature of the participants who competed in the game was apparent in the very first year of Ultimate’s spread. The show of spirit by the Varsity squad illustrated Ultimate’s nature of inclusion while Kalb introduced the tension of Ultimate’s competitive potential sought by players from mainstream sports backgrounds.

As the students graduated, they took the game with them, spurring development of a dozen college teams by 1972. Princeton and Rutgers played the first collegiate Ultimate game on November 6, 1972, on the same geographic spot (a parking lot in 1972) as their predecessors had played the first collegiate football game in history 103 years earlier. Over 1,000 fans and a television crew came to witness the historic event. “Official referees were used” perhaps “in an effort to add an aura of authority for the television cameras.”44 The

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43 Leonardo and Zagoria, p. 10
44 Leonardo and Zagoria, 12
coverage and spectators were the first taste of the mainstream for the game, foreshadowing the intense debate on the desired direction of Ultimate in the community for years. The use of referees was allowed in the first three editions of the rules. If there was not a referee present, the honor system was to be relied upon in the case of fouls or other infractions. However, there were hardly any instances where referees were used, as it was difficult enough to field two teams of players at the time. Consequently, Silver said that “we had to play a game that was on an honor system and we had to play a game that was gentlemanly.” Thus the roots of the Spirit of the Game sprouted from the mostly call-your-own-fouls matches.

Since its inception, Ultimate has countered the familiar order of mainstream sports. In the foreword to *Ultimate: First Four Decades*, a couple of the original propagators for Ultimate and other flying disc sports Dan “The Stork” Roddick and Eric “Sholom” Simon wax eloquently on what brought about this “maverick of a sport?” They cite the rebellious attitude of the “Ultimate pioneers who guided the game into a particular direction, although guidance surely isn’t the word. Ultimate evolved in a crucible of democratic, and sometimes anarchistic, collaboration.” Goffman explains that for a concept to be countercultural, “it must leave the realm of the familiar.” Self-officiation and relying on a collective spirit to ensure that a game is played fair is a great separation from what was (and still is) familiar in sports. These attributes constitute the countercultural ethos from which Ultimate came and upon which Ultimate is still based. The way the Varsity showed respect for their seemingly RAG-tag opponent and how they relied upon the honor system

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45 Ibid. 8
46 Ibid. i
for non-refereed (a large majority) games were early exhibitions of the Spirit of the Game. Though self-officiation and the Spirit of the Game were not explicitly stated in the first editions of the rules, the acts of the players established the ethos of the sport that was countercultural to American mainstream sports culture.

A Counter Culture Realized

In order to further tie-in Ultimate’s ethos with what it means to be countercultural, I juxtapose scholarship on the counterculture with the continuing historical narrative. Peter Doyle’s work on assessing communicative action, a conducive manner in resolving conflict in social situations, in Ultimate provides a look into how Ultimate’s culture is counter to that of mainstream sport and that the communicative action required in playing Ultimate is rare in today’s sports and society. I also address some of Kirsten Walters’s contentions that Ultimate is too often and too simplistically described as a countercultural sport. The thesis of her dissertation, “Ultimate Spin,” states that the Ultimate community’s identity as a counterculture is more perception than reality and a mythical association that is assumed and passed on by players. She discounts the presence and power of the Spirit of the Game in Ultimate and its culture of sport that is counter that of mainstream sports remaining in a majority of the players to this day. I address her qualms by showing how the UPA upheld the countercultural ethos with its tradition of self-officiation while promoting the uniqueness of the Spirit of the Game and its ubiquity in all levels of Ultimate.

48 Kristen Walters, "Ultimate spin: Contesting the rhetoric, countercultural ethos and commodification of the Ultimate "frisbee" sport, 1968—2008" (PhD dissertation, University of Iowa, 2008)
In *Counterculture through the Ages: From Abraham to Acid House*, author Ken Goffman, a.k.a. R.U. Sirius, explains “the essential countercultural spirit perpetually reinvents itself in unpredictable ways, outrageous styles and novel forms.”\(^49\) It is not that the people who joined Ultimate were and are counterculturalists or hippies reliving the sixties through spirited self-officiation on the playing field (though there is a large contingent who revel in that resemblance). The essences of the game – the Spirit of the Game and self-officiation – were the two most important “novel forms” Ultimate players invented that countered competitive athleticism of the late 1960s and early 1970s and that solved a practical problem of not having enough people to serve as referees. Addressing the debate on self-officiation player Bill Nye (yes, Bill Nye the Science Guy) exclaimed “nor am I asserting that Ultimate players are different from everyone else! It’s the game that’s different!”\(^50\)

The rejection of the traditional role of officials and the allocation for the players to control the game by means of an enlightened version of sportspersonship resonated with the views of the man who coined the term “counterculture.” In *The Making of a Counter Culture* Theodore Roszak wrote that in the counterculture, resistance to the technocracy, the state of rule by corporate and bureaucratic controllers of technological expertise that dominates industrial society, “assumes a position similar to that of the purely neutral umpire in an athletic contest.” The “umpire is the most significant player in the game. He

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\(^49\) Goffman, p.26

alone sets the limits and goals of the competition and judges the contenders.” In most levels of Ultimate, the players are the judges, and in the rulebook the limits and goals apply equitably. Roszak gives cultural meaning to the technocracy that relates to Ultimate’s place on the fringes of mainstream sports culture. He defines the counter culture further than its capitalist sense as:

It is the expression of a grand cultural imperative, a veritable mystique that is deeply endorsed by the populace. It is therefore a capacious sponge able to soak up prodigious quantities of discontent and agitation, often well before they look like anything but amusing eccentricities or uncalled-for aberrations.

As the counterculture struggled against the corporate, bureaucratic authority, so the Ultimate community has struggled with standing out from the mainstream sports culture. Another parallel is that just as the technocracy’s advocates also sought to neutralize or incorporate the counterculture by repackaging countercultural aspects as things to market and profit from, there have been and continue to be people within and outside the Ultimate community who hope and at times organize the tweaking of Ultimate to become a profitable competitive sport, which I cover more later in the paper.

The capitalist aspect of marketing sports nationally relates directly to debates in Ultimate and its purposes and scope. The industrial revolution promoted passive acceptance of a capitalist systemized “process of bureaucratization and commodification”

52 Ibid. xiv
53 Today, as then, many teams, tournaments and leagues are totally separate from the UPA. The UPA is the governing body but there is a majority of Ultimate played that is not affiliated with the UPA. It is only required to be a member of the UPA if one wants to compete in either UPA-sanctioned events or the Championship Series for College and Club. As a participant-observer I have known many players that have not been paying members for years. This does not understate the role of the UPA in the growth and development of the game. In regards to my thesis for this paper, the fact that play outside of the UPA’s influence is most-assuredly more dedicated to the spirit in the community and traditions of placing more emphasis in fun and fellowship than competition. In later sections, I explore this in much greater detail.
in society. It substituted “institutional engineering of producer-consumer marketing” for previously community-level decision making that bettered the community. As Zang pointed out “sport presented a visible battleground for most of the issues confronting broader culture.” By absorbing the culture of a capitalist society, American mainstream sports “have become contests of self-interest” where training for competitions is driven by a monetary value, competitions have become more about marketing, and business-end judgments of winning and losing are valued often-times more than winning itself. Therefore, maximizing self-interests has largely replaced the more communally focused decision making in sports and broader society. For example, America’s Cold War-era co-opted sports to develop a competitive drive in society. As a result, sports as big-business has become the norm in mainstream sports; players understand that in their sport’s management the business-end of transactions outweigh their overall talent or their contributions to winning. The Ultimate community’s retention of self-officiating in particular and Spirit of the Game in general creates a sense of community that does not prioritize winning at all costs, does maintain respect for opponent players, and so undercuts the cultural imperatives to demonize and dehumanize the enemy. While players compete on opposing teams, Spirit of the Game does not allow for the level of belligerent, extreme partiality toward one’s own team that includes hatred and desire for harm to the other team. There are exceptions to the rule and in I address the contingent that brought about more win at all costs attitudes.

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54 Doyle, 22.
56 Doyle, 22.
The Cultural Resonance of Ultimate

The flying disc team sport was not exclusive to the East Coast. Games that were essentially like Ultimate were being played on the beautiful beaches and grass of Southern California in Santa Barbara. In 1973, Tom Kennedy, who later founded and became the first UPA director in 1979, was in a park doing Frisbee Freestyle  with some buddies. In a 2001 interview Kennedy explained that “the climate was right” in Santa Barbara in 1974 for Ultimate. “I don’t know how else to better put it. People [at the time] were, quote, questioning authority, people were not wanting to accept blindly anything. They were doing what would shy away from traditional.” Kennedy gained acceptance to compete as an individual freestyler at the World Frisbee Championships in the Rose Bowl in Los Angeles in 1975. Ultimate’s vigorous spread on both coasts speaks to the readiness of the counterculturally influenced American youth for an alternative sport. In a countercultural context the creation of the game on two different coasts of the United States by non-interrelated groups lends to Goffman’s theory of resonance. He states that the “thread of countercultural continuity...whose source is a mystery” accounts for similar countercultural ideas coming about in different places from different situations but result in the same or similar cultural trend. It is how countercultural ideas are transposed

58 Freestyle is a flying disc sport that involves a person keeping the spin of the disc alive while performing different moves. It is most likely what people related Ultimate to when they do not know what it exactly is. Freestyle has been around since the Pluto Platter was introduced. They took them to the beach and the prevailing winds coming off the ocean were great for trick shots with the disc. There they realized that by throwing into the wind they could create more snap, thusly keeping the spin of the disc alive making for more opportunities for tricks.

without interaction between the parties. As Ultimate’s nature of inclusion and the community’s aversion to type-casting players like mainstream sports echo Goffman’s statements on what it means to be counterculture explain that “countercultures seek primarily to live with as much freedom from constraints on individual creative will as possible.” As is examined in the next section Ultimate players are able to exercise individual responsibility and freedom “wherever and however it is possible to do so,” such as in arenas apart from the game. “When people exercise this kind of freedom with commitment and vigor, they unblock the light so that subsequent generations may bask in its glow.” Therefore, the originators of Ultimate threw aside the curtain of mainstream sports culture and let in the light of individuality on the field so that the later generations of Ultimate players may celebrate their sport’s counterculture.

Organizational Extension of the Grassroots and the Challenges to the Game in the 1970s

Ultimate spread vigorously through the tireless promotion by the “Johnny Appleseeds” of Ultimate - high school and young college students. Throughout the 1970s, the game was organized at the grassroots level. The largest of the events was the first national championships in April of 1975, held on Yale’s campus and organized by teams on the East coast at the East Coast Captains Meeting. By that time graduates of CHS started about half of the 35 college teams on the east coast and the Midwest. Club teams mainly comprised the West coast Ultimate scene as many players who picked up the game, like

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60 Goffman, p. xix
61 Goffman, p.xvi
62 Ibid., p.xvi
63 Ibid., p.xvi
Tom Kennedy, were already through college and in their mid-20s. Frisbee sports were also growing and gaining momentum as a whole in that decade. Wham-O had a place in the Ultimate community from the beginning as it was prominent in all flying disc sports as the manufacturer of Frisbees; the Wham-O regional promoter in New York had given the Ultimate pioneers a couple boxes of discs to help spread the sport in 1969. Yet, Wham-O saw Guts and Freestyle as the more marketable and viable sports because of the ability of most to play them. Translation: one did not have to run around a lot (like in Ultimate) and for the most part (in the case of Guts) one could get as “drunk on beer” as one wanted “and stand around and throw discs as hard as you could at your opponents.”

The relationship between Ultimate players and Wham-O was tenuous at best as Ultimate grew because the company’s commercial interests precluded them from fully supporting the burgeoning sport.

Wham-O organized the World Frisbee Championships that ran from 1974-82 in the Rose Bowl, arguably the biggest events in flying disc sports history. The 1975 iteration had over 20,000 spectators (provided free admission) there to witnesses to the best Frisbee-tossers in the world. This was the big time for flying disc sports and it was Freestyle, Guts and K9 partner catch that were the center of the showcase, notably not Ultimate though.

“Wham-O’s bastardized version of Ultimate,” Netbee, was their competing way to market a field sport played with a Frisbee. In Ultimate circles, it is said that Netbee was devised by Wham-O because of the acrimonious relationship with the promoters of Ultimate – Larry

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64 Leonardo and Zagoria, 9
65 Guts was inspired by dodgeball. A specialized disc, that is smaller in diameter, weight and thickness, is used by teams of one to five members standing about 15 yards away from each other. The goal is for one team member to throw the disc so hard directly at the opposing team so they are unable to catch it. Catching the disc with one hand is said to take guts, hence the name, and points are assigned according to how the disc is caught.
Schindel and Irv Kalb, both graduates of CHS. The inventors of Ultimate had copyrighted
the game a couple years prior, but Wham-O wanted to capitalize on the growing popularity.
So they designed Netbee that had a larger lacrosse-type net added to the list of items
needed for the game as well as an assortment of other rules. Netbee was introduced to
players and fans (given free admission) at the 1974 World Frisbee Championships. It was
not well received and was seen as a “slap in the face” of Ultimate players. Schindel, who was
playing at the championships and was representing Ultimate’s interests at the WFC in
1974, was told by Wham-O “if you want Ultimate to appear on TV, you are going to have to
do it yourselves.”66 Netbee was much more gimmicky. There were nets for goals,
specialized positions for defenses and “hot-spots” that counted for more points. Wham-O
saw that Ultimate could not be successfully marketed in terms of required equipment that
could be sold and promotion of the sport for all ages. Many in the Ultimate community
were very turned off by Wham-O’s imposition on Ultimate and any endeavors involving
Wham-O or those associated with the company inside the community were tainted.

By the latter years of the 1970s, Ultimate had already crowned a few national
champions, though the first couple are considered unofficial because they only included
east coast teams. Ultimate’s team competitions, its highest level, were organized by
captains and team leaders at the East Coast Captain’s Meeting, started in 1975. They would
meet to discuss and vote on where and when to schedule tournaments and what would be
on the line. It was decided that East versus West would be the best all-inclusive nationals
format, thereby letting Santa Barbara compete. This disadvantaged Midwest teams from
Michigan and Ohio that drove full days to compete at Easterns (the nationals qualifying

66 Leonardo and Zagoria. p. 22. Taken from Schindel’s notes on the happenings of the 1974 WFC.
tournament in North Carolina) in order to try to advance to Nationals. The biggest grievance of the midwestern teams was the lack of representation and voting power on the decisions at the East Coast Captain’s Meetings. That the decision to expand the regions from two to five and give regional captains autonomy to organize events addressed regional differences and created the first calls for a national organization.67

New regions’ captains meetings floated the idea for a national player’s association that consolidated the efforts of the different regions’ meetings and respective planning of events. Captains were already feeling the squeeze of the organization of the new regions and new regulations for qualifying for Nationals. According to players at the Northeast region’s captains meeting, there was an overwhelming mind-set that the player’s association was essentially “unionizing” and much of their sentiment was best summed up as “fuck the UPA! We want to get on with scheduling tournaments.”68 Some of the captains were already weary of the recent changes, as the new captain’s meeting was enough organizing for them. Many had been attracted to the sport because of “the countercultural attitude” present in the community and at the time it was the majority in Ultimate; unionizing players under a national umbrella seemed to be a bit too much conformity for them.69

Regardless of popular sentiment, the creation went forth – but in name only. The biggest promoters of the Ultimate Players’ Association, Tom Kennedy and Dan “Stork” Roddick, had to solicit help at the regional level to gain the all-important grassroots support.

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67 College and club teams were competing for the same title until the creation of the college division in 1984.
68 Leonardo and Zagoria, p. 22
69 Ibid, p. 22
To the Eastern Ultimate captains he [Kennedy] had things working against him. He was from the West. He was still a newcomer relative the easterners, who traced their lineage to Columbia High School. Some players continued to be ambivalent about Wham-O’s role in the sport and thus had some concern about the Wham-O-Roddick-Kennedy connection. On top of that, he was essentially proposing to unionize a bunch of rebellious Frisbee players.\(^70\)

Kennedy, Roddick and their regional reps pressed on and called for community support. Kennedy was one of the best Ultimate and disc golf players in the world, but he and Roddick had obstacles in the community going against them. The UPA could be nominally founded, but without support of the community, it would be a lame duck in its efforts. Roddick’s precarious position in the Ultimate community aggravated concerns about the creation of the UPA. He was hired on as the full-time director of the IFA in 1977 and there was a split feeling in the community on his relationship with Wham-O and mostly the financial arrangement the company had with the IFA. Skeptics of commercialization questioned whether this relationship with Wham-O would filter in to the community further through the advent of the UPA. Following the example of the Guts Players Association and the Freestyle Players Association, that some of the community was at least familiar with, Kennedy and Roddick assured that political power would remain in the hands of the players – not Wham-O or any sort of conglomerated Ultimate. They presented it as more like a consortium of the regional captain’s meetings that would govern the sport on the national level.

In late 1979, a few months before the UPA gained ground in the community and became the national organizational tool for Ultimate, Roddick had rewritten and updated the rules of Ultimate. The 7\(^{th}\) edition rules were the first to include the Spirit of the Game

\(^{70}\) Leonardo and Zagoria. p. 45
clause. Before this, it was implied in the rules that players play with respect toward their opponents and the game. Irv Kalb explained in the November 1980 issue of the *UPA Newsletter* that spirit was not written into the original rules because the CHS kids were playing amongst friends, “there was no ‘enemy’ to be beaten.” It was not until the game spread across the country by teams “spring[ing] up from just reading the rules or hearing about the sport by word of mouth” that a “loss of understanding of its basic philosophy” occurred. Thus, the clause was written in so that new teams would understand the ethos this sport was built upon and that Ultimate was not like others sports in which a ‘win at all costs’ mentality was encouraged under third-party officiation and that Spirit of the Game was the underlying force in maintaining the ethos. This was the first time Spirit of the Game was enforced as a firm rule. As it still appears (with minor changes) in the 11th edition rules today, the clause reads:

> Ultimate has traditionally been considered an alternative athletic activity. Highly competitive play is encouraged but never at the expense of the bond of mutual respect between players or the basic joy of play. Protection of these vital elements eliminates some behavior from the ultimate field. Such actions as taunting of opposition players, dangerous aggression, intentional fouling or other ‘win at all costs’ behavior are fouls against the Spirit of the Game and should be discouraged by all players.\(^{71}\)

Therefore, the creation of the UPA coincided with the articulation and implementation of one of the two most important countercultural elements in Ultimate. Touting the virtues of the Spirit of the Game and self-officiation, the UPA took Ultimate into its next stage-- the adolescent. It took a good 7-8 years to organize extensions of playing opportunities for the diversely growing community and in the next section I examine how the UPA planned to do so through placing the power for change in the hands of the playing constituency,

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\(^{71}\) Leonardo and Zagoria. p. 40
establishing a newsletter that was as much as forum for opinions on the state of the game as it was news and introducing equal opportunities for playing by making exclusive divisions for college students and women.

UPA Guides Ultimate from Infancy to Adolescence

Leonardo and Zagoria state that the modern era of Ultimate began with the creation of the UPA in 1979. Their argument is that Ultimate finally had a national body to organize its play for the community; however I do not consider the beginning of Ultimate’s adolescence to coincide with the start of the modern era. By 1980, Ultimate was still in need of structure and a judicious “organization to raise [it] out of its infantile stages”72 as there was still only one division in which club and college teams battled each other for the national championship, putting the younger players at a disadvantage in size, strength, speed and experience. There was no tried and true method of confirming that players on a college roster were enrolled in that college rather than being opportunistic club players. A larger problem was there was no women’s division; they had to play on the “open” men’s teams. I cannot think that the sport could be in its “modern” era if women were relegated to limited participation in games and college and club players were competing on level terms. Ultimate stepped into adolescence in 1987 when the UPA finally addressed these three issues, so this section examines the UPA’s role in the development of the women’s division, the college division and the national-level structure.

The UPA published the *UPA Newsletter* as a call for community support and a space for discussion. During the first few years of the publication, many articles were focused at calls-for-action from the community to support the UPA by enlisting other players to become members so that the UPA could have the financial means to implement new policies and the players could take advantage of the structure of the association that put powers of change in their hands. In the August 1980 issue of the *Newsletter* Kennedy stated in his editorial that the “method [for changing the rules of Ultimate] was set up so that the membership was in control of initiating and controlling the rules of the sport.”

Even players understood the mountain the UPA had to climb as Dave Claycomb wrote in “it will take time to convince people we’re not just another organization out to promote the views of a few egotistical leaders...Let’s work together towards a truly representative players association.”

Through most of the 1980s, Ultimate was still in flux, caught between the older crowd that was content with the recreational pastime of Ultimate, free of competition over fun and other mainstream sports influence, and the newer structure that had visions aimed at taking Ultimate into further and further towards the mainstream (throughout this paper this is a common theme in the community, though with different contest points). The UPA pushed forward to provide the Ultimate-playing masses a competitive platform to

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showcase the sport while not leaving the ethos of Ultimate behind. As player Tom Livernois explains in a 1981 *UPA Newsletter*:

Disc sports are at a point in their evolution where they can either conform to the traditional course or attempt to forge their own distinct identity in the midst of an already defined sporting world. . . . Disc sports are the sports of the future.

While structuring the sport to appear more legitimate, the UPA was “dedicated to the spirit of the game and its membership.” It also supported the values of the ethos of the sport by putting power in the hands of the players and relying on grassroots support and promotion to propel the sport.

Equal Opportunity

Ultimate was growing, even though there were only 350 members of the UPA by mid-1980 out of the several thousand that played Ultimate around the country, interest in the organization was growing. The next year that individual membership number doubled.

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75 Spirit of the Game and self-officiation were the beacons of the counterculture ethos, but there were other allocations made by the UPA to keep the sport fluid. The by-laws, printed in the same issue of the *Newsletter*, state “the captains of the teams may agree on any additional ground rules necessary” on a game-by-game basis – known largely as the “captains’ clause” (still in the 11th edition rules used today). The players were (and are still) allowed to agree before a game that certain rules (outside of what a game is played to or that it can extend past the limit of the established round time) can be mutually agreed upon by the captains. This rarely happens and as a participant-observer I have never personally been in a situation where it was employed, nevertheless, it is an allowance to players that represents the UPA’s dedication to their power and is an example of the UPA not playing dictatorship but rather leaving democracy prominent in the governing of the sport. Counter to the position mainstream sports governing have over the rules and regulations that place uniformity at the forefront of their sports.


and registered teams were at 500.\textsuperscript{79} The questions of whether games should be timed or not, whether Ultimate should have referees, and what roles women should play in Ultimate were the most-covered topics in the articles and remain relevant to the direction of the sport today. The newsletters’ second issue contained many editorials on whether games should be timed or not. The majority opinion was for converting to point-capped games, as it seemed to make more sense for the flow of the game. One writer argued that fewer restrictions on the flow maintained attractive elements of respect for competition by circumventing the temptation for teams to run out the clock in blowout games and not play hard to the end of a game. A proponent for timed games argued that it was more professional and provided more familiarity for spectators. In the 8th edition of the official rules (published in 1982) an option for playing games to time or points was included, that was also the first edition printed by the UPA and included numerous rule changes.

\textit{Women}

The roots of women’s participation in Ultimate also began its story at Columbia High School. Girls at CHS in 1970 only had the opportunities to play organized varsity-like athletics four days out of the school year. This was before Title IX had been implemented in 1972. A few of the school’s women saw a chance to participate in an athletic endeavor more frequently in Ultimate. It was their “opportunity to play in a semi-organized sport” and many “enjoyed the challenge of being out there with the guys.”\textsuperscript{80} As Ultimate grew so did the participation of women, but not at the same rate men’s did. Out of the 100-plus college

\textsuperscript{79} UPA Newsletter, March 1981, Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Columbia, via Walters, 94.

\textsuperscript{80} Leonardo and Zagoria, 10.
teams, only two were recorded as being founded by women – Sara Schechner cofounded the Harvard University team and Andrea Cummis founded the team at Carnegie Mellon, who was later a part of the call for involvement from women in forming a women’s division in 1980 as she took over the Women’s Coordinator position for the UPA.81 As early as 1971, in the inaugural New Jersey Frisbee Conference (a precursor to the East Coast region) every team had women. In Ultimate’s infancy, though, it was nearly unattainable to field a women’s team, much less get seven on a line or close to that number for practice.

As the UPA came into power, the place for women in the newly nationally organized Ultimate was questionable at best. Suzanne Fields was frustrated at the position of women in Ultimate and her “resolve to do something began to build.”82 Fields was already a main benefactor for women’s Ultimate in the late seventies and early eighties. She was involved in the formation and she coordinated the Flying disc League of Women (FLOW). “The first (and only) [at the time] organization dedicated to promoting women and disc sports” and was the precursor to the UPA’s women’s division.83 When the UPA presented itself as the consortium for all things Ultimate she addressed the needs for attaining an exclusive women’s division. Collaboration with the UPA was necessary to gain more viability. The first year of the UPA Newsletter (1980), every issue had some sort of call for women (or at least someone) to join the movement to develop women’s Ultimate. Kennedy, the UPA


Director, solicited more involvement and increased recruitment of women to “be encouraged to play on all levels,” (his italics) not just on men’s teams or the sparse all-women pickup games. Kennedy knew that Ultimate could not continue its course for legitimacy without more participation from women and eventually a separate division. One of Ultimate’s most prized aspects was its accessibility and the UPA was determined to offer members of the Ultimate community, and more importantly potential dues-paying members, equal opportunities for play. Yet, grassroots promotion of women’s Ultimate was the necessary avenue in order to provoke more women’s inclusion in the sport.

Fields described women’s situation in the sport and called for women in the community to become more involved in competitive-level participation and organization. In 1981, she stated that a large majority of women were “neither active, nor vocal in letting their concerns be known about the game, nor their part in its development” lent to and compounded “the lack of support” from the UPA “for women as players [as] a very significant factor.” She questioned whether women should consider “support for an organization that does not support me as a player” as there was no women’s division. “Isn’t the UPA a ‘players organization?’ Isn’t the support of the players, individually and collectively, a primary objective of the UPA?” These questions were valid and she knew that only calls for more support from the community would change conditions. More grassroots recruiting would get the numbers of women needed to have a sustainable division, but some high-caliber female players were skeptical about a women’s league. Women who enjoyed playing with men on competitive teams recognized that many of the all-women experiments included women who lacked skills compared to the more experienced women that had been practicing and playing with men for the past few years. Fields saw at least
some of the better players were more concerned with high-level play at the moment than
growing the competition of the future through supporting women-only organization.
Fields, herself, could empathize with the more competitive women wanting the highest
athletic challenge as she was the world-distance record holder and went to Men’s Nationals
in 1980 with Boston Aerodisc, who finished second to Glassboro State.

The relentless pursuit of a women’s division by Fields, Cummis, and Louie Cohn
eventually overcame other women’s reluctance to buy in to the all-women’s field. These
three took advantage of an opportunity at a hot tub meeting with Kennedy and some
regional UPA coordinators in 1981 to discuss the formation of a women’s wing. Their
promise to do all the legwork surmounted Kennedy’s concerns on the possible low number
of participants, as well as some other paternalistic obstacles, and the UPA held the first
women’s Nationals tournament later that year. Boston Ladies Ultimate (BLU) won. Cohn, a
tenacious defender and athletic playmaker, had recruited Fields throughout that year to
play with BLU. Even with the win and Cohn’s insistence on sticking it out with women’s to
make it grow, many of the women would still practice with Aerodisc during the year
because of the overwhelmingly better numbers at practice. In Ultimate: First Four Decades
Fields recalled her frustration at “being the ‘teacher.’ [She] just wanted to play!”84 This
attitude affected the growth of the women’s division as participation did not always
increase year-to-year and in some instances decreased. In the first issue of the Newsletter
in 1985, Brian Murphy, the UPA Director at the time claims that many teams, once
“established in a given area...suddenly feel they owe nothing to the sport...it has
contributed directly in the number of decreasing women’s teams and is, I feel, the biggest

84 Leonardo and Zagoria, 52.
problem facing women’s Ultimate today.”85 Fields echoes that sentiment on the same page and calls for women to “be ever mindful of our growth and development.”86 In 1987, a time when the UPA was forming its top-down ideology to hopefully buttress the grassroots promotion of Ultimate, a women’s college division was established. Ironically, that same year, Kathy Pufahl lamented the “dismal” state of women’s Ultimate in the first half decade of existence. She cited that grassroots growth was stunted because of the “small pool of women who possess the leadership qualities and who are experienced enough to nurture growth.”87

**College**

In the seventies, college teams were the top contenders and recruiters as players graduated, moved to larger cities and spread the game further. The consolidation of talent in metropolitan areas lent to the formation of competitive teams, separate from any college affiliation. These teams began to qualify for nationals and pushed the younger, less experienced college teams, aside, as the Santa Barbara Condors did when they beat Glassboro State in the late seventies and early eighties.88 A concerted call for a separate college division came in 1983 from Andy Borinstein and Mike Farham. It began as a

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88 This is something of a rare occurrence today, in the more structured, segregated divisions of play. The college season runs the entire school year with the regular season going from January to mid-April and the semester culminating with the series. Whereas, the club season runs from June to October. Only a few tournaments a year feature cross-division matchups of college and club where usually the club teams are an informal pickup team.
proposal at the East Coast Captain’s Meeting, at the time still an assembly for scheduling non-UPA sanctioned tournaments.\textsuperscript{89} Later that year, they held the East Coast College Ultimate Tournament that featured teams from the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions (this tourney was a precursor to the still-running College Easterns in Wilmington, NC). The tourney was a success and Farham met with the UPA to propose an actual exclusive division for college in 1984. Coincidentally, this was also the first meeting of the newly formed UPA Coordinating Committee, made up of the National Director, recently appointed Brian Murphy, and the five regional directors. Farham sold the committee on the idea and he conceived the eligibility guidelines that a roster had to be signed and sealed by the school registrar. In order to grandfather in the status quo of club players playing on college teams, there was an allowance for teams to petition for two non-enrolled players called the “ringer rule.” There were ten teams at the first nationals in Somerville, MA and in the finals were pitted Stanford and Glassboro State (a long-time powerhouse reputed to have many ringers not enrolled). Stanford won with some offensive ingenuity and patience and within a year Glassboro disappeared from the Ultimate scene (presumably because of eligibility rules).

Eligibility was a hot topic in the community because teams like Glassboro largely disregarded eligibility restrictions. Ideas on age limits were proposed as well as getting rid of the ringer rule, but in 1984, it was left in the hands of the Eric “Sholom” Simon to

\textsuperscript{89} The UPA only organized the Championship Series, starting with Sectionals, Regionals and then Nationals. The Spring (college) and Fall (club) Series then, as now, are the only means of qualifying to win a National Championship. Other tournaments separate from these had been used for warm-ups for the series or just tournaments for which teams to compete. In 2010, the college regular season was established in which UPA-sanctioned tournaments (outside of the series) determined rankings and earning bids for a region to Nationals. In the 1980s and 1990s, tournaments were still free-for-all, whoever could pay the entry fee could come, events (outside of a select few that were designed for specific teams). In 2012, a regular season was established in the club division.
determine how rosters would be confirmed. He determined that a five-year period of eligibility for college would be the best due course but did not abolish the ringer rule (that loophole was closed in 1987). Much to Simon’s chagrin, the UPA relied upon the spirit of the game of captains and team organizers to turn in a registrar-verified roster, so there were still many discrepancies in the authenticity of “experienced” college players. Spirit did not always win out and in one case in 1986, the MVP of the finals match, between the University of Massachusetts and Stanford, was a former club champion in 1981. Buzz Ellsworth was a legitimate student at UMass, majoring in physical education, and there was no requirement that club players could not go back to school to play, but he was well beyond the allocated five years. These types of problems came to a head during the controversial 1987 championship. Chabot College (now called Las Positas Community College) had numerous players who signed up for very cheap community college classes to play Ultimate and in many cases did not attend class. The abolition of the ringer rule went into effect in the 1987 college Spring series along with the five-year eligibility rule that articulated any player on the roster must be enrolled at least half time in a degree-seeking program. 1990 was the last season in which any player that was grandfathered in at the advent of the five-year eligibility was allowed to play.

Conclusion

In the end of Ultimate’s infancy, from 1980 to 1987, the upstart UPA took the grassroots national as Tom Kennedy, Suzanne Fields, Mike Farham, Brian Murphy, Louie Cohn, Eric Simon and countless others volunteered their time, effort and concentration to make an “insolvent” UPA the national governing body that Ultimate needed for the sport to
be showcased to the mainstream. Much like the attempts of Wham-O to commercialize their version of Ultimate, the UPA presented the largest organizational challenge to the counter culture of the Ultimate community to that point. Yet, simultaneously, the UPA’s direction set out to include upholding the countercultural elements of the sport—self-officiation and Spirit of the Game—while organizing the highest levels of competition in order to take Ultimate into uncharted territory. Murphy, who took over for Kennedy in 1982, helped to combine the different East and West coast interpretations of the rules to provide players with national consistency game to game in the 8th edition. He also began the “process of institutionalizing the UPA” with making membership required for those that wished to compete in the UPA Championship Series, establishing tax-exempt status and to “entrench...in the minds of players” the Spirit of the Game through UPA promotion as the “guiding principle” of the sport. McGivney saw the path the highest level of the sport was taking after a Chicago Windy City player spiked the championship trophy after finals in 1986. He knew this type of degradation to the ethos could be disastrous for the game and decided to place much of the UPA’s resources to take to the fields to instate the Spirit of the Game amongst the membership; thus disrupting the path the first two had forged.

There is no doubt that without the efforts of the three UPA directors during the infancy period, the UPA and Ultimate as known today would not exist but, as is explored later, the formalization of the UPA as a corporate structure ensured that it would last through its most unsure years, the adolescent period. Without this type of leadership and organization, Ultimate could not have matured from infancy to adolescence. In the next section, I begin my analysis of the adolescent period of Ultimate (1987-2010). I feature the arguments and debates in the community from the perspective of the community as well as
from mainstream society through media coverage of the sport. I set up the environment in which the real institutional challenges to Ultimate came about to absolve some of the debates over the direction of the sport (which I cover in later).

Debates on Developments in Ultimate in the Adolescent Period

The Ultimate community entered adolescence much like any child: curious as to the shape its body was taking, how it would deal with all the new experiences to be presented and the bewilderment felt by what the future may hold. It embarked into its uncharted organized territory with the delineation of divisions for women and men, college and club players (women’s club division started in 1981, a men’s college division in 1984 and a women’s college division in 1987). The accessibility of playing Ultimate was already a hallmark of the promoters of the sport, yet as Ultimate entered its adolescence the opportunities for the drifting athlete to discover the sport increased dramatically through administrative marketing, an increasing culture of aggressive competition, and promotion through media. This ostensibly led to more and more people being turned on to the sport at younger ages and more so at the competitive level than ever before (mostly on college campuses). I present the debates and discussions at the player and team level over the direction of the sport and on the ethos of Ultimate in the early adolescent period. I chronicle the largest debates in the community over the adolescent period – the place for Spirit of the Game in Ultimate, on self-officiation versus third-party officiation, and how mainstream ideals affected the efforts in directing progress for Ultimate. I also argue that new players introduced to the sport in the competitive levels at a younger age altered the landscape of the growing Ultimate community, which was augmented by the diffusion of
more aggressive attitudes from the top teams down throughout the community. I utilize the
Google-archived Usenet group, Rec.Sport.Disc, the UPA Newsletter, personal interviews and
email correspondence, mainstream publication articles and internet blogs to present
content on those discussions.

The UPA Gears Up

The UPA made some of the largest changes at the administrative level that directed
the future growth. Membership had gone from 350 players in 1980 to 4,500 in 1987.90
During that time, the UPA National Director took it upon himself to grow the sport – from
Tom Kennedy basing UPA operations out of his apartment, to the aspiring lawyer Brian
Murphy starting the process of professionalization by writing bylaws, to Gary McGivney’s
return to the grassroots promotion of the Spirit of the Game. Consequently, when Rob
“Nob” Rauch was named National Director of the UPA on January 1, 1987, it was not
relatively far from the “grass roots organization that had been instated at its genesis.”91

From January 1988 to 1990, “Nob’s UPA,” as Leonardo and Zagoria label it, became a
“responsive corporate entity”92 by redrafting the official UPA bylaws to be more
professionalized, soliciting annual survey results from players, and re-establishing their
“corporate and not-for-profit status” with the government in his three years of tenure.93

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90 “UPA Membership and Income,” via UPA.
21, 2013).
91 Rob Rauch, “Ultimate Hall of Fame Class of 2006 Interview,”
February 28, 2013)
92 Leonardo and Zagoria, 73
93 Rauch, “Hall of Fame"
Nob\textsuperscript{94} played and won at the highest levels and reflected the sentiment of the top teams regarding the UPA’s apparent:

Lack of real professionalism ... the [way the] sport was being run was really hindering its growth and frustrating players. I felt the UPA had lost focus in the mid-1980s and was not responding to the changing requirements of the sport and players it was representing... my fear was stagnation. I believed that there was a need for a stronger central organization that could address the challenges the sport was facing, and a need to introduce basic business practices in order keep it going.\textsuperscript{95}

The UPA structure that Nob created was the base from which the association would grow from being a co-op of players facilitating play to a national governing body for the sport. The UPA insurance policy was developed in order to make legitimate the association for field rental, which compensated the UPA through tournaments being required to use its insurance policy. The UPA increased their revenue nearly threefold through his efforts from 1987 to 1990. The UPA’s campaign for legitimacy through professionalization began in earnest in 1988, again taking a big step in 1996 with the formation of the Board of Directors and finally culminating with the reconstitution of the UPA as USAUltimate in 2010.

Nob focused administrative efforts at increasing revenue so that they could put money back into the sport to help sustain “the elite, mid-level and grassroots players.”\textsuperscript{96} He also created the Certified Observers Pool (COP) and published the 9\textsuperscript{th} edition of the rules; moves that were geared towards improving the state of the game at the highest level. In its early adolescence the sport was a game divided against itself because of dualistic

\textsuperscript{94} Throughout the paper I refer to the more prominent Ultimate players by their community nicknames, by which they are most known. Rauch is “Nob” and in the next section I introduce Mike Gerics ("Mike G") and Todd Leber (“Toad”).

\textsuperscript{95} Rauch, “Hall of Fame”

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
responsibilities of the community and its governing body to maintain the ethos of Ultimate while the UPA and some grassroots players actively strove to legitimize the sport in the eyes of the mainstream sports culture. These efforts to showcase the game influenced and were influenced by the influx of more aggressive, competitive, serious and individualistic driven-for-glory attitudes that colored many players on the top teams in college and club. Those very leaders worried community members who wanted to preserve the Spirit of the Game.

Spirit of the Game's Status in the Adolescent Period

The Ultimate community grew at a rapid rate in the early adolescent years as the number of high-level players boomed, the play became more fast-paced as more athletes and diverse peoples were attracted to the athletically-stimulating sport, and teams were becoming more dedicated to being the best and placing their attention and training towards winning. Leonardo and Zagoria sum up the debates of the time as concerning whether “the sport would remain a recreational pastime, free of observers, referees, uniforms, prize money and all the things that accompanied big-time sports.”97 To many the Spirit of the Game was at stake as the game grew more aggressive and competitive at the top levels.

Some thought that the first step was for Ultimate to be recognized as a Varsity sport in college. In the UPA Newsletter’s 1990 article “UPA College Eligibility – Why?” Frank Revi, the UPA College Division Coordinator at the time, asked if the college division was headed for NCAA status, a question still asked today. He answered with a well argued “no.” He

97 Leonardo and Zagoria, 71
explained “the philosophies of the two organizations conflict” and provided a compelling argument for the differences in structure and scope of the NCAA and the UPA:

The purposes of the NCAA include ‘to uphold the principle of institutional control of and responsibility for, all intercollegiate sports in conformity with the constitution and bylaws of the NCAA.’ This is in conflict with the UPA’s goal of promoting individual responsibility for adhering with the rules and procedures of the UPA. The UPA is a players association, the NCAA has member institutions; the UPA is explicitly the players’ organization, they [NCAA] explicitly place themselves above players (and schools, too).98

Even as Ultimate hit its stride, the UPA wanted to keep to its countercultural ethos because Ultimate organizers considered individual responsibility paramount. In light of a fair competitive structure, Revi extended that individual responsibility to players to decide for their selves whether they were eligible for college. In the article “Spirit of the Eligibility Rules” he explains that the rules and guidelines are there for the “players to apply the intent of the rules to themselves.”99 Revi’s call made an impact. Three months later, UPA Newsletter reported in a letter to the editor from a Tufts University player that his teammate had called Revi to discuss whether or not being enrolled in a continuing education program made him eligible. The teammate could have easily just listed his name and university ID number on the roster. The writer praised his teammate’s show of spirit off the field and explained “Ultimate was created in reaction to the ‘win at all cost,’ ‘cheat until your caught’ attitude found in most sports. Ultimate will live or die by that same reputation.”100

New York, New York (NYNY), the six-time champion in the Open Club division from 1987-1993, was the most ultra-competitive team during their time and was one of the most notoriously aggressive teams in the history of the sport. They set the trend (training intervals, four-throw offensive sets and unprecedented defensive strategy) for years to come on how to be the best in the sport. The players were known for being incredibly intense in competition, fiery almost to a fault and many teams saw them as bending the Spirit of the Game to their will. Captain, Kenny Dobyns, one of the most well known players in the history of the sport was the embodiment of NYNY’s attitude. He was wildly fearless, ornery and very athletic, especially for his 5'6” frame. Most importantly, and at times astonishingly, he always played biggest at the biggest times, always with the biggest ego and heaviest attitude, and, on a few courageous occasions, playing very injured. One such was in 1989 playing finals on one leg, because he tore his ACL the day before in semi-finals. He boasts that he had “a massive ego, inspiring fear and dread in teammates and opponents alike” and many contend that his “unspirited” ways denied him induction to the UPA Hall of Fame for years. Only after much solicitation from the community and after four of his former teammates were inducted, he was finally voted in in 2011. Dobyns had to lose some early on in his career until he “realized that the only way to achieve greatness was to model [him]self on greatness” and impress that mentality on his team; “hence, New York, New York, the Evil Empire, the bottomless pit of darkness that swallowed all that was good about the game” came into being, and Ultimate was changed forever. Danny Weiss, a teammate of Dobyns on NYNY, remembers the internal and external “struggles” in playing Ultimate at the highest level the time as “born out of intensity, emotion, striving for
excellence and personality – all in the context of an ungoverned group of highly individualized athletes.”  

NYNY started their nearly decade-long reign competing at the highest level just as the UPA became more structured under Nob and his attempts to gain some recognition from mainstream media for Ultimate were underway. Moreover, Nob was a member of NYNY during his tenure as Executive Director and through his experience, he realized that focusing so much on the competitive level could severely disrupt the balance of the community as more and more Ultimate traditionalists came to dislike the style of the “elite” teams, what had become known as “Uglimate.” In the first UPA Newsletter of the year in 1990, the UPA posted its annual questionnaire. The first question asked, with multiple choices, was what the status of the Spirit of the Game was at the time. Only 13% of the membership answered so these results terribly underrepresent the memberships’ opinions much less the community, but there is something to take from them. Sixty-two percent of the respondents believed that the Spirit of the Game was “less strong at the most competitive levels than before” while 8% saw that it was totally “non-existent at the most competitive level of play now.” Nearly 18% voted it was “less strong at all levels of play than before” and only 9% voted that spirit was “alive and well at all levels.”  

“The game was pushing against its own boundaries, straining the tight unity of the clique of players across the country.”

101 Leonardo and Zagoria, 71
103 Leonardo and Zagoria, 71
The spirit of the community was a by-product of that on the playing field. Doyle contended that Spirit of the Game was “crucial” in the development of the Ultimate community. In the early adolescent period, the competition levels of Ultimate were officially stratified; however, a party attitude was consistent throughout the community as the social level of Ultimate was still highlighted by its “wild freedom, self-regulation and unruliness.” Players from some of the best college teams trashed the host hotel at the 1990 College Nationals in Scottsdale, AZ, causing thousands of dollars in damage. There were over 200 complaints lodged on Saturday and Sunday night about the rowdiness of the players. This was a common occurrence at Ultimate tournaments, which led an exasperated Dee Rambeau to ask, “Why does our entire sport have to have a problem with rules, leaders, and any figure of authority at all?” Later that year, at Club Nationals in West Palm Beach, Florida, some members of an esteemed team and a Regional Coordinator for the UPA tore up part of the stands at the polo club at which the fields were located. There was thousands of dollars in damage, and Nationals has not been back there since. The Nationals Tournament Director lamented the destruction as going “against everything this sport stands for, The Spirit of the Game” (his italics). Many argue that the anarchic actions off the field are part of the spirit in the community. Granted, at tournaments when a large group of rambunctious players get together (and usually imbibe alcohol excessively) there is potential for debauchery, but usually there is just mischief and nothing too

104 Ibid., 71


criminal. In 1996, in Plano, TX at Club Nationals, during half time of the finals game, a small group of players from Oregon’s Rhino Slam! streaked through the field doing cartwheels. The mayor of Plano and his family happened to be at the park and were checking out some of the action when they spotted the gymnasts in the buff. Police response almost prevented the final game from finishing. The City of Plano Parks and Recreation Department banned Ultimate from City of Plano fields.\textsuperscript{107}

The Diversified Landscape

The Ultimate community grew exponentially in the early adolescence. The UPA increased the accessibility through new divisions, promoted the sport to whomever would listen, and focused on youth participation, so that membership in the UPA more than doubled in the Nineties. Borgmeyer contends that:

\textit{The evolution in ultimate [was] a natural result of the fact that the Frisbee is objectively fun, and that all types of people will agree with that if they give it a try. The ultimate community is bigger and therefore less accurately described in terms of specific characteristics.\textsuperscript{108}}

The sport gathered participation due in part to the UPA’s introduction of high school Ultimate curriculum, the increased visibility and media coverage of the top teams. NYNY players reached out to the media to get the sport some play. Yet it was the accessibility of the game, the athletic appeal of the sport and the unique communal atmosphere that attracted most newcomers.

The emerging force in Ultimate were new, mostly younger, athletic players introduced to the sport on college campuses and most came with a mainstream

\textsuperscript{107} This still stands today. I have tried to reserve fields for a tournament and have received a very hearty “NO.”

\textsuperscript{108} Borgmeyer, email to the author, March 4, 2013.
competitive sports attitude begetting aggression. There were already disputes on where the game was headed, so this influx represented a large challenge to the traditional Ultimate that was known to the community. The older “spirit contingent” pined for a game where Spirit of the Game was paramount and offending win at all costs attitudes constituted a small minority. The competitive contingent gained momentum with the increased amount of younger aggressive players. They made the call to the UPA, to the community and, in some cases that are explored in later, took to grassroots organizing for more implementation of rules that would allow the best team to be awarded while not having to deal with calling the games themselves. Referees became a real threat to the traditional community.

In the survey I conducted, responders repeated the sentiment that in the Eighties and early Nineties the sense of community in Ultimate was more celebrated than athleticism and aggression. Some saw that top teams in the nineties were just as competitive as the teams now, but not as skilled or athletic. Some contend there has been a “huge change” in the spirit level of teams since then and many of the respondents attributed the dwindling of spirit at the college level to players with mainstream sports backgrounds being introduced to Ultimate at the most competitive level and without guidance on the ethos of the sport. Of course, these opinions are subjective and almost totally depend on what levels are being compared. In Ultimate, “The level of spirit has always had an inverse relationship to the stakes of the game being played.”

Daniel Kehler, a player from Canada who participated on “competitive” teams in the Open, Mixed and Masters (33 and older) divisions cited “the counter culture element of Ultimate [as] what drew people to the game,” yet:

saw the gradual evolution away from this as the sport became more popular, and started attracting players who had experience with other competitive sports (especially soccer). They brought with them their regular sports mindsets, as they tended to be better players, that belief system slowly became the mainstream in Ultimate.110

A great example of this young and aggressive contingent was Mike Geris. He was a NCAA Division-I Soccer player at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington in the late Eighties. Mike G, as he is called, was introduced to Ultimate while there and after his NCAA eligibility ran out, he played Ultimate at UNCW. He is one of the most decorated college players and coaches in history. He won a national championship with UNCW in 1993, and then transferred to East Carolina University only to take their regional-level team to back-to-back championships in 1994 and 1995. After his college days, he coached the UNCW women to a championship in 1996. He was an aggressively athletic defender, thrower and cutter who brought even more attention to himself with his bravado, a penchant for speaking what was on his mind and a commitment to using (or abusing, depending on one’s perspective) the rules to his team’s advantage than his outstanding play. Since 1990, he has been one of the most infamous, insular, and polarizing individuals in the game’s history because of his outspoken nature, sometimes vehement posts on RSD and his staunch opinions on Ultimate.

Since 1993, he has posted on RSD over 10,000 times, been kicked off the forum by the moderator three times, has insulted just about everyone who disagrees with his agenda

and has written some pretty inflammatory statements. His agenda has been, since day one, that self-officiation holds the game back and was why many in the community saw him as self-officiation and thusly spirit’s anti-Christ. In one of his first posts on RSD, Mike G, fresh off his first championship with ECU, aptly named the Irates, Mike comes to the defense of his team as they were being lambasted online for their “unspirited” and “aggressive” play. He was a proponent of his players to know and use the rules, therefore he urged the community to:

just accept that spirit is equal to 14 refs at a time and drop the rest of the spirit jive. Everyone learn the rules, ok. We don’t all have to get along all the time just because we play Ultimate. It takes an irrational mind to believe we can. For better or worse the world is like that.\footnote{Mike Gerics, post on Rec.Sport.Disc, October 9, 1994.}

He even stated that in North Carolina “spirit can be bigger than the Hoover dam or hide behind a grain of sand,” depending on one’s point of view.\footnote{Gerics, post on RSD, March 3, 1995. https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups=#!searchin/rec.sport.disc/mike$20g$20grain$20of$20sand/rec.sport.disc/ksxthaqn6Kg/CEEHv6Hm0m8J (accessed March 19, 2013).}

Mike G was an ardent supporter of the introduction of referees to the sport, as were others that came from the Wilmington Ultimate pipeline. Many of his “Ultimate Talks” on RSD would feature his ramblings on how the unsavory situations in Ultimate, due to the bad calls of a player, could absolutely be remedied with a referee making active calls. He believed that Ultimate was changing in the early Nineties and that:

Both ECU and UNCW, I believe, represent the new age of ultimate...I’m not trying to be all philosophical or break bad about ultimate in this area, I just firmly believe that the future of our sport will include much more intense in your face hardcore physical contact and aggressiveness. The future of our sport will include referees.\footnote{Gerics post to RSD, March 29, 1995. https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups=#!searchin/rec.sport.disc/ultimate$20talk$20with$20mike$20g$20referees/rec.sport.disc/fmtq9hU01Fl/9ZXZf6hsFak}
Tully Beatty, a player at UNCW in the early Nineties, illustrated the “new age” players of the teams in North Carolina that were winning that challenged the old guard. They were not a bunch of “alternative hippies – what ECU and UNCW had was ex-high school jocks. The only thing different was that they grew their hair long.”\textsuperscript{114} The landscape of the sport changed with players like Mike G and his aggressively athletic UNCW and ECU teams showing the rest of college Ultimate what they had to go through in order to win.

Cultural Diffusion in the Community

The advent of Ultimate video and later the internet, especially the Usenet group, Rec.Sport.Disc (RSD), helped spur the transformation of Ultimate in the early adolescent period. The earliest and best example of this diffusion was the distribution of video of NYNY’s championships that spread their win at all costs attitude. Young, impressionable players saw the best of the best conducting themselves on the field in that manner and understood that the game could be won with the type of mentality that, irrespective of the opponent, they are the best and no one can stand in the way of stopping the best. Leonardo and Zagoria give an account of the North Carolina player, coach and organizer, Todd “Toad” Leber for an example of this type of diffusion. Toad was a prominent figure in the Wilmington Ultimate community, leading UNCW to a semi-finals appearance in 1990 and later coaching of the UNCW women’s team. He played a near-constant loop of NYNY videos while his team mates and players would come over, smoke some weed and make tie-dye shirts, or “Toad-dyes” as they were called (his business at the time). With evidence from the videos, he explained to them that knowing the rules and using that knowledge to one’s advantage.

\textsuperscript{114} Leonardo and Zagoria, 98.
advantage was key to success in Ultimate. Andrew Zeldin, a player on that UNCW team, confirmed that he had “seen that tape a hundred times, it’s part of our background. New York players were our idols. They motivated us to want to play Ultimate. Dobyns was like a rock star.” Toad was quoted in *Ultimate: First Four Decades*, sounding as if he were Dobyns himself: “we practiced, we watched films, we did chalk-talks, we studied our books, [and] we trained physically. We were really strict with our practices; we were regimented. We knew we had a goal and we wanted to achieve it.” These tactics were straight from the NYNY school of Ultimate.

This diffusion continued as the teams piloted by Mike G, a Toad school of NYNY product, led the UNCW and ECU incarnations of aggression to the top of the college division. An anonymous RSD poster applauded Mike G for his “revolution” of the sport in the college division. Barckeley Toole, who is an international player and has played all over the world (Europe, Asia, Philippines) echoed the sentiment of the community that “poor spirit [was] introduced by Wilmington, NC in the mid-90’s and was absurdly accepted by many teams citing Wilmington’s competitiveness. As the college game grew, where parity is very high, poor spirit proliferated.” Most assuredly Wilmington’s Ultimate community culture was not solely responsible for the “proliferation” of poor spirit, but just as NYNY they set a bar that some teams decided they needed to attain in order to get to that level. He concluded that due to the diffusion, the United States is now regarded as the least spirited country, a very popular opinion in the international Ultimate community. His second statement on the growth and parity of the college division (the best college teams can

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115 Leonardo and Zagoria, 96.
116 Leonardo and Zagoria, 96.
fluctuate year to year and there are few dynasties because of the turnover rate of players) does lend to the notion of cultural diffusion in the Ultimate community, especially among younger players and only augmented in the Internet age of the sport. In Ultimate, there is “an expectation of the more advanced players” to help grow the sport “because there’s a culture of teaching.” As such, many players, especially the young and impressionable, learn about the game, the techniques, tactics and styles, from the older players or coaches at the youth, college and club level. They also absorb any attitudes towards spirit and how to conduct oneself in a self-officiated contest. Toole “attribute[s]” the diminished spirit in the college division to a “lack of seasoned players coaching college ultimate and pressing to make SOTG a central tenant of competition.”

The composition of mid to upper teams at the club level got younger and much more competitive than a decade before as the parity in the club scene leveled out a bit due to the diffusion of competitive attitudes to younger players. The elite teams were still older though. NYNY had held the same core of their team for seven to eight years and Boston’s Death or Glory had an average age of 32 years old when they knocked out six consecutive championships from 1994-1999. After a decade of disparity in play, the college division was garnering skills and a level of aggression comparable with club teams. The 1993 UNCW team that won college Nationals was invited to play Club Worlds in Madison, WI that summer, a couple months after winning. They placed comparatively well against the world’s best club teams, but they furthered the growing divide in attitudes toward playing the sport between the more aggressive American style and the more mellow international

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118 Conrad via Doyle, 62.
fashion. Players that responded to my survey tended to see the development of players’ skills at younger ages as a deterrent of spirit in the competitive levels. It is also worth noting that the growth of youth sports in general has supplemented the sport of Ultimate with athletes over the years. There are more opportunities in youth sports than there are for sports at the organized level (higher than city league) for college-aged players and adults; thus Ultimate’s national structure attracts those that could not play their sports past high school or college.

*RSD*

In pre-internet days it was much harder to gauge oneself against the rest of the country. RSD was started in 1991, within a couple weeks of the launch there were already posts decrying the level of spirit at the recent College Nationals, questions on strategy and whether the Discraft Ultrastar was better than the latest model of Wham-O Frisbee. RSD has filled the gap in the community that mouth-to-mouth and tournament social interaction could not. It has enhanced community information exchange. Most posts covered the announcements of events (tournaments, leagues, pickups, tryouts, etc.), discussions on rules, negotiations on ethical play and to relay tournament results. There were also plenty of posts that reported gossip on players and teams and many caveats and disclaimers on those that played without spirit or with disregard for the other teams’ safety and enjoyment.

Mike G began his posts in late 1993 and exhibited the arrogance, aggression and narcissism many older players accuse the college players of portraying today on the fields. Mike G knew how to exercise the power of the information super-highway and the
influence it had in the Ultimate community. He posted a series of "Ultimate Talk with Mike G" where he wrote about everything from how his practices went to calling out other posters for what they had said in opposition to him to commenting on situations in Ultimate games that could be improved with the installation of referees to giving his view on the state of the sport. A majority of the RSD community let Mike G know they disapproved of the changes he proposed. Players noticed the trend in the sport that Mike G recorded, and I found posts from players that thought more in line with the thinking that Ultimate was becoming a more aggressive sport which lends to this notion of diffusion. Some supported the move for referees and some adamantly did not. More diffusion of Ultimate’s mainstream trends came later when youth participation really exploded after 2000 and the advent of online video archives as well as Ultimate-specific video production companies in the mid to late 2000s.

Documentaries and Highlight Videos

There have been more than a handful of documentaries over Ultimate throughout the adolescent period. Before 1987, ABC’s Wide World of Sports and ESPN produced a couple. The early adolescence production of videos was scarce, but beginning in 1999, documentaries and videos on Ultimate started anew at the grassroots level. Above and Beyond, filmed and edited by Mike Bell and Lance Larson, was the first highly produced documentary on the sport of Ultimate in the late adolescence. It covered the happenings of the 1999 and 2000 UPA Club National Championships. It showed how tight-knit the community was, even at the highest level and showcased the game’s best. I Bleed Black was a documentary that covered the University of California-Santa Barbara Black Tide in their
quest for another college title in the 2001 spring season. It features more of a behind-the-scenes look at what a sports team goes through in an Ultimate season. These two documentaries are the most known and most popular in the community. I have talked with players that cite these videos in raising their intensity and outlook on Ultimate. They also helped spur the creation and distribution of specified highlight videos for teams.

The University of Oregon Ego was one of the first teams to create a highlight video of their season that consisted of big plays on offense and defense and lots of spiking the disc. Spiking the disc has been around for a long time as it has been in football and at the top level it was a common occurrence after scoring. Players contended that spiking was not done in disrespect to opponents but in order to release their elation upon scoring or to pump up their teammates. However, many below the top levels did not condone spiking. I argue that the pervasiveness of highlight videos, especially in the latter years of the adolescent period, has led to more players spiking the disc in innocuous situations – league games, pickup, and after routine plays. Since I started playing college Ultimate in the fall of 2005, I remember only a handful of spikes my first year of playing against mostly high level college teams. My team’s leadership had a real aversion to spiking so it was a big deal when it happened and it fired us up. The spiking trend has exploded in recent years. Highlight videos that feature spikes and players that are renowned for spiking are some of the more popular today have coincided with spiking being much more prevalent today than at any time during my eight years in the sport. The NexGen “superstar” Dylan Freechild, whose nickname is “Spikezilla” even has his own t-shirt. NexGen is a college all-star team that travels the country in the summer playing the top club teams. The popularity of NexGen has led to players imitating the playing style and attitude of the players in their own play.
The internet and access to cheap video recording and editing equipment and software has increased the amount of highlight videos out there and, for example, when a high school basketball player taunts his defender after getting to the basket on a great drive just like he saw Lebron James do, players for high school teams and low-level college and club teams are spiking the disc even after making a standard catch. The propensity of players that exude the attitude that comes with spiking lends to the notion of diffusion in the Ultimate community. Younger players are the most impressionable and today there is much more access to video of games than ever before. It is a bit disconcerting to the Ultimate traditionalists in the community when such admiration is paid to the celebrations after a score than the actual movement and flow it took to get there. More players are becoming fixated on the big play and looking good after it happens; the ethos of the sport are being left behind and forgotten about more and more.

The old adage – “sports don’t build character, they reveal it” – put forth by the legendary UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, can be reinterpreted with the stipulations of playing Ultimate fairly in mind. The main tenets of Ultimate, through which the countercultural ethos of the sport exist – Self-officiation and Spirit of the Game – can account for revealing the character of competitors in Ultimate. Gary McGivney told ABC’s Wide World of Sports in 1986 that players in Ultimate compete on two planes, the physical and the moral. Therefore, it could be argued that players in a self-officiated system could potentially build more character than those of the mainstream. In the early adolescent period there was much debate over spirit and whether it existed at the top levels; many of the respondents in my survey acknowledged that the debates concerning spirit and self-officiation today are the same they were 20 and 30 years ago. The ever-diversifying
landscape in Ultimate began to catch real steam in the Nineties, as more players from traditional sports like Mike G led the charge for more inclusion of mainstream norms, such as referees and commercialization, in Ultimate.

The Question of Self-Officiation

In the early adolescence, it was apparent to the many in the community that, at the highest competition levels in college and club Ultimate, fair self-officiation was no longer guided by the Spirit of the Game. Egregious calls, poor sportsmanship and long-winded disputes colored the games at the top level. In my survey, most respondents to my question – “What is your feeling on self-officiation?” – expressed that self-officiation could not be maintained fairly at the highest levels because the stakes were higher and there were no deterrents to keep players from doing so. Many calls were not made out of knowledge of how the game works, but spite or frustration aimed at the other team or because one team was simply losing the game. In this section I cover the arguments throughout the adolescent period on self-officiation versus third party officiation.

The influx of new players that represented the “new age” style that Mike G championed above in the early adolescent period hurt the effectiveness of self-officiation and led many to call into question how long Ultimate could maintain civility at the highest level with it. But, even the most competitive players who got “caught up in the intensity of the game” did not want the introduction of referees into Ultimate.

Winning is very important to me; I work extremely hard and sacrifice much to accomplish that goal. BUT I will not sacrifice the game I have given more than a
decade of my life to, and this is exactly what you’re doing by saying that you need an external force to control your actions.¹²⁰

The game got noticeably faster and more intense with more athletes’ participation. Andrew Worstrom, a player who started at Oberlin College in 1992 stated that the spirit level of teams then was high as well as the competition level. He posited that with “the addition of better athletes who want to beat the other guy has drastically changed the ultimate mentality…I think that now spirit has dipped (although making a resurgence on some teams) and the competitiveness has become more cutthroat.” As for self-officiation, he continued “the transition of the sport from those that love to play to those that couldn’t make their college team in the sport they played in high school has made this process [self-officiation] more dicey and contested.”¹²¹ This view is representative of what many thought has happened to the game since the early Nineties. A teammate of Worstrom’s at Oberlin also responded with a philosophical view on self-officiation. He contended that it “brings about a sense that players on both teams are working together even beyond the competition to win,” but can also bring out “the worst in people.” He admitted it is “very difficult to make a call with integrity when it might hurt one’s [own] chances of winning,” although it “often appears to run counter to human nature” which he argues “is a good thing, since human nature is so frequently base and amoral.”¹²²

The anti-referee sentiment has been the majority opinion since Ultimate’s beginnings. Many players feel that Ultimate’s ethos require one to play at the pinnacle of


competition, being honest with oneself and honest with one’s opponent. They do not want “ref sense” to become part of the game if self-officiation is removed. “Ref sense” is evident in any refereed sport: when a basketball player throws his/her arms up in attempt to draw a foul or dupe the referee into thinking a foul has occurred, soccer players hitting the ground on any contact looking for a free kick and even in baseball when the catcher prolongs their catch of the pitch over the strike zone to try to draw a strike call from the umpire. These types of minor infractions do occur in Ultimate. Robbins documented many instances of top-level players “letting it slide” when such incognito pulls of the jersey and tugs of the arms happened. Players at that level understand the physicality of the game and “flopping” or acting like more contact happened than did would just be an embarrassment in a self-officiated game.

Self-officiation is still integral to Ultimate not only in a philosophical or moral sense, but a practical sense. It would be nearly impossible for the UPA or any governing body to enforce a third party system for all levels of play. Even if the UPA enforced the use of third party officials at all sanctioned events (which in 2012 was 60-plus), it would be a logistical nightmare for organizers as well as a financial burden for the officials as there is no budget for them. Catherine Greenwald, a five time Club Women’s Champion from Boston agrees that “self-officiation is critical to preserve as a concept to enable the growth of the sport -- it’s great that you can have a legitimate, competitive game without having to round up an official, because there simply aren’t that many around. Keeps costs low and makes access easy.” Self-officiation in Ultimate “keeps barriers low,” as accessibility is a huge pro for any sport, and is probably the biggest recruiting tool for new players.

Late Adolescence Mainstream Identity

Ultimate finally began to receive mainstream media attention in the middle part of the adolescent period, partially through efforts of the UPA, but mostly through the promotion of grassroots tournaments. Ultimate was “on the fringe, but no longer outside the fringe” as the UPA Executive Director Bob Byrne put it. Around four-fifths of the articles I perused revised the outdated view of Ultimate as just some game where everyone is stoned and/or drunk and chasing a Frisbee around on a field. Headlines like “Counterculture Game Grows Up—Sort of” and “A Good Sport” fostered an outlook on Ultimate that nudged it toward the mainstream acceptance that the UPA wanted while still highlighting the “jovial anarchy” present at the less competitive levels. An article from 1996 in the Wisconsin State Journal stated that Ultimate is “not a traditional American sport, but that’s what Ultimate fans admire most about the game.” Another article from the Harrisonburg Daily News Record in 2007 highlighted what players loved most about the game was that “the sport is really more laid back than most mainstream sports. It mostly focuses on camaraderie and fun.” Many of the articles underscored the unique features of the game – Spirit of the Game and self-officiation – the ethos from which Ultimate has flourished; others mentioned the split in the opinion on self-officiation. There was an

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article that toasted Ultimate players for their “information-age cachet” because of the large amount in the growing technology careers. Written at the height of the dotcom boom the author exhibited how the Ultimate community “can be a jobs pipeline.”

However, not all the articles portrayed the unique elements of the sport and community of Ultimate so positively. The most controversial depiction of Ultimate in the mainstream media was an article in the Wall Street Journal that focused on the problems and debates in the community without making mention of the virtues of the sport. The author, Ross Kerber, stated that, in 1998, Ultimate was “having an identity crisis” and that without referees the game was spinning out of control. He painted Ultimate in a negative light throughout the piece, beginning the article with the story of the Mike Gerics spitting incident in 1996 and his suspension by the UPA. He did not mention Spirit of the Game once even though he mentioned a clause in the “rulebook that officially decries a ‘win-at-all-costs mentality.’” Rather, he reasoned that the Spirit of the Game was a “strong honor code whereby players are encouraged to rat on themselves.” He stated the case of the proponents of referees, exhibiting some of the problems with self-officiation and highlighted the alternative culture of the community. Presumably, his only physical contact with Ultimate players was at the fun, party tournament April Fools where teams are usually costumed and players go more to bask in the revelry than for the competition. Here he encountered teams like “We Smoke Weed” with which Ultimate superstar, Kenny Dobyns,

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129 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
was playing. Dobyns posted on RSD post after the article came out that he explained to Kerber that the scene at April Fools was far removed from what occurred at competitive tournaments. Dobyns contended that Kerber already knew what he was going to write before he got there. There were over 70 posts on RSD that players mentioned they had sent emails to the editor of the *WSJ* bemoaning the article with eight posting their full email complaint. Youth Ultimate organizers took to RSD to describe how they had to deal with parents, administrators, colleagues and kids that saw the article. The UPA sent a formal complaint that read more like a list of the better aspects of Ultimate. Kerber’s article was poorly researched and visibly biased, but it served a point that was a hot topic in the community for years.

The *Wall Street Journal* article reflects mis-impressions people outside the sport had about Ultimate, with which people in the community struggled as they tried to further the sport. The mainstream sports culture view has considered Ultimate as nothing more than a pastime at best, in part, due to its lack of referees. There were large concerns about this article’s implications on potential sponsorship opportunities as they were the subscribers of *The Wall Street Journal*. It was unclear whom Kerber intended as the audience of the article. Tiina Booth, the most accomplished youth Ultimate organizer in Ultimate, stated that high school Ultimate’s struggle has stemmed coaches and administrators not recognizing it as a bona fide sport at her school even though Amherst Regional High School has competed at the top of the youth game since the late Nineties and produced some of the best Ultimate players across the country.
Conclusion

The Ultimate community saw the writing on the wall, that change was coming, but from where and for what? The UPA understood this the most. Nob’s UPA cemented Ultimate as a sport that was growing and the UPA as its governing body. In the early adolescence, the old guard, those that were familiar with Ultimate, pre-UPA, was quickly becoming a rare breed. New players introduced to the sporting aspects of Ultimate at the highest levels of competition, mostly in college, were not fully taught what it meant to be a member of the community or what Spirit of the Game’s importance was. The institutional challenges lobbed by the grassroots Ultimate entrepreneurs begat from these debates and discussions covered in this section. They were directed at both the UPA and the ethos of the sport. These attempts are further elaborated on later. I chronicle the development of the UPA Observer system, as it grew into what it is today and focus on the attempts, either in collaboration or conjunction with the UPA or completely independent, to redefine Ultimate and analyze how those challenges affected the ethos of the sport. How would the UPA work to retain the ethos while appeasing the growing quotient that wanted to make the sport more palatable for elite players and prospective spectators, sponsors and fans while deflecting the institutional challenges from the grassroots Ultimate entrepreneurs?

The Institutional Challenges to the UPA and Ultimate’s Ethos

As the adolescent period progressed the Ultimate community was a mass of diversified interests, divided over where Ultimate was headed. This section features the grassroots alternatives to the UPA’s brand of Ultimate from entrepreneurs in the Ultimate community who sought to spread competitive Ultimate through other avenues during the
adolescent period. Some of these ventures were challenges to the ethos of sport by including referees while others looked to celebrate the spirit and community in Ultimate. Throughout I cover how the UPA altered their product in response to the challenges in order to promote Ultimate and how they kept to the ethos of the sport despite the drive for more commercial success. Chris Van Holmes, an older player who was well-known and respected in the community and represents the acknowledgement throughout the community that Ultimate was too diverse for the UPA easily to be the umbrella organization to all levels, stated that:

Ultimate is too large and diverse for any one group to claim ownership or to control a single direction of growth. And part of growth is to spread through society. For a sport, that means filling as many niches as possible - college, Jr & Sr High, corporate league, community league, and even professional play. Which ones should we not allow experimentation in?\textsuperscript{133}

The segment of the community that wanted changes at the highest levels of the sport in order for it to be more familiar to mainstream sports and the perks that accompany them had grown, augmented by the new, aggressive, mostly younger players who were more driven to win than the ordinary member of the community. These Ultimate entrepreneurs were concerned the UPA’s promotion of Ultimate was seemingly “acting as a standoffish teenager who expects to be taken seriously” in the eyes of the mainstream and they sought to create opportunities to remedy that.\textsuperscript{134} This combination formed the biggest challenges to the ethos of Ultimate in the adolescent period. This segment of the community focused on the push towards the “big time” – whether for players to feel

\textsuperscript{133} Chris Van Holmes, post on RSD, November 24, 1997. https://groups.google.com/group/rec.sport.disc/browse_thread/thread/cc13f7c472de75a8/32771efd46c0def9?hl=en&lnk=gst&q=end+of+nortel+series+#32771efd46c0def9 (accessed on March 14, 2013)

\textsuperscript{134} Tony Leonardo, post on RSD, April 7, 1999. https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups=#!searchin/rec.sport.disc/cuervo$20referees/rec.sport.disc/Z2Q3o3SQR00/QxrfCnxr08gl (accessed March 18, 2013).
legitimate, to be recognized for the work and skill that it took to win, to dispel the cheaters that took advantage of self-officiation, to attract attention of mainstream sports fans, or to spite the “spirit zealots” who never wanted to see their sport change. The UPA still had its limitations, even with the efforts of Nob to “professionalize” the association, as it tried to grow the sport competitively and recreationally. The UPA’s inherent tensions between wanting to spread Ultimate and insisting on preserving spirit allowed the entrepreneurial activists to “court mainstream…outlets” from the grassroots level.

In this section, I feature the propositions, experiments and exhibitions at the grassroots level that were challenges to the UPA’s institutional brand of Ultimate, which had held true to Ultimate’s ethos while still striving to promote the visibility of the highest levels of the sport. First, I show how the call for more inclusion of third party officials on the field, that I covered in earlier, led to the development of the UPA’s training and certification of observers, how the introduction of major sponsorships to the sport such as Jose Cuervo and Nortel Communications directly and indirectly influenced the increased use of observers, and how observers help to maintain the ethos of Ultimate. Then I briefly chronicle some of the grassroots ventures that wanted to rid the “elite” level of Ultimate of self-officiation by offering referees instead of observers in order to lure more sponsorship and promote Ultimate to mainstream sports success. Throughout I focus on how the UPA responded to these threats to their domain through co-optation and competition and how the community reacted to each of these new ventures.

The UPA Certified Observer Pool (COP)

In the early adolescent period, players at the highest level were calling for more power for observers to make calls in order to prevent players from getting away with
unspirited play. Some high-ups in the UPA and others in the community, though, viewed the allocation for, training and certifying of observers as an insult to the Spirit of the Game, and some of the members on the UPA Board of Directors actually threatened to resign rather than vote for the allocation of funds to training observers. A player whom Doyle interviewed for his study stated that she was part of a “sit-in” in protest over the use of observers in their semi-finals game at Nationals in 1989. A majority of the community felt that any form of active observers would initiate a “slippery slope” towards the type of referees other sports used and bring along ‘over-commercialization, excessive fouling and purposeful cheating.’”135 Yet observers served the purpose of quelling players’ win-at-all costs attitude that had been gaining steam at the higher levels as well as allowing players to communicate actively and effectively, thus keeping to the ethos of the Spirit of the Game.

In the early years of observer experimentation, teams recruited observers from those who were not playing a game that round or from the non-playing crowd. There was no systemized organization or training and many times what one observer saw was not usually what the other did. Nob, a player on NYNY, knew of the shortcomings of these observers having participated in the contentious final in 1989 against San Francisco’s Tsunami, among others, which for the game on the highest level was “the culmination of the win-at-all-costs, tit-for-tat crap that had been going one for a number of years.”136 The game was an intensely played battle with plenty of great plays, but it is remembered for the “many long arguments between the teams over calls and rules;” eventually “The fans became so disenchanted and restive that the chant went up: ‘Travel, foul, pick; suck

135 Chris Van Holmes via Leonardo and Zagoria, 84.
136 Bob Pallares via Leonardo and Zagoria, 84.
The observers in the game had no authority to keep the game flowing or make rulings on certain calls that were the disdain of the spectators.

Nob took it into his own hands to make sure that showcasing championship Ultimate could achieve the goals he had set forth when he was named the National Director rather than highlight the tedium over calls as in the 1989 finals. He wrote in the first UPA Observers Manual:

The COP program was refined in response to changes in play and players’ expectations. Observers became requested more often at important tournaments, and requests even began occurring during pool play. Moreover, Observer involvement became more active, though not nearly to the level of referees in some sports.

This was the first foray by the UPA into sponsoring training and certification for third party officials. Before that much of the use of observers was experimental at grassroots-level tournaments with the UPA utilizing some for semi-finals and finals at Nationals; usually only at teams’ requests would a runner set out to find someone capable and willing. Nob assessed that because of the “fear of referees in our community, the observer system was developed as a compromise…it does not satisfy either the SOTG purist or the pro-ref, let’s get serious type.” He continues that with the introduction of newer rules in the 9th edition to help streamline games of Ultimate, they can be more “reasonably effective” than

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before. He made it clear in that the “observer system only works if the Spirit of the Game is operative.”

In the adjacent column of that issue of the Newsletter, Kathy Pufahl made the argument that observers are not needed at any level of Ultimate and that the onus for a cleaner, more respectful game is on the elite teams. She proposed a system of accountability for club teams that are the ones calling for observers and that “maybe peer pressure is our only really effective tool.” This is an interesting point. Looking to the effect of competitive diffusion discussed earlier, one could assume that if the top teams exuded spirit in their play then maybe the rest of the competitive contingent of the community would follow suit. However, this was not the case; the sport was trending toward more aggression due to the increased arrival of younger players from the mainstream sports culture who were not fully educated on the Spirit of the Game. Peer pressure from the more mellow competitors had not seemed to produce her desired results. She raised a valid point questioning why the entire membership should have to contribute funds to the certifying and training of observers in the COP to appease an already overly-coddled (to the extent the fledgling UPA could coddle) top tier of Ultimate, which is still a major debate point today. She calls for those at that level to embrace the position they are in as exemplary of the world’s best, not only in skills, but also in spirit. They should not have to look to the UPA to bring in third party officiation to decide who the best is; they are already in the position to and are just admitting their own faults.

\[140\] Ibid. 14.

Recalling the “costs” (that players or institutions must account for in playing Ultimate) presented by Blaine Robbins, the UPA, before the COP, had focused planning and allocated funds to maintain primarily the first two costs – “the costs of regulating team and player eligibility [and] the costs of coordinating competition.” By providing the funding to train observers, the UPA assumed the cost “of detecting and controlling malfeasance” in game play, but left “the costs of negotiating and bargaining foul violations” relatively untouched to be attended to by players, thus keeping to the ethos. Observers mostly controlled against malfeasance, as that was the biggest problem with self-officiated play at the highest levels.

In the early adolescence (1987-1999), the UPA was in the position to direct the sport’s growth; they had sprouted the seeds of their youth program that would come into its own in the late nineties and placed its organizational energy in promoting the quality of the top levels of the sport and observers. The development of the UPA’s Certified Observer Pool marked a further extension of its institutional control of the sport. This was challenging to the on-field ethos of the sport, but the UPA saw observers as a compromise that allowed the ethos to still flourish at the highest level. The Jose Cuervo sponsorship from 1990 through 1993 affected the debates over observers and referees as well as subsequent grassroots ventures. I assess whether it was a complete challenge to the ethos or just to the norms in the Ultimate community.

142 Robbins, “Playing with Fire,” 275
143 Ibid. 275
One of Nob’s goals during his time at the UPA was to gain more visibility in the mainstream through promotion, marketing and sponsorship. Dee Rambeau, a player with connections to the Carson International marketing company saw an opportunity to align Ultimate with the popular “alternative” sport movement. Carson had negotiated the Association of Volleyball Professionals’ (AVP) Jose Cuervo beach volleyball series and struck a deal with the tequila company to sponsor an Ultimate series. Rambeau also saw a chance to take the control of the highest levels of Ultimate away “from the restrictive socialism of the UPA and towards the capitalism and marketing merriment of big money.”

Carson originally suggested the UPA have Cuervo sponsor Club Nationals. The UPA rejected this pitch because Cuervo wanted “control over the game, including the ability to change rules they didn’t like,” creative control over anything their name was on (for instance editing the content of what was said about the sponsor in the *UPA Newsletter* and the ability to suspend players or market certain teams based on their observations).

Rambeau suggested an alternative, that Cuervo create their stand-alone series with or without the UPA’s support. He knew that the prize money would entice enough players regardless of rule changes. The Cuervo Series lengthened the playing field to 90 yards and the end zones to 15 each, while half-field was demarcated as a two-point line. Cuervo had initially wanted referees but saw the problem with providing the necessary recruitment, training, and pay. Thus, they decided on having observers for as many games as possible.

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144 Leonardo and Zagoria, 90.

145 Rauch email to Leonardo via Leonardo and Zagoria, 90.
Cuervo, Carson and Rambeau laid out a five-year plan, similar to the track the beach volleyball program was on, with the end goal of a television deal for years four and five. The Cuervo Series’ first entailed cooperation with Ultimate was funding one tournament in Atlanta in September 1991. The next year it became a true series with each team’s respective placements adding up to the Cuervo Championships final. Kevin Hatch, a grassroots tournament director that worked with Rambeau and Carson to put on a tournament that was a qualifier event in the series stated his “view was that Carson Intl didn’t really have a clue what to do with Ultimate...Dee [Rambeau] was running the show.”146 The most control Cuervo had for those tournaments at the ground level was that “Carson Intl supplied a few hundred dollars...and required that money be spent on player amenities: water, food, etc. They basically forced us to do more to enhance the player experience than we previously had.” Therefore, it could be argued that Rambeau was making his own mark on the Ultimate world with Cuervo’s money and name. But the community was mostly content with some money, a big name and outside support inserted into the community.

By Ultimate standards, the tournaments were well run; the prize money and two-point line were very popular with the players that participated, but, of course, there was outcry from the community. In a letter to the editor in the June 1992 UPA Newsletter, Troy Frever, denounced the anticipated results from sponsorship, namely the Cuervo Series. He predicted that with the introduction of the so-called “necessary changes’ [i.e. referees, commercialization] for the selling of Ultimate to the general public, you can bet that the

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146 Kevin Hatch, email to author March 3, 2013.
Spirit of the Game will be the first to go.”  

Neal Dambra, the UPA National Director that took over for Nob in late 1990, retorted that “sponsorship was not a dirty word” but the UPA “would never ask a sponsor to become responsible for the actual competitive part of the game...the players job.” He continued saying that the UPA would decline any offers from sponsors that insisted on changing the player’s or the UPA’s control of the game. The Cuervo Series did not go any further into maintaining the “costs” of Ultimate than the UPA had, only employing observers where it could. The problem the community and some in the UPA had with Cuervo’s involvement was its initial desire to control the portrayal of Cuervo in the community and what may become of increased commercialism, besides that they were just providing prize money and corporate sponsorship for a growing sports community. There are a few theories on why exactly the Cuervo Series was discontinued in 1993. At the series championship in 1992, at the party after finals, there were a couple hours or open bar and then tabs would be opened. During the open bar time, players began to reach over the railing that sequestered all the Jose Cuervo tequila and passed bottles around.

Rambeau cited that incident as “convinc[ing him] that Ultimate players have always been their own worst enemies. The irreverence and rebelliousness, the self-regulation, [the] lack of structure...everything that made Ultimate so fun to play were the things that made it impossible to sell.”  The tournament organizer agreed to an extent in our correspondence. “Most players didn’t really care about trying to make Ultimate into

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148 Rambeau, interview 2004 via Leonardo and Zagoria, 92.
something bigger... [They] didn’t really take the whole thing very seriously.”149 Dambra had a more practical outlook on the situation. “It was a case of simple economics”150 in that Ultimate had not brought in enough revenue to offset what Cuervo had put into sponsorship. Many Ultimate commentators would refer to this as the largest challenge to the ethos of sport. Evidence suggests, however, that the Cuervo Series indirectly challenged the ethos of Ultimate down the line by exacerbating the notion in the community that Ultimate could not succeed in the mainstream without commercialization or full third-party officiation. In the early adolescence, the culture of “Ultimate [was] just not ready”151 to fully support and cooperate with a venture such as this. Players I have talked to about the Cuervo experiment do not remember much indignation against it; they mostly thought the prize money and two-point line were cool and different, but there were times when players were not so keen on the infiltration of the type of professionalism that came with sponsorship. Hatch believed “there was an undercurrent among many players that they weren’t into ‘selling out’.”152 Some were interested to see it grow, but no one seemed to mourn the loss in 1993.

UPA’s Push to a Governing Body

The early adolescence (1987-1996) was marked by a fledgling UPA that stated what it wanted to do but did not yet have the resources or support to accomplish everything.

Nob’s and Eric Simon’s, a Regional Coordinator and/or Board Member of the UPA from

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149 Kevin Hatch, email to author March 3, 2013.
150 Dambra, interview 2005, via Leonardo and Zagoria, 92.
151 Kevin Hatch, email to author March 3, 2013.
152 Ibid.
1982 to 1998, early efforts to create a top-down organizing of the Ultimate community started the move towards the UPA becoming a governing body in the late Eighties. They moved the players association further away from the co-op of players that wanted only to facilitate play to actually governing the community and the fairness therein. Troy Frever completed the efforts of Simon and Nob by creating a Board of Directors (BoD) in 1996. The BoD formalized the corporate structure and took Ultimate into the late adolescent period, marked by more formalized organization of play. The BoD created a salaried position of Executive Director and appointed Bob Byrne in 1996, after which the UPA began to conduct itself more as the governing body that it strove to be.

This was also a time when the UPA was put in the unenviable position of having to become a disciplinarian organization. Mike G once again made his mark in Ultimate history at the 1996 UPA Club Nationals when, on two different occasions, he spit in the face of an opponent. Both instances were caught on tape filming the same game and a third incident was reported but not substantiated. Kevin Hatch chaired the committee that convened to apply due diligence to the case remembered that getting statements from the guys that were spit on “was like pulling teeth... If they cared about Mike getting some kind of due, they didn’t show it.”\textsuperscript{153} They were not out to take down Mike G, but it seemed the UPA wanted to make sure something like this did not happen again by making an example of him. Mike G has termed it a “witch hunt” countless times over the years on RSD. As a result of the methods for investigating this incident, Hatch actually rewrote the procedure for formalizing complaints by placing the responsibility in the complainer’s hands so as not to have “volunteers act like some kind of detective agency to chase down details of some

\textsuperscript{153} Kevin Hatch, email to author March 3, 2013.
incident.”154 There was definitely some history of Mike G’s behavior that contributed to the
diligence on the part of the UPA to make sure he was punished for these transgressions.
Rumors of him being verbally abusive towards his own players on the UNCW women’s
college team he had coached in the 1996 College Nationals as well as his run-in with a
confrontational Cindy Fisher, who was National Director at the time, were not enough to
have him disciplined, but he was admonished in the UPA Newsletter for his behavior as part
of the punishment. After the UPA reviewed the spitting incident videos, they gave him a
year suspension from the UPA, barring him from participating – playing, coaching or
directing – in UPA events. This is the only such suspension in the UPA’s history and it
would have its repercussions down the line for Mike G.

The UPA moved toward becoming primarily a governing body for the sport of
Ultimate. It provided outlets for national competition for college, club, men, women, youth
and offered insurance for tournaments and leagues through their sanctioning. It had
survived the Cuervo Series by not selling out; however, their formalization and corporate
structure took them more away from the players association it began as and seemed to
become more “impersonal and dictatorial.”155 The heads of the UPA had a top-down
approach to governing Ultimate. These perceptions spurred rival grassroots efforts such as
the formation of the National Ultimate Association in North Carolina. The UPA deftly
weathered such challenges by co-opting many grassroots efforts in order to hold its place
as the governing body of Ultimate.

154 Kevin Hatch, email to author March 3, 2013.
155 Ibid.
National Ultimate Association

The most numerous challenges to the UPA’s brand of Ultimate occurred in the late adolescence. Referee Ultimate activists Toad Leber, Ed Wagenseller and other like-minded volunteers in Wilmington, NC created the National Ultimate Association as an alternative theatre for competitive Ultimate to that of the UPA. They wished to provide a couple tournament venues for changes in the sport that could attract spectators, sponsors and media. There had been other tournaments that had used referees in similar fashions, such as Labor Day in Santa Cruz in 1996, but they were one time deals and they did not intend on growing the tournaments eventually into a league built for the more “hard-core Ultimate athletes” on the elite teams.156

Members of the community that were only privy to the information online, on RSD and word of mouth jumped to conclusions about the NUA partly due to North Carolinians creating it. The Wilmington Port City Slickers (PCS), led by Mike G before his suspension (which he was serving at the time), was one of the more reviled teams in Ultimate. Did they form the NUA to fulfill their wishes for a more aggressive, less spirited game? In fact, the NUA and the PCS were not working together and Toad’s stated goals were to provide an alternative to UPA play that included less down time in games and refereed play, therefore a product that could be showcased to the mainstream in order to eventually sustain a professional league. It seems that Toad had a “falling out” with some of the players on PCS and was not part of that crew. The only real connection between Mike G and Toad was when Mike G worked for Toad’s successful “Toad-dyed” shirts in Wilmington during

Mike G and Toad aside, the largest concern of the community was how referees would alter the ethos of the sport: Would spirit diminish with the abolition of self-officiation?

RSD posts from players that participated in the NUA games contained mostly positive reviews on the NUA style of play. They contended that in most cases they did not notice a loss of respect for the game or their opponents because there were referees. However, there were also accounts of the type of “good fouls” that a basketball or soccer coach would teach that a referee would not see. In one a player punched another in the stomach in order to get open coming back to the disc. A referee did not see it so it was not a foul, but in a self-officiated game an occurrence like that rarely happened without some major provocations leading up to the altercation.

The three-time defending UPA Club Champions, Death or Glory, chose to attend the NUA tournament instead of the World Ultimate Club Championships in August of 1997 in Vancouver, BC. The Ultimate masses cried out on RSD, worrying that if the top teams were “defecting” then the UPA was in danger of being supplanted by the NUA. Also, DoG was not

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157 The most-accomplished author of Ultimate history, Tony Leonardo, has based his historical writing concerning the creation of the NUA on personal feelings and some even claim neglect. Mike G used to have a series of RSD posts called “Ultimate Talk with Mike G” in which he established his views on what Ultimate could become and what it needed to get there – referees. There were threads where Leonardo and Mike G bickered back and forth. In many Leonardo seemed to be baiting Mike G into making unsavory comments, which was/is not very difficult. He attacked the idea of referees and accused Mike G of having numerous complexes. In his article “The Big Payout: College Ultimate’s Road to Marketability,” Leonardo incorrectly states that Mike G and Toad worked together to develop of the NUA, as well as getting the date of the first NUA event incorrect. The accounts I present are what were reported through RSD and correspondence with Mike G. Toad posted his corrections and accused Leonardo, for the second time, of writing with bias on the history.


like NYNY or the Port City Slickers; they were seen as *the* embodiment of a spirited
competitive team in the Ultimate community.\textsuperscript{158} Jim Parinella, a DoG captain, explained that
they decided to attend the NUA because North Carolina was closer and cheaper to travel to
and that there was better competition playing other US club teams there than the
international squads at Worlds that year.

The NUA only lasted one experimental tournament, a couple scrimmages and a
college and club showcase game at Easterns in 1996 and 1997, but the “waves” were felt
throughout the community. Perhaps the Ultimate community just was not ready for the
type of game that elite teams playing in a refereed environment provided and perhaps the
organizers did not continue to place the efforts and money into continuing the NUA as they
could have. It was probably a combination of the two. Toad attempted to revitalize the NUA
with an announcement that it “could” be happening a few times over the years (1999, 2003
and 2005), but there just was not enough support. The NUA suffered ridicule from the
community because of Toad’s posts on RSD that presented his adamant stance on referees
and how Ultimate was ruled by “spirit zealots” that would not dare let referees in Ultimate.

There were positive impacts of the NUA in the community. Jim Nesbitt looked back
on the NUA league in 1999 and saw that:

Despite the controversial nature of the NUA, I believe its impact has
helped the UPA recognize some change possibilities and spurred some rule
changes that many club teams have come to appreciate... It made people think
logically about other options.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{158} Popular opinion and *Ultimate: First Four Decades* lend to the notion that the spirit of DoG was antithesis to
that of NYNY. But, with a little digging on RSD, one can find the evidence of a “can’t beat them, join them”
mentality. Jim Parinella announced the arrival of *Death and Glory* (its name the first few months of existence)
to the RSD world in 1994 that they were going to “kick the asses of all teams in the open division.”

\textsuperscript{159} Jim Nesbitt post to RSD, June 3, 1999.
http://groups.google.com/group/rec.sport.disc/browse_thread/thread/81f865076a672cfc/c66a859d9fc829
Peter Giusti, a UPA BoD member at the time, also saw some virtue in the NUA’s offering to Ultimate. He did not think that referees necessarily removed Spirit from the game. Self-officiation was gone, but Spirit could still be found in the respect and integrity of the participants. He was not been speaking in an official UPA BoD capacity even though he signed off with that distinction, but he showed interest in co-opting the type of Ultimate the NUA promoted.

Personally, I’d like to see a "professional" Ultimate league within the UPA as well as the maintenance of the grass roots feel for everyone else. The NUA or something evolved therefrom, seems like a good place to start; and given that the "NUA ECC" [the Emerald City Classic in Seattle in 1997 held an NUA showcase game] was a UPA sponsored event, it seems like that’s what’s happening ‘naturally.’

Ultimate is an accessible, inclusive sport, and its culture supports that. Kenny Dobyns posited “the best thing about ultimate is that it has a place for everybody.” When Giusti applauded the NUA for adding to the “marketplace of ideas” in the Ultimate community, his distinction between the “professional” level and “everyone else” and his claim that the UPA sanctioned the NUA Emerald City Classic shows the UPA’s responsiveness to the debates of the time and willingness to co-opt reasonable ideas.

Animosities and ego have hidden how the NUA came to affect the UPA’s brand of Ultimate and the Ultimate community in general. The NUA indirectly influenced grassroots organizers by showing that structured game play through the use of referees could make Ultimate more palatable to the mainstream sports fan and possibly attract major

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sponsorship. In the next section, I uncover the NUA’s effect on organizers who recognized the importance of the delay of game rules and applied revisions to the roles and procedures of observers based on the refereeing and structure of the NUA.

The Nortel Series and the Callahan Rules

Three years after Cuervo, Charles Kerr initiated the next large corporate sponsorship. He brokered a deal in 1997 with the startup communications company Nortel to sponsor the North Carolina State Men’s Ultimate team of whom he was the coach. Nortel was well aware of the growing number of college graduates in Internet, communications and computer technology that were Ultimate players and looked to raise their profile so they could recruit the new young minds. Kerr promoted Nortel’s interest in sponsoring college Ultimate teams and events by emailing captains, tournament directors and coaches of the top college teams and tournaments to invite discussion on how best they could take advantage of the opportunity.

Will Deaver, a player and captain on the University of Georgia Men’s team, and also the tournament director for the Classic City Classic (CCC) in Athens, GA, was one of the captains that received the email from Kerr and leapt at the opportunity to get some money from a corporate sponsor. He also had witnessed the use of referees in an NUA showcase game in October 1997. The streamlined management of the game intrigued him. Referees kept time limits that maintained consistent speed and fluidity of the game, and Deaver especially admired the elimination of down time that had plagued the game. He was not particularly in agreement with the full on, active third party officiation or the power of the referees in regard to calls on the field. It did not seem to be fully Ultimate. He did concede

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the benefits of third party arbitration in call resolution and how the established observer procedures could adopt some of the “activeness” of the NUA referees. In correspondence with Kerr he mentioned his ideas for the experimental set of rules that utilized observers to keep the game moving and told him that CCC would be the laboratory for this venture. Kerr suggested having Nortel sponsor the tournament and getting more exposure for the experiments from the top teams and players. Kerr, familiar with the NUA because he was from Raleigh and had coached in an NUA college showcase game, and Deaver agreed that new rules were a good thing for college Ultimate and that observers should have more power in certain circumstances. The NUA was growing in popularity somewhat and Kerr and Deaver felt that if there was not some adaptation in the wider competitive scene that emphasized keeping the game moving, then the future of competitive Ultimate would turn to NUA-style referees, which neither wanted.

Nortel’s involvement was not like Cuervo where the sponsor wanted some creative control over the action; Deaver stated that “Nortel doesn’t give a damn what rules we use as long as we hang up their banners and put up their posters and try to get as many people out to the tournament as possible.”\textsuperscript{162} The Nortel sponsorship and the Callahan rules developed separately but simultaneously. It was a fortunate coincidence for the future of Ultimate that it happened this way. CCC was a pre-season fall tournament where teams use the competition to develop their younger players in order to gear up for the primary competitions in the spring and it had a tradition of experimenting with some rules. Kerr and Deaver collaborated to write the Callahan rules, which they successfully implemented.

\textsuperscript{162} Will Deaver, post on RSD, November 24, 1997, https://groups.google.com/group/rec.sport.disc/browse_thread/thread/cc13f7c472de75a8/bd3290bafe6c3d49?hl=en&lnk=gst&q=dissenting+perspective+on+the+nortel+series#bd3290bafe6c3d49 (accessed on March 14, 2013)
at CCC that fall. Kerr had come up with the Callahan award the year before to honor the player that best represented the sportsmanship and skills it took to be the MVP of the college season. Henry Callahan, an early ambassador of the sport in the Northwest who promoted the spirit and camaraderie of the game and was one of the hardest training players in the early years of Ultimate in the Northwest, was shot in 1982. Kerr posthumously honored him with bestowing the name of the MVP award, Ultimate’s Heisman trophy and the new rules for him.

There were those in the community that were wary of a corporate-sponsored series that used experimental rules, especially in introducing new observer responsibilities. This was surely compounded by the development coming on the heels of the NUA. Don Barry, another RSD poster-extraordinaire, provided his “dissenting perspective” on the Nortel Series in November 1997. His knee-jerk reactions were to express concern that the series sidestepped the UPA, ask how the Ultimate community would benefit from Nortel’s financial involvement and accuse Kerr of reaping some extra benefits from the deal. It is apparent in Barry’s post that he was most offended by the observer usage in the experimental rules at CCC, which was made even worse by being backed by money. Kerr came to the defense for the venture claiming that they did consult the UPA to make sure they were not interfering with any of the UPA’s marketing plans, that Nortel was genuinely interested in seeing Ultimate grow as well as recruiting players to work there in the future, that he was not receiving any finder’s fee or anything personally from Nortel, and that the announcement may have misled some on Nortel tournaments about having to use the Callahan rules. This was not the case, as the four tournaments in the series were free to use whatever rules they wanted and be sanctioned by the UPA.
Deaver responded also with his first ever post on RSD, which is very indicative of how one properly introduced oneself to the online Ultimate community. He presented his, albeit limited, accolades in the sport – “the little skinny guy with the ponytail that you can’t cover” and that he was captain of Jojah and “ran with Chain in the fall” (Chain Lightning is one of the most successful and storied club programs in Ultimate) – in order to garner some respect from those in the community concerned with the proceedings. It also proved that his ideas were from a member “of the larger Ultimate community, not those of some faceless corporate entity” of which Barry had accused them.\textsuperscript{163} He pointed out the grassroots effort involved in advertising through word of mouth at tournaments, having the discs and posters designed by Ultimate World (a now defunct Ultimate-specific design company), getting Discraft to produce the discs, and Kerr developing the website for the series in his own time and with his own money. He reasoned, in response to Barry’s assertion that they were undermining the UPA and leaving the “larger [Ultimate] community” in the dark and that introducing these rules in such a visible venue as the college regular season was based more on expediency than deceit. The “UPA...as a large institution, [is] very slow to accept change, and when things do happen, they tend to get watered down”\textsuperscript{164} he explained. He finished with the exclamation that through this for us, by us venture the “larger [Ultimate] community is involved and at the most important level, the level were things get DONE.”\textsuperscript{165}

Things did get done. All the tournaments in the Nortel Series used the Callahan rules, which the most competitive college regular season tournaments also followed – the

\textsuperscript{163} Deaver, post on RSD, November 24, 1997.

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{165} Deaver, post on RSD, November 24, 1997.
Stanford Invite, College Easterns and the Yale Cup. The Nortel Series ended amicably after one season, but the push for more experimentation with the Callahan rules had just begun and the UPA took notice. That next spring season Kerr and Deaver petitioned the UPA with a survey of the top-50 college teams to see if they wanted to include the Callahan rules in the competition at College Nationals in May 1999. Many had experienced the rules in the Nortel Series the season before and other tournaments in the 1999 season continued to use them even after Nortel’s involvement ended. Regardless of more consternation for the change spearheaded by Barry, the UPA accepted the petition and the 1999 College Nationals used the Callahan rules, thus embracing grassroots efforts in the evolution of the sport.

The biggest reformation was the inclusion of observers for all the games at the 1999 College Nationals. Since the COP was instated in 1990, the UPA observer program grew, but there was still much discourse and inconsistency on how they should be used and what roles were too much for the passive officials. Based on watching the refs in the NUA games, Deaver saw observers could be best used to keep the game timely and orderly. He did not want to set fire to the ethos of the sport, but rather further formalize the application of observers at the highest levels of competition to eliminate the delays and arguments that had plagued the game for almost two decades. The UPA Standing Rules Committee met with Deaver and Kerr after nationals that year and worked with them to integrate the Callahan rules into a set of UPA-sponsored experimental rules that would eventually become the official 10th edition of the rules or the “X-Rules.” Some changes were made to be more in line with what the UPA wanted, but the Callahan role of observers remained as a major step to systemize Ultimate observers in use today. The largest provision was they
were no longer required to make black and white rulings on disputes between players over violations if players asked them; thus keeping the ethos of self-officiation relevant and the Spirit of the Game alive in third party arbitration. The UPA had assumed Robbins’ third and fourth “costs” to an extent. In the end it was a major breakthrough in the history of third party officiation in Ultimate that the UPA co-opted the grassroots promotion of the Callahan rules and their type of observers.

Grassroots Coed

Not all grassroots organizational challenges to the UPA’s outlets for competition in Ultimate also challenged the ethos of the sport. The Coed renaissance in the Nineties celebrated the spirit and inclusion of Ultimate. Today, the UPA’s Mixed club division is the only one of its kind for a field sport that competes nationally for a championship title. The division has a grassroots background that started with a strictly Coed (4:3 ratio, men: women or women: men) tournament in Berkeley, CA started in 1987. In 1989, the first unofficial Coed Nationals was held in Chicago, but only for a couple years. In 1990, a club Coed team was founded for this tournament and decided to travel to open tournaments as a Coed team. In the early to mid Nineties, a few perennial Coed tournaments started that were light in competition, heavy in reverence and aimed towards “community participation, charitable giving and environmental conservation.” The Coed tournaments established during this time were based more on the social atmosphere of the Ultimate community with the competition being secondary to winning the party and having fun.

166 There are also some mentions on RSD of an earlier Coed tournament in Chicago in 1983, though I have not been able to find any confirmation.
167 Leonardo and Zagoria, 120.
Winning the party was a tradition at many fun tournaments and even more serious ones. The team with representatives that were the last to leave the party on Saturday night won the party which to some players and teams was more important than winning the tournament, especially if their team was out of contention on Sunday.

The popularity of the Coed division grew in the mid Nineties until multiple tournaments hosted National Coed Championships. The first was a culmination of California’s Bay Area Coed Summer League (The Totally Coed Championships) in Santa Cruz in November 1995; it attracted 23 teams and was a good success. Many Coed teams were amalgamations of summer league all-star teams from around the nation and Canada. In February of 1998, Mike Gerics and his Wilmington Ultimate Frisbee Federation held their first WUFF Coed National Championships in order to balance the playing year out for Coed players, who were mostly married couples and younger players introduced to the sport at this level (as opposed to in college). The WUFF Coed National Championships lasted for six years but petered out partly through the Coed division getting younger with high school and college players, as it was more accessible for them to make Coed teams, thus hurting spring participation of those players whose seasons were then. The growing anti-Mike G feelings in the community also led to the downfall of the WUFF Coed Championships, as it has for many of the ventures that he has created.

Joey Gray wanted to take the Coed phenomenon national and believed a new Coed organization could flourish, but saw the true path to acceptance and consistent support through affiliation with the UPA. She lobbied the UPA for help and support for her cause and was named the UPA National Coed Director. In 1997, she and the UPA first created an
experimental series for “those who have traditionally been under-served by the UPA.”¹⁶⁸ which ended with the Labor Day weekend Coed Celebration. It brought together the spirit and camaraderie that many Coed players loved, offering a “finale” to shed the competitive connotation held by “championship.” The placement of the unofficial Coed Championships in the summer separated the timing of the Coed series from the fall series and led to open and women’s players coming together to play on super teams that were deemed unfair to those that played Coed exclusively. After a couple years of growth through the experimentation, Gray seemingly gave in to the competitive stroke of Ultimate and voted, along with others in the UPA Board of Directors, to move the experimental series to the regular UPA fall series format, thusly ending the celebration and beginning the championships. There was some fallout from this move in letters to the editor in the UPA Newsletter and posts on RSD, but the UPA co-optation of the Coed movement was solidified. The division has grown feverishly since then and now boasts more participation than either the Open or Women’s teams.

Major League Ultimate

In 2006, a couple grassroots organizers from Seattle and the founders of the NUA collaborated with Potlatch, one of the “fun” Coed tournaments, to develop Major League Ultimate. Potlatch had been known for experimentation since its creation in the mid Nineties and helped influence the Major League Ultimate’s four-team showcase event made up of all-stars from different geographic regions. The round robin format was held in

conjunction with Potlatch in order to showcase some of the best in the game. The major divergence from the UPA’s brand was fully active referees, like the NUA. The event was designed with the spectator in mind and Ultivillage, a startup Ultimate video production company from Vancouver, British Columbia, was there to film the event and plenty of people there to watch with the attachment to Potlatch, a very populous tournament.

They did not intend to hold a traditional Ultimate tournament, but rather a spectator-friendly version of Ultimate, played at higher speeds and with more physicality. Ben Wiggins, a participant on the Northwest team, posted on RSD his experience in the MLU. In his “pros and cons” he listed the positive aspects of the sped up game play and the lack of “spurious” travel, pick and stall calls, the fan-friendly rules, and the silent stall counts that were the referees’ responsibility thus providing consistency in the stalls. His main “con” was essentially the removal of the ethos of Ultimate in the MLU brand. To him, the MLU was:

A different game, and probably not one that most Ultimate players want to play recreationally... Ultimate was designed for players, MLU for the spectators, and there are some big tradeoffs between the two... MLU is NOT a replacement for Ultimate.... I think they are different sports, and both have a ton of value.169

Wiggins described plays that happened over the course of the weekend that would never happen in Ultimate but were normal strategy in a refereed MLU game. Taking a page from strategy in the NBA, he committed good fouls to keep points off the board. He “bearhugged” a player to prevent him from getting a two-point huck off (a long throw, usually for a score), he tackled a player to keep him from throwing a sure score and “dragged down” a receiver that was streaking deep for the score. The Spirit of the Game was potentially at

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https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups#!searchin/rec.sport.disc/major$20league$20ultimate$202006/rec.sport.disc/0Y6BTv-2VZI/e2UU3OK4d4EJ (accessed March 15, 2013)
odds with the style of play in the NUA and MLU compared to self-officiated or observed games were players were still held accountable through tradition for their actions. Wiggins is known far and wide as a spirited player and admitted that he would never even think about doing those intentional fouls in a game of self-officiated Ultimate. However, with referees calling the fouls and the increased physicality, it was just a different game.

One of the players Doyle interviewed in his study, “Ernesto,” was a participant in MLU who believed the use of referees removed “respecting the game” from the players and focused them on feeling that their “responsibility [was] to win the game...and you want[ed] to win the game at all costs.”\footnote{Doyle used pseudonyms in his interviews. Ernesto Interview Transcript from Doyle, 143.} Earlier in the interview Ernesto defined the Spirit of the Game as a specific level of respect for “my opponents, my team mates and the game of Frisbee.”\footnote{Ibid, 151} He mused that the highest levels of Ultimate should include referees, the ethos of the sport be damned. The implications of the effect it would have on the ethos are too threatening to many in the Ultimate community, most especially those in charge of the UPA. This is one venture the UPA has not co-opted. BoD member Gwen Ambler stated that referee use in the UPA’s Ultimate is only possible at an experimental basis at the highest level, but even there it is not plausible.

The MLU did not occur again after Potlatch 2006 even though it seemed to go over pretty well with participants and spectators. There were many comparisons of the MLU to the failed NUA. The comparisons were mostly assumptions based on the fact that there were referees and Toad’s involvement in both, although he had a much more limited role in MLU than in the NUA. Judging by the account from Wiggins and Ernesto, the MLU was a
major success for the plausibility of referees at the highest level of the game, but as Wiggins pointed out, it would not be Ultimate. Comparisons between the MLU and the NUA should be limited because the MLU did not strive to become a league, but rather focused on one event to exhibit that Ultimate could indeed be showcased in a marketable fashion. The NUA started with the aspiration of providing a marketable version of Ultimate for the top teams in the nation that they predicted would be an alternative to the UPA. The MLU did not seem to want to supplant the UPA nor did it want to take away teams that were bred in the UPA system. I discuss in the conclusion more of the effects of the MLU on the current professional leagues that were established in 2011 and 2012.

Ultimate Observers Association

Mike G was part of the development of the UPA observer system that came about with the Callahan Rules in 1998, and he is still listed as a contributor in the 2012 UPA Observers Manual. He helped develop the Two Observer System (TOS) used by the UPA, a fact that has been obscured within official UPA discourse. There was bad blood between the association and Mike G, as he was coming off his one-year suspension at the time. He claimed that the UPA changed some of the details in the positioning and placement of observers on the field and he was not totally satisfied with the system the UPA used for observers. In the fall of 2009, Mike G, along with associate Jason Weddle, made a return to college Ultimate by unveiling the Ultimate Observers Association (UOA). The UOA observers were more “ref-like” in providing stall counts; active up/down, in/out and travel calls; and the introduction of the Immediate Referral System (IRS). The IRS came into play when a foul was contested by a player, the observer would quickly come in and rule on the
dispute, foul or no foul, and play would move on without any discussion between the players.

Mike G described them as there to “minimize discussion and to maximize PLAYING ULTIMATE ... We’re officiating Ultimate, the way the players have grown up expecting sporting events to be officiated.” Since UOA observers were more like referees than UPA observers it may have led one to assume that the ethos of Ultimate was forgotten, however, player testimonies from participants in UOA events (my 2010 UNT team one of them) beg to differ. Teams felt that spirit actually improved in the UOA games. There were fewer arguments over calls and:

Players still control[led] the game which is something that we believe has to be maintained in order for Ultimate to maintain the essence that draws us to it. However, Ultimate’s evolution to a more competitive level has required that there be moderators to assist in maintaining that essence.

The UOA suffered a similar fate to the other ventures that Mike G has backed. A tournament they hosted in February of 2010 experienced some bad weather and the fields were damaged. This is a fairly normal occurrence, but the field owner contacted the UPA to complain about it since it was a UPA sanctioned event. This was coupled with a complaint from a team that decided to not finish the tournament because of injuries and the condition of the fields. Mike G had a history of dislike for teams that do not play out the tournament. He reportedly was very upset with the team and made derogatory remarks

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174 2010 was the first college season that the UPA mandated college teams to have at least 10 sanctioned games in order to earn bids, or spots, to Regionals and Nationals for their respective sections and regions.
towards them. Within 24 hours (one of the quickest turn-arounds for a ruling from the UPA ever) of the complaint the UPA dropped the sanctioning for the UOA tournaments that were already scheduled and made the ruling that any events run by Mike G and/or Jason Weddle would not be sanctioned. They would only allow sanctioning if Mike G was not on the premises and was not involved in the tournament under any circumstances. Today, the UPA will not sanction any tournament that uses UOA observers even if Mike G and Weddle are not involved. There seems to be a large bias against Mike G’s endeavors at the UPA.

Conclusion

The UPA weathered the attempts by grassroots organizers to challenge their governance over the most competitive outlets in the Ultimate community by either co-opting many of the innovations that came through those pipelines or by relying on the Ultimate community to reject the alternative versions of Ultimate that challenged the ethos of the sport. Travis T. posted on RSD that:

The UPA brand of ultimate is longer on traditions and slower to innovations. I think this form of Ultimate is reliant on these other innovators to try things, fail or succeed, and demonstrate the legitimacy of the solutions they provide and the shortcomings they address. So it’s useful to look at changes from their grass-roots development.175

The UPA’s evolution was spurred by the development of experiments with the game from grassroots organizers. Cuervo, although not necessarily a challenge to Spirit of the Game and self-officiation directly, held its influence in the community by showing that Ultimate could possibly garner sponsors and make it a “professional” endeavor. This did challenge

the status quo, and Spirit of the Game may have taken a hit on the whole with the influx of more competitive-minded players, but only as much as it did while NYNY was spiking and berating their way to winning in the late Eighties. It was more evolution than revolution. The experimental rules used in the Cuervo series did partially inspire the NUA and the NUA did challenge the ethos by utilizing referees. The use of referees influenced the creation of the Callahan Rules, and the Callahan rules influenced how observers are used today in the UPA system. In the conclusion, I cover the UPA's final transition to a governing body when it became USAUltimate in 2010. I also cover the latest developments in the Ultimate community that is taking Ultimate to new heights – professional leagues, a contract with ESPN and the redesign of the competitive series in order to be more palatable to the outside spectators.

Conclusion

On March 2, 2013, just over 300 players and members of the Ultimate community convened near Boston for the Ultimate Coaches and Players Conference (UCPC). There were seminars on how to run a comprehensive tryout, how to recruit and retain women effectively, how to coach the Spirit of the Game, and the myth of momentum in Ultimate among about 20 topics. The keynote speaker was Kenny Dobyns who waxed comically about the nuances of the Ultimate community. Yet, the main event of the conference was a five-person panel on the future of Ultimate: Elliot Trotter, editor of the most successful online Ultimate news feature, Sky’D Magazine; Gwen Ambler, one of the most decorated and accomplished female players and organizers of women grassroots promotions in the community; Brodie Smith, arguably the most famous Ultimate player in the mainstream
because of his “Frisbee Trick Shot” videos on YouTube that had gone viral; Tim Morrill, the founder of the most successful Ultimate-specific training program, Morrill Performance; and Jim Parinella, the de facto representative of the old guard in Ultimate, who had won six open championships in the Nineties, was a central commentator on Ultimate during his playing days and a fairly accurate prognosticator of Ultimate’s future in the early Aughts. They were there to debate the current status of Ultimate and what the future of Ultimate could be.

The End of Adolescence

In 2010, Ultimate’s participation and exposure was at an all-time high and a majority of the community was finally coming to terms with the increased leverage of players that came from mainstream sports backgrounds. The ethos of Ultimate and the grassroots levels of the sport survived the challenges throughout the adolescence. The UPA had weathered storms and was poised to take Ultimate to the next step. Yet, at the end of its adolescence the Ultimate community was at odds on what that step was.

The UPA transitioned completely to the governing body of the sport of Ultimate in 2010 with the hire of CEO Tom Crawford. Whereas all the UPA top directors (managing director, executive director and CEO) were members of the community before appointment, Crawford had a mainstream background. He was “a founder and Managing Partner of High Performance Associates (HPA), providing consulting services to Fortune 100 companies, universities, sports organizations, and executives and athletes across the United States” and spent 10 years as the Director of Coaching and Managing Director with
the United States Olympic committee.176 His tenure started with the rebranding of the UPA as USAUltimate. Their new mission was to “advance the sport of Ultimate in the United States by enhancing and promoting Character, Community, and Competition”177 rather than their prior “all things to all players” position.178 Unfortunately for the lower levels of competitive Ultimate, the advancement has been mostly focused on the promotion of the top levels of the sport. The transition to USAUltimate had assimilated to a structure more familiar in mainstream sports in the United States – USASwimming, USATriathlon, and USABasketball. The goal was made apparent, that USAUltimate wanted to be the body that guided Ultimate to the mainstream since it was made more possible with the increased participation and exposure. The change was reflected in the financial reports. Membership dues increased 25% and corporate sponsorship more than doubled from 2010 to 2011.179 Increasing corporate sponsorship fulfilled the goal the governing body had had since Nob first took the steps to a corporate structure.

The college regular season was the first installment that affected players on the ground with the restructure and rebranding of the UPA. Instead of the College Series being the only requirement for teams to attempt to get to Nationals, teams now had to register a roster for the regular season in order to play in sanctioned events. This pressured teams to convince players to pay USAUltimate dues earlier in the season and it was difficult for

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barely established teams to recruit new players and place such immediate demands on
them at the beginning of the season. The top teams that had been in place for more than a
decade have enjoyed this change, as they have been the teams to reap the most benefits. In
2010, 2011 and 2012 only 5 out of the 35 different teams that qualified for the college
championships in the Open division had never qualified before. The rich seem to be getting
richer. USAUltimate suppressed certain aspects of growth and there are college teams that
do not participate in the series because of the requirements.

Professional Leagues

AUDL

In February 2011, Josh Moore, a recent business school graduate from the
University of Missouri officially announced his professional Ultimate venture on RSD after
two years of researching the viability of a professional league and developing the idea. He
was unknown to the Ultimate community and had only played Ultimate in intramurals and
local pickup at his university and had no exposure to the Ultimate community as a whole
prior to his posts on RSD. The RSD community attacked his proposition, mainly his lack of
experience in the sport and position in the community. In the 200-plus-comment thread,
“Who is Josh Moore?” Colin Baer summed up the sentiment of the majority of the posters:

People with intimate knowledge of Ultimate, years of experience in Ultimate, and
deep connections in the sport have struggled to make sweeping changes. That’s not
to say it’s impossible, and outsiders with vision and knowledge are certainly
welcome. But someone trying to come into our sport with no knowledge of Ultimate
and no references is going to create doubt, if not outright rejection.\textsuperscript{180}

\textsuperscript{180} Colin Baer post to RSD on February 24, 2011
https://groups.google.com/group/rec.sport.disc/browse_thread/thread/4f3a1c823e3aa43d/ec1f87c517024
a2d?hl=en& (accessed April 9, 2013).
Moore was actually lured into the thread because he did not want potential investors finding his name on the Internet with such slander surrounding it. Moore refuted with:

Our league will do nothing more than to grow interest in the sport and drive more people to want to play. I don’t think anybody in the current ultimate community should feel threatened by the league, but rather, encouraged at more public awareness of the game and maybe help drive some further growth.  

My study has shown that during the adolescence people in the community were reticent about ventures that placed revenue over the game. Today, there are still those threatened mostly by the potential effect a professional league may have on the ethos of the sport. Yet, the largest concern with this venture at the time was that Moore and his associates attempted this without really consulting anyone in the Ultimate community. They were outsiders who seemingly avoided engaging anyone from established ultimate organizations who could give them solid advice. As Baer stated, established figures in the community had a poor track record of making "sweeping changes;" an outsider had to face much more scrutiny in their intentions.

The American Ultimate Disc League started its inaugural season in April 2012. There was much speculation leading up to the opener and a couple months before there were still people asking on RSD whether it was a joke or not. The league had franchises placed in cities with relatively weak Ultimate communities – Buffalo, Detroit, Providence, Indianapolis and Columbus, Ohio – none of which have fielded a nationals-level USAU Open club team in recent years. The only strong community with an established USAU club presence was Philadelphia and their franchise, the Spinners, won the first AUDL championship. The level of play in most games was that of two mid-level college teams.

181 Josh Moore post to RSD, February 24, 2011
https://groups.google.com/group/rec.sport.disc/browse_thread/thread/4f3a1c823e3aa43d/ec1f87c517024a2d?hl=en& (accessed April 9, 2013).
There was some individual talent, but mostly mediocre players. But these were not the biggest problems. Weeks before the season ended the Rhode Island and Connecticut teams were fined by the league for failing to play games on the allotted schedule, which were payable to the affected teams. Those two teams were coincidentally involved in a lawsuit with the league at the same time over the selling of franchises to New York and Boston for the 2013 season who were within a 100-mile non-compete radius. This became a very big mess and both teams ended up being terminated by the league. Even with the tumultuous first season, the AUDL is starting its second season on April 12, 2013 with new franchises in New York, Cincinnati, Boston, Toronto, New Jersey, Chicago, Minneapolis, Madison and Washington DC. The AUDL showed that professional Ultimate had a place in the mainstream sports culture. ESPN featured two plays on its Top Ten throughout the summer after Ultimate only garnering that recognition once in the previous five years. Professional Ultimate may just be more enticing to those in the mainstream as the plays were nothing spectacular.

**MLU**

The Philadelphia Spinners Owner and Coach, Jeff Snader, did not agree with how the AUDL was operated as he had run-ins with Moore and sided with the owners of the franchises that were terminated. He thought “if you can’t join ‘em, beat ‘em” and collaborated with some of the organizers who developed the MLU showcase in Seattle in 2006. Together they created and announced Major League Ultimate (MLU) in October 2012. The MLU is directly competing with the AUDL; New York and Philadelphia have AUDL and MLU teams. The MLU differs from the AUDL in that compensation is based on
profit sharing instead of players being paid a base salary. Also, since it is developed by players known in the community and has franchises on the West coast where top-level Ultimate has thrived (San Francisco, Seattle, Portland and Vancouver who have combined to win 9 of the last 11 USAU Open club titles) the MLU has already enjoyed more positive responses from the community in its lead up to the first pull than the AUDL had in 2012. Pro leagues downplay the history and culture of Ultimate, thus damaging the ethos in a relational sense while also separating the ethos from the most potentially mainstream version of Ultimate. There seems to be an emphasis on the supply-side market in Ultimate. Young, mostly male players, are creating competitive outlets they would like to see succeed instead of searching for what is in demand within the Ultimate community, currently the only market that knows of Ultimate’s respectability as a sport. There are not legions of fans clamoring for professional Ultimate, it is the players that benefit most, at this point, from professional Ultimate – instead of being in the red after a club season, they have their expenses covered while being able to play Ultimate.

Concerns over the Effects of the Pro Leagues

Both leagues have their backers in the community and the feedback from players has had overwhelmingly positive reviews on the game play and sportsmanship level. Regardless, there has been considerable backlash against the potential effects the leagues may have on the ethos of Ultimate and standards of the game for future generations of players to learn. The NUA and the 2006 MLU both had their detractors that bemoaned the change of philosophy in playing a refereed game. Ben Van Heuvelen, a huge proponent and activist for youth Ultimate and coaching the Spirit of the Game as well as an elite USAU club
player, asks the community “What Do We Stand For?” He rejoices in the idea that even though sportsmanship has been present in other sports and has been around for ages, “Ultimate couldn’t function without it.”\textsuperscript{182} He agrees that promoting the sport and compensating players instead of relying on them to foot the bill is a “noble goal,” but questions whether it should be the biggest goal and what might change if it is. He accuses the professional leagues of attempting to forgo the ethos of the sport and change Ultimate, as it is known by “trying to monetize our play.”\textsuperscript{183} He states his goal is to promote “the joy of competition” embodied by Ultimate and the interest in selling the product of Ultimate by the leaders of professional leagues sets aside that joy. He is right in that the AUDL and MLU have made compromises for mainstream inclusion by adding referees to “conform to the expectations of prospective fans” and making the field size equivalent to that of football to fit in to pre-existing fields with stands more seamlessly. Lending to the notion of “cultural diffusion” that I covered earlier, he worries that eventually the professional players’ impressions on youth in the community will lead them to play with what they can get away with rather than what is fair. He denounces the professional leagues’ “poverty of imagination” due to their ignorance of promoting traditional Ultimate and assuming that the model of mainstream professional leagues is what is best for Ultimate to succeed. He argues that the Spirit of the Game can be marketed and that self-officiation, even with observers, can distinguish Ultimate’s top league instead of lumping it in with other sports


\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
professional branches. He implores the community to “expand the scope of our imagination and ambition” and keep building upon the ethos of Ultimate.184

In a response article, Ultimate legend, Kenny Dobyns downplays Van Heuvelen’s use of “we” for the community in his article. Dobyns argues that every player has had a different experience in their introduction, play, view, and competition in the sport. “The Disease of We,” as he calls it, merely limits the expansion of Ultimate and falsely consolidates the “ambitions” of people in the community. He believes that some entrepreneurial minds should be able to gather investors, market Ultimate and value financial success for the viability of the sport at the professional level if they want. He contends that once the original rules were published and put out there, anyone had the right to play Ultimate. Inclusion is the most beautiful aspect of the community of the sport and to exclude certain people’s drive to promote the sport to the mainstream counter-intuitively closes the sport to potential participants and fans. Samantha Salvia calls out the professional leagues for allowing the only visible participation of women in the MLU is that the Philadelphia Spinners have a cheerleading squad in her article “Open Letter to Mark Evangelisto, General Manager, Philadelphia Spinners.”185 She worries that young women outside of the Ultimate community will assume this is the only place for women in Ultimate. Women Ultimate leaders do not want this American mainstream professional sports manifestation to seep in the community. At the UCPC panel on the future of Ultimate, Ambler distinguished Ultimate from other sports in that it has developed relatively across

184 Van Heuvelen
both genders under UPA/USAU’s guidance. Women’s participation in USAU events jumped 10% in 2012 compared with the 6% overall increase. The youth level of women’s Ultimate has exploded in the past few years also. Women do not want the potentially furthest-reaching into the mainstream branch of Ultimate showing that women merely belong on the sidelines in scantily clad clothes, dancing to Jock Jams. Salvia did not demand that there be a professional women’s league, she just echoed the women players’ sentiment that want the professional leagues offer some show of acknowledgement of the competitive women’s Ultimate scene.

These articles have attracted the most attention and comments of anything published on Sky'D. The debates over the direction of the sport are palpable and the community is more engaged than ever in this era of expansion for Ultimate. Van Heuvelen’s article has over 200 comments and counting while Dobyns has seemed to top out at 61. The majority of the community does not want to lose the ethos of the sport in the expansion into the mainstream, but are for diverse branches and the visibility and potential participation they can garner. USAUltimate has taken up the blending of the maintenance of the ethos and increased marketability.

Competition and Co-optation – USAUltimate’s Plan

In 2005, there were rumblings of the NUA restarting. At a UPA board meeting the agenda called for the board to discuss how to deal with the competition from the NUA. The UPA “did not publicly respond to competition in the past,” but the acknowledgement that the NUA was “competition” in 2005 assures that USAUltimate certainly views the AUDL and the MLU competition. They are showcasing Ultimate skills that players formed in their
competitions. To compete with the new draws, USAU announced, in October 2012, their five-year plan designed to take Ultimate into the mainstream. The plan to create a more constant schedule for simpler marketability of the USAU’s top level of competition has been in the works since 2008, the professional leagues just exacerbated the extent to which USAU would need to restructure the season. They totally restructured the Open, Women’s and Mixed club seasons to a format deemed the Triple Crown Tour (TCT) in order to provide a more stable schedule that could be marketed to sponsors and cable networks. Basically, they divided the teams that participated in 2012 into four tiers – Pro (top four), Elite (next four), Select (next 16) and Classic (the rest) based on the 2012 season results and scheduled tournaments. The Pro tier teams are scheduled to play each other in fixtures throughout the season to maintain consistency, are not required to play any other teams, but are allowed to play in non-USAU sanctioned tournaments. USAU essentially segregated competition by co-opting existing top competitive tournaments for the tour. Tournaments in which teams could gain entry to by putting in a bid or that were invites are now restricted to USAU’s approval of the competing field. There has been backlash against the TCT, but not as much as against the professional leagues. In late March 2013 USAU completed a deal with ESPN to stream select games from College Nationals, the TCT and Club Nationals, a huge coup for their cause. This could propel USAU’s brand of Ultimate into the mainstream.

“Legitimacy” has never been closer and still the community is divided on what that means for the sport and what aspects of the ethos, essence and culture may be risked for that. The Ultimate community is typically “a bunch resistant to change, inexplicably tied to certain aspects of the game for reasons that may not make sense” to someone from the mainstream sports culture. USAUltimate, the AUDL and the MLU all look to push the product of the best players who are the custodians of what it means to play great Ultimate. Yet, the community wants to promote what has driven the sport – this higher ideal of what competition is – as the primary force for the expected change that comes with evolution and progress and not have professionalization, monetization and commercialization, what should be secondary goals, stand in front of that notion. The ethos of Ultimate, the Spirit of the Game and self-officiation, has many supporters and many detractors, but all agree that they are unique features that distinguish Ultimate from the mainstream sports culture. Without the presence of the ethos of Ultimate, it would be just another sport and those that disagree fail to consider anything beyond the physical boundaries of the game. Taking a meta-glance at spirit and what it means to the community shows that Ultimate is different than mainstream sports, culturally and philosophically. John Borgmeyer’s wrote to me that “Ultimate is still somewhat ‘counter cultural’ in the sense that it primarily exists as a physical experience rather than as a consumed image.” “The self-seriousness of pro sports” cannot be imported into the “Ultimate culture” that grew with a Frisbee game that was

started as a “gag” on mainstream sports between friends in 1968 “without at least acknowledging that you get the joke.”

The dominant culture of the Ultimate community has progressed with the sport from infancy to adolescence and now to young adulthood. Regardless of what happens at the top level of Ultimate, there will always be the grassroots level of the sport. There will be players that only participate without shoes and those that refuse to play with people without shoes. The community is built upon that; the ethos of this organized game with a disc is what Ultimate will always have. Conjuring Erikson, the community is now searching for its “affiliation” and “love.” Though, I posit that the community’s love for the sport will not waver. In Borgmeyer’s experience, as more people have discovered Ultimate and the landscape of the community has diversified, it has become “less explicitly populated by specific personality stereotypes (hippie, counter-culture type, etc.)” and it is now “defined by shared values, the first and foremost of which is enjoyment of the disc.” However it progresses Ultimate will always affiliate with its ethos through its culture, essence and communal spirit at the grassroots level. The community as a whole has the duty to carry this game into the future with honor and integrity whether a product is being sold, observers are being utilized or kids are playing 20 versus 20 at summer camp. Commercialization is the American way and it is persistent. One can only hope that the ongoing professionalism will not drown out the grassroots ethos of Ultimate.

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188 Borgmeyer email to author, March 6, 2013.
189 Borgmeyer email.
APPENDIX “
ULTIMATE THESIS SURVEY” BY SURVEYMONKEY
(created February 28, 2013)
1. **What is your Ultimate playing experience? (when you were first introduced, how long you've played, what levels, etc..)**

I started playing informal ultimate in high school during the club activity period. I started playing in college in 1999 and club in 2001. I competed with mixed and women's club teams at Nationals for about 10 years.

*3/27/2013 8:31 AM*

First played the game in 1979; played intramurals from 1980 to 1985, with some exposure to college and club; played college from 1986 to 2000, including a couple of Nationals appearances; played club open and mixed from 1987 to 2012; played summer league from 1987 to 2011; just played in my first ever college women’s tournament a month ago!

*3/17/2013 5:36 PM*

started College Rec league in 1982. Played College Nationals, Open Nationals, various summer leagues.

*3/13/2013 3:24 PM*

Played since 1989 at all levels (including world and national championships). My last club open season was 2006. I now play Masters.

*3/11/2013 3:08 PM*

Started playing Ultimate at age 38 and have been playing since, (our for a year with knee injury). Been playing disc sports since I was 16. Only played local tournaments and league. Play competitive, but not elite. Still play and now some coaching and running clinics for my

3/8/2013 1:03 PM

Started in '92, played rec thru club to nationals, played in US, Europe, India, and the Philippines

3/8/2013 7:50 AM

I started playing when I was 10 (1992-93). A boy on my street joined the very loosely organized ultimate club in high school, and he taught all the kids on our street to play in the asphalt cul-de-sac. By my freshman year, he was a senior and prez of the club, and I joined and started playing with them. We occasionally hosted school-wide tourneys, but our first really tourney was the GA Games in 99 or 2000. We got our asses kicked, and I got one of the worst rasberries of my life laying out on those dry bermuda and dirt fields. I’m now 30, have been playing for 20 years. Playing with the AFDC for the last 3.5 years has taught me more about the game and improved my skills more than the previous 17 years did. Having played other sports all my life (Swimming, triathlons, softball, tennis) I can honestly say that the level of sportsmanship and community involved in ultimate has made it the most enduring activity in my life. People attracted to ultimate play for love of the game, and thats what makes it the greatest.

3/7/2013 11:33 AM

I had limited exposure in college (83-87) because my brother was playing for Ga. Tech. I began playing after I moved to Atlanta in pick up games in 1990. In rapid sucesion I moved
from league play (AFDC) to club (Chain Lightning). I played club from 91-97, then masters and mixed 06-12.

3/7/2013 8:40 AM
I was first introduced to Ultimate in 2002 at Summer Camp. I went on to start a team at my high school in 2004 and have played in college and leagues since then

3/6/2013 12:16 AM
I began playing in college in 1997, in a very competitive program. Within 6 months of when I first stepped on an ultimate field, I was playing on a contender for the college national championship. I played four years at that college, including winning the UPA College Championships once. I then played elite open club on several different teams, including winning the UPA Club Championships.

3/5/2013 10:16 PM
Introduced in college *1997 Re-introduced in Dallas *2002

3/4/2013 7:05 PM
I was introduced to Ultimate during orientation week my freshman year of college in the Fall of 2005. I played 4 years in college (attending Nationals once), two years in USAU club (Mixed Nationals both years, finishing 2nd in 2010 and tied for 3rd in 2011) and played professionally last year for the Connecticut Constitution.

3/4/2013 5:16 PM
1st played in early 80’s. joined a competitive team in’87. Played ever since. Played many tournaments in Europe when stationed there. Was once advanced and above average but
not national team level. Like Hat tournaments. Started the Presidential Plastic Platter Hatter that is still going in Melbourne, Fl area each February.

3/4/2013 3:42 PM


3/4/2013 11:07 AM

Started playing college ultimate in 1990 at Kansas and used all 5 yrs of eligibility. Qualified for nationals 4 times but had poor showings. Played club ultimate until 2007 or so. Never played at club nationals but got close a few times.

3/4/2013 9:02 AM


3/4/2013 8:02 AM

First started playing with a bunch of distance runners (some D1) as cross training in 1976. Most of them didn't move beyond pickup, but I went on the play in national championships finals in the open, masters & grand masters division. I'm still playing in the GM division.

3/3/2013 8:19 PM
First introduced informally in the early 90s, played in college 94-98 (lost in a couple of game-to-go's), played coed at the "trying to make it to the back door game" level, then competitive womens with Strike (2 years) and Ozone (7 years)

3/3/2013 6:20 PM

First introduced 1978. That makes 35 years of playing at all levels.

3/3/2013 6:16 PM

Started Oct. of 91, played at high club (3rd at nationals in 98, won coed nationals and worlds 99 and 00.

3/3/2013 2:33 PM

I started playing around 2000 in the Philippines, of all places.

3/3/2013 5:41 AM


3/2/2013 10:58 PM

I first started in High School in 1988, playing a very informal Ultimate game on the lawn, with few rules. In 1990, I started college and played on an intramural league for a few years. I also went to a couple of tournaments with the local club team. Since then I have founded two college teams, played on competitive men's, mixed and Master's teams, almost all in Canada. I am now retired due to injuries.

3/2/2013 3:07 PM
started playing in college in 1999 my freshman year at UW-Stevens Point. I still play at some of the larger Co-ed tournaments around the PNW. Never been to a nationals. It’s a more of a social, go see all my friends, kind of thing now.

3/2/2013 12:08 AM

First introduced to Ultimate around JR/SR year of HS, 1984 or 85. First real experience w/ the sport wasn't until SO year of college in fall 1986. Played on a Regionals qualifying Mid-Atlantic team while in college (highest finish 8th). Moved to NW in 1990, playing mostly league with several sojourns into Mixed (losing game to go to the game to go to Nationals in 2002) and Masters (team made Nationals in 2009), as well as coaching a local college team for two years, and I have been a certified Observer for several years now.

3/1/2013 6:45 PM

I was first exposed to ultimate at age 15 or 16, in approx 1983 at my Jewish day camp outside Baltimore by a friend who played at his Friends School. Later that summer went to a couple of pick-up games/practices at Towson State University and what I later learned was a club team (Baltimore Breeze) although college and club almost interchangeable back then. Didn’t catch the bug until freshman yr of college (spring 86) when after a disastrous season or riding bench on a winless, D-III football team at Western Maryland College (now named McDaniel) I formed the school’s first team. Later played and captain at University of Maryland, then club in DC, club and masters in NC, FL, and now GM back with Baltimore (and NC). Traveled club East Coast/MId-Atlantic club circuit in late 80s through mid-90s; Been to Nationals with four teams in three divisions in two regions (and counting).

3/1/2013 6:39 PM
I was first introduced in 1992 by a player from Oberlin College.

3/1/2013 5:52 PM
Almost 20 years, mostly mixed teams at the club regional level

3/1/2013 5:42 PM
Started at age 12 in 1975. I played in college, and some early club with Chain Lightning, mostly recreational continually since then. There for the beginning of the Washington Area Frisbee Club, and the Atlanta Flying Disc Club. Since active in the AFDC's many leagues. I also coach my daughter's Middle School team for the last two years and plan to continue coaching for a long time.

3/1/2013 5:03 PM
Started playing in HS in Ny in 1993. Been playing ever since. College, Club (nationals) and now masters

3/1/2013 4:42 PM
First introduced to Ultimate in 1983 in Santa Barbara (SB Condors vs. SF Flying Circus exhibition game. I went to UCSB. They had a very strong intramural program at the time something more than 50 teams). I believe Tom Kennedy had a hand in starting Intramural Ultimate at UCSB. Played in the Black Tide program 1983-1985. Played Condors 1985-1995.

3/1/2013 4:26 PM
I started in 1984 at Winona State University and have played open ultimate at the elite level as well as national champ in masters
3/1/2013 3:52 PM
Playing since 1979. Introduced as Frisbee Football during middle school recess. Playing off & on since. Club experience from 2002-2011, now retired. I have been to club nationals 6 times (Mixed & masters).

3/1/2013 3:49 PM
began playing in 1977 college Midwest; club and league 1981-1985 SF Bay area, 1999 to present, league, mixed, pickup.

3/1/2013 2:44 PM
I was introduced to ultimate when making a weekend trip to Wilmington, NC in 1991 and came across College Easterns. I played college soccer for a tiny school in western NC. We brought back ultimate to our college and started an intramural league. After taking a year off of school I moved to Wilmington and joined the team.

3/1/2013 12:46 AM
20 years. started playing just after college, i’ve played at nationals in open(semis best finish), nationals masters and won grand masters nationals.

3/1/2013 12:35 AM
Started playing pickup and intramurals 1979, collegiate 1984. College nationals, club regionals.

3/1/2013 12:35 AM
1983, 30 years this year, Nationals
3/1/2013 11:07 AM
Playing actively since 1994. Played college (regionals yearly) boston area tier 2 club for ten years.

3/1/2013 10:57 AM
Started playing when someone posted a notice about playing in a company newsletter in 1987. Played in UPA Sectionals that year and traveled to the Tempe New Year Fest in Jan of 1988. Moved to Mesa, AZ in 1988 and started playing with the hardcores. Basically played and traveled as much as possible for the next 22 years. I played on all of the most competitive teams in the Phoenix area in that time, and was typically involved in the captaining. I was the TD of the New Year Fest from 1991 until about 1996, and played a strong role in that tournament until around 2005 or so. I was the principal instigator in the formation of the Valley of the Sun Ultimate Association, which still operates the New Year Fest and the various leagues in the Phoenix area. I was a fairly strong role player in the Cuervo ultimate series during its 3 years of existence. The highest level of play any of my teams achieved were in the UPA Masters division. We lost in the semifinals in 1992 (after winning pool play; damn injuries). We came in 5th in 2003.

3/1/2013 10:46 AM
First played in 1978 at Williams College, didn’t start playing seriously until fall ’82 in Boston. Played women’s club until ’96; went to Nationals 11 times, 5X finals, 3 wins, played 2 WUCC and one world championship. Played a little mixed at regional level 4-5 years in 2000s.

3/1/2013 10:40 AM
Played pickup in the late 70's. Played competitive on college teams in mid-80's. Played on Open teams in 80's and early 90's. Twice went to college Nationals with Ga Tech (87 and 88), twice to Open Nationals with Chain Lightning (89 and 90).

3/1/2013 10:36 AM

Learned at summer school at Choate from some guys who played at Wesleyan College (Middletown CT) in 1986. Played pickup-level at Bristol Central High (CT), and against a cross town high school in 1988. Founded a team at Rose Hulman in 89-90. Played at Macalester 91-92, Twin Cities Ultimate league organizer from 95 present. Smattering of low level club play. Grandmasters Nationals in 2012

3/1/2013 10:25 AM

First introduced to Ultimate in 1981 by a group of Chiropractic students in Sunnyvale, CA. I was 11. Started playing pickup games in high school in 1986. Played college at Oberlin College in '91-'93; helped the team make it to Nationals in '92. Played on club teams in Brooklyn and Santa Barbara until 2002.

3/1/2013 9:13 AM
1985-2007

3/1/2013 8:57 AM

poop

3/1/2013 1:06 AM
2. What is your take on Spirit?

It is important for players to have good sportsmanship on and off the field, which is how I feel for all sports. It is important for Ultimate leaders to embody and role model good sportsmanship.

3/27/2013 8:31 AM

Spirit of the game is first and most important rule; without mutual respect, the game is not 'ultimate,' it's just another game. Players are made better by respecting their opponents and trying harder to be better in a fair way.

3/17/2013 5:36 PM

Have always been a fan of the spirit principle. Unfortunate that some try to take advantage of it - mostly at higher competition levels and for certain teams only.

3/13/2013 3:24 PM

It's an important aspect of the game. It's a grand experiment that's worth having.

3/11/2013 3:08 PM

Spirit is the most unique idea in team sports. To be able to trust that the other team is also doing their best to always play fair and never cheat is unheard of in most other team sports. To quote Dan "The Stork" Roddick, (the man credited with writing the original Sotg philosophy), "Ultimate continues to be a maverick in the herd of conventional sports." An important benefit of playing with spirit is that the best team on the day will win, not the team that used "win at any cost strategy". With spirit we are an example to all other sports how to truly compete in a game with genuine sportsmanship. The concept of receiving joy
from playing is contrary to most other sports where the joy only comes from winning.

Compare playing a game to living and we learn that it is always more rewarding to enjoy
the moment, to live in the day, rather than for the future.

3/8/2013 1:03 PM

It's the core of what makes ultimate different and is being lost in the US. I attribute that to
the lack of seasoned players coaching college ultimate and pressing to make SOTG a central
tenant of competition. I also attribute that to US's British heritage. In short, US teams follow
SOTG the least followed by GB. Continental Europe and south east Asia play with the most
spirit.

3/8/2013 7:50 AM

A bad day playing ultimate beats a good day doing almost anything else, so I always try to
show good spirit and sportsmanship (heckling counts as good spirit, right?) One jack-ass
player with poor spirit can make the whole game go down the tubes, so I always make it a
point to try and cool the hot-heads on my team and calmly explain any disputed calls

3/7/2013 11:33 AM

It was a major drawing card for me when I first began playing. It wasn't questioned or
viewed as 'hippie crap' at the time, so it was more universally observed. I still believe it is
an aspect of the sport that separates Ultimate from other sports.

3/7/2013 8:40 AM

Spirit is the most important part of Ultimate. It holds fair play and respect for others in the
highest regard.
I think that spirit is an important organizing principle for ultimate, and that it encourages players to prioritize their opponents in ways that they otherwise wouldn’t. It’s essentially the golden rule.

It’s the backbone of what makes this the best sport in the world. Tragic that we have to battle to keep it.

I think that spirit is what you make it of it. For the majority of career, Spirit of the Game was well adhered to, even in the most competitive of games. Unfortunately, there are most certainly teams that take advantage of the system to benefit their team.

Spirit should be tantamount. The idea is for everyone to play their best and other players playing hard spur better play and that hard play should be rewarded/acknowledged no matter what side you’re on.

A cool, ambiguous component of the game.

Too easy to abuse. Tough to be consistent in heat of battle.
Spirit=Sportsmanship. Different levels of play and styles of tournament require one to act accordingly. There will be a much different vibe in league play, versus warm up tourney play, versus regions or nationals with observers and something on the line.

3/4/2013 8:02 AM
I'm not a big believer in the spirit of the game. It does exist at the lower levels even among a few players at the highest level, but the higher the stakes the, the lower the spirit.

3/3/2013 8:19 PM
Integral to the sport of ultimate, but also at risk of disappearing as the sport becomes commodified.

3/3/2013 6:20 PM
Spirit is often conflated with self-officiation, and they are very different. Spirit is inherently personal and therefore subjective. Like snowflakes, no two spirits are alike.

3/3/2013 6:16 PM
It should be what makes this game great, but we the players let it down all the time.

3/3/2013 2:33 PM
I know it sounds corny and elitist, but I believe Spirit is what separates us from other sports. I've played other sports competitively (eg, basketball, volleyball), and ultimate definitely has a different, unique culture. I have made more close friends and had more fun playing ultimate than any other activity in my life. I think the emphasis on Spirit is directly responsible for the creation of this awesome culture.
Spirit was a central part of playing Ultimate. I loved the cheers, the friendliness, and the lack of testosterone on and off the field.

It's been something to strive for on the field and in life. A good thing.

Spirit is both a good thing and a bad thing. Good sportsmanship is always important, but there seems to be an undercurrent within Spirit that frowns upon competition and, especially, following rules (see following answer).

Overrated. A nice idea, in theory, that has proven unworkable at the highest levels. Fine for pickup, summer league, coed, but has outlived its purpose in the so-called "Elite" play.

Spirit is an integral part of the game, without it we are just another sport.

Depends on the context of the game. Good spirit in a summer league game is different than good spirit in high competition.
Very important too me. It is something I try to teach others. I feel some of it is lacking at the highest Club levels.

3/1/2013 5:03 PM
I like the spirit of the game. I like fair play, honesty and respect for your opponents. but i dont think that means you cant have good 3rd part officiating.

3/1/2013 4:42 PM
I think the Spirit ethos is admirable but as the game becomes inevitably more competitive, and with athletes coming from more traditional sports, actual officiating will become increasingly more necessary.

3/1/2013 4:26 PM
I think it is a proxy for good sportsmanship. We sometimes make more of this than is necessary and makes us feel self rightous. I think the concept is great and I talk highly of it, but use terms like sportsmanship and morality to make the point.

3/1/2013 3:52 PM
I love the concept of SOTG at the youth level & pickup. At the higher levels of the game, I am for observers or refs. I believe we can retain the best parts of spirit/sportsmanship while playing under different forms of officiating. SOTG does not equal "make your own calls"

3/1/2013 3:49 PM
Personally, I think its nice, but over hyped. I rank skills, strategy, teamwork, meeting new friends and competing to improve myself above it. Never got into cheers.
I think "spirit" is a very unique part of the game and believe in it from a competitive perspective. However, I think many players take advantage of the term and use it to manipulate the game as well as create drama that is irrelevant to competitive ultimate.

Play fair, don't be a dick, but try and beat your opponent down

A vital and useful part of the sport.

Spirit is good, and a foundation of the game.

Spirit does not mean singing a song to the other team after a game. That time should be spent getting ready for the next game. To me spirit more embodies a desire to play a hard, fair game within the rules and to not be a dick. I think this goes along with my preference for open league, mid-high competitive levels.

I've long thought that the story surrounding SOTG is overstated. However, I also have long thought that it's a valuable conversation to have, esp when playing under self-officiation. My point is to be realistic about how self-officiated play under SOTG actually works out.
? Kind of open-ended question ... players have always sought to find loopholes in the rules; but it's always a better experience for everyone when people play within the rules and aren't jerks.

3/1/2013 10:40 AM
I like the spirit clause. It is essentially the Golden Rule.

3/1/2013 10:36 AM
"The hardest thing about spirit of the game is believing the other guy has it." I teach that as a captain and I carry that around to places like RSD, Skyd, and league discussions. Spirit is important to our game, but takes active engagement.

3/1/2013 10:25 AM
I think it's challenging and awesome. I love that it puts a premium on personal responsibility, often in situations where one has temptations to make selfish calls.

3/1/2013 9:13 AM
I like it, but don't feel it has to mutually exclusive with active observers. For non-active calls, like fouls, if the players can't work it and thus have to go to the observer, there should be a penalty against the team of player with whom the observer disagrees.

3/1/2013 8:57 AM

3. What is your feeling on self-officiation (pros/cons)?
At the highest levels I believe we need some sort of ref or observer system. I don’t feel that having officials inherently contradicts sportsmanship or spirit of the game. Self-officiation is great for low to medium levels of ultimate, as it places the responsibility on the players to know and implement the rules and reduces costs. The con at the highest level especially is that it can make the sport less spectator-friendly (when it slows down the game, or the fans can’t understand what is happening). To be successful refs or observers need training and practice; having bad refs or observers is far worse than no officials.

3/27/2013 8:31 AM
I ardently support self-officiation, with allowances for observers. I detest active referees, and have played with them before; the game is diminished by active referees because it induces an incentive for less 'ultimate' players to cheat, and like in soccer, referees miss a lot of calls that players do not miss because they were involved.

3/17/2013 5:36 PM
Generally a big fan of it b/c of the principle and it does away with need for finding refs. At certain high level competitions have understood when ref.s were called for.

3/13/2013 3:24 PM
Self-officiating creates an expectation that does not exist in a refereed sport. I’ve seen C league IM basketball games at Princeton University (could their be a less significant league out there?) devolve into absolute wars in the paint because teams are "playing the refs" instead of playing the game. I also played in the NUA event in North Carolina where one of the players simply socked a player in the stomach because he knew that there was almost no chance that the ref would see it. In other words, when the onus is completely out of the
players' hands, it becomes ok to cheat, to dive (as in soccer), etc. Clearly, some players will cheat even with self-officiating, but then it's at least clear that those players are cheating.

3/11/2013 3:08 PM

Pros; 14 referees are better than only 2 or 4 and since they are also players, will always be closer to the play, (even with observers, they sometimes leave it to the players, because they didn't have a better perspective). Encourages all players to know the rules. The responsibility to play fair is with the players, so takes away the temptation and the opportunities to cheat. Cons; Some players still cheat, by making calls that will be to their or their team's advantage, so they have a better chance to win or they won't look bad on a play. (Nothing says nice huck, like travel).

3/8/2013 1:03 PM

Its ideal as it promotes integrity and character. Players without integrity and character should be chastised by the larger community. In the US, especially Wilmington, NC, there are communities of players that lack integrity and character which degrades the effectiveness of self-officiation. Another note - self-officiation keeps the barriers of play (i.e., cost to play) low and makes the game more approachable for more people. Lastly, observers / referees are there because there is an assumption that players are cheating. If players didn’t cheat, we wouldn’t have them. Why do we consciously accept the notion that ultimate players are cheaters?

3/8/2013 7:50 AM
I think it’s great that we have a sport where self-officiation is possible, but there are definitely times when it would be nice if someone who knew ALL the rules could step in and make a call when disputed.

3/7/2013 11:33 AM
The biggest benefit I felt was as a motivator. I felt it challenged me to play even better because it was a point of pride to be viewed as a spirited player and a talented player. It is easier to be one or the other. The cons are that obviously some can and have take advantage of the situation. We had some of that in the 90’s. Individuals who blantly violated spirit were frequently policed. When teams as a whole adopted a ‘test the boundaries’ mentality it became more difficult to stem.

3/7/2013 8:40 AM
I feel that self-officiation is a great feature of the game when used correctly. It’s when people call unnecessary fouls, picks, and violations that the game becomes tarnished. Calls should be made out of knowledge of how the game works, not spite or frustration.

3/6/2013 12:16 AM
I think that ultimate at the highest levels is nearly impossible to manage well with self-officiation. Some games go fine, but it doesn’t take much for a game to turn into an ugly call-fest, and many teams have used that to their advantage. I would love to see a system where refs make calls, or observers with increased powers, but with the expectation still on the players to not push the boundaries, and to point out calls that are missed. Based on the culture of other competitive sports, I realize that may be unrealistic.
3/5/2013 10:16 PM

Pro -- It asks people to compete at the highest levels and integrity without regard of victory or loss. Con -- For the most part, man can’t adhere to the pro.

3/4/2013 7:05 PM

Growing up, I played basketball, so I was very use to officials and self-officiation was a big change. Overall, it works if the players want it to work. I personally prefer the officiated game - you can focus more on what you’re doing on the field and less on "is that a foul" or what the stall count is.

3/4/2013 5:16 PM

Self officiation is the way to go. As long as people know the rules, there should be no argument. Either contest or don’t and move forward. As level of play rises - bigger and more recognized tournaments, it tends to decay into arguments and name calling or ridicule. I can see where officials are needed to move games forward as players think winning is more important than spirit.

3/4/2013 3:42 PM

S.O. continues to evolve. I like the observer concept

3/4/2013 11:07 AM

Great in theory, too hard to implement in heat of battle.

3/4/2013 9:02 AM

It makes the sport accessible because refs and officials are difficult to obtain in any sport. Especially on the scale they would be needed in ultimate. At regions and nationals, I think
they should be utilized. The main issue with self officiating in high level events is how different people view the game, contact, infractions, and the rule book. Do we utilize technicalities to our advantage or let them slide to facilitate game play. Do we call every little touch, or let it go until it actually affects play. An official usually has one way of calling things so you begin to understand. Players are all over the place.

3/4/2013 8:02 AM

The problem with self-officiating is that every individual has their own opinion about how the rules should be enforced. It's like having 14 officials on the field. Active observers or referees limit that to a few people. Also, players with overbearing personalities are more apt to make calls causing an imbalance.

3/3/2013 8:19 PM

Key to the sport. There are too many players on the field and too much incidental contact for officials to be able to see everything. As a result, without self-officiation, people will increasingly game the rules. Not that it doesn't already happen, but the observer system seems to work well - preserve the self-officiated nature so that individual players must self-regulate, but calling out a team or an individual on things that are gross violations (TMFs, ruling on certain issues that otherwise would slow the game too much, deciding fouls only when asked to rule, etc.)

3/3/2013 6:20 PM

It's fantastic when it works, but at the highest levels of competition it can be problematic. It's hard to makes plays and calls. Usually one or the other will suffer.
3/3/2013 6:16 PM
It should be the only way the game is played, but we are not worthy of the responsibility.

3/3/2013 2:33 PM
I've seen people make terrible calls in ultimate, but I've also seen refs make bad calls and players try to work refs (soccer comes to mind). Having played officiated sports, I can say I have a preference for self-officiation - it's imperfect (like any other system) but it's an inextricable part of Spirit which I value greatly. The day someone tackles me from behind to prevent a score because they have a "foul to give" is the day I quit playing ultimate. Having said all that, I would understand the need for refs in a pro ultimate league - the context is completely different.

3/3/2013 5:41 AM
asdf

3/2/2013 10:58 PM
This was the core of ultimate, the notion that we were mature enough to sort out what was right on our own, that people did not have to cheat to win, unlike other sports.

3/2/2013 3:07 PM
Pros- Teaches you lessons. Usually works well enough. It is socially enforced. When you're at the party, people talk and know who the dink on the field is. Cons - at high levels of play, it isn't adequate sometimes.

3/2/2013 12:08 AM
Pros: 1) 14 refs on the field means that subtle fouls and violations that do affect play are more likely to be called. 2) Self-officiation coupled with the Observer system is, in my opinion, far superior to Refereed ultimate. Cons: 1) Few players have actually read/digested the rules; most players knowledge of the rules is via word-of-mouth and, as such, their knowledge and understanding of rules and their subtleties is severely lacking - particularly when every player is, in theory, a referee on the field.

3/1/2013 6:45 PM
Kind of hard to distinguish re above. It doesn't work.

3/1/2013 6:39 PM
It is good. The transition of the sport from those that love to play to those that couldn't make their college team in the sport they played in high school has made this process more dicey and contested.

3/1/2013 5:52 PM
Self-officiation generally produces better calls but can also be gamed for cheating.

3/1/2013 5:42 PM
Very important to me, also, but I think the Observer Program is a good compromise. I am a Certified Observer. It needs to me streamlined to help speed up the disputes.

3/1/2013 5:03 PM
works at most levels (for most teams) but insufficient for competitive ultimate.

3/1/2013 4:42 PM
I think self-officiation is fine for lower-level competition, but as the stakes get higher, the burden of making a call (right or wrong) should be handed over to officials. That was the players can concentrate on playing the game.

3/1/2013 4:26 PM

I think it makes alot of sense for league play, but I question the idea when trying to develop talent at the youth level. I still think the kids should make the call with the right of coaches to overrisde when the calls are incorrect.

3/1/2013 3:52 PM

see previous answer

3/1/2013 3:49 PM

The reason I got into ultimate is that I hated coaches and officials. Self officiating and putting up with the ass-hats who abuse it are part of the price to be paid.

3/1/2013 2:44 PM

Players are so diverse that they often interpret the rules differently from one another. What is a foul to one person isn't a foul for someone else. In competitive games self officiation can be unreliable. The concept is great! However, the game has evolved and self officiation should be left for lower level ultimate.

3/1/2013 12:46 AM

I'm for it, but like having observers against certain teams who have a history of abusing the self offication. I also think for series events like regionals and nationals they should always be available.
As above, a vital and useful part of the sport.

Unfortunately, not everyone can abide by Spirit of the game, so it is tough to rely on. The older the game gets the tougher it seems to police.

I like self officiation, but lack of knowledge of the whole ruleset, particularly at the somewhat competative level, makes it difficult. I say at that level because they is a place where the speed and athleticism of the game make rules calls a much more split second decision that at lower levels. At higher levels I think the rules are more generally known. I'm not sure if I would like full on referees - I think I would, but I would like some other changes as well (shot clock for stall count is one) Observers and linesmen is a pretty good way to go, but there just aren't enough to go around.

While I am fine with self-officiated play under SOTG in many contexts, I do see the need to have observers/officials when players' notion of the importance of winning is high. There are some people who are simply not suited to self-officiated play, and even people who are generally well-suited to it can botch the job when the stakes are high. Of course the costs are attractive under self-officiation. I ran tournaments with up to about 70 teams, and it was hard enough without having to deal with officials. It would have been far more expensive to the participants to have officials. We were fortunate in that the New Year Fest was always a tournament where the fun was more important that the title, so we were able
to avoid uglimate for the most part. And make no mistake, we had some big shitheads play in our tournament.

3/1/2013 10:46 AM
See above. Self-officiation is critical to preserve as a concept to enable the growth of the sport -- it's great that you can have a legitimate, competitive game without having to round up an official, because there simply aren’t that many around. Keeps costs low and makes access easy. On the other hand, I've been to two college nationals watching daughter's team and I think having Observers makes it a much better experience for everyone because it's harder for cheaters to cheat.

3/1/2013 10:40 AM
Pros: puts responsibility on players, keeps players from subtle forms of cheating like grabbing cutters and semi-intentional picks in the stack. By keeping Ultimate self-officiated, it keeps the game somewhat clean and not a game of What can I get away with? The game would probably descend into more of a physical game like basketball if there were refs. Cons - bad foul calls by players to gain an advantage, long delays to work out calls

3/1/2013 10:36 AM
Ultimate should be played, and the best way to insure you've got a game is remove barriers to participation. Self officiation keeps barriers low - everyone's expectation should always be that you're self officiating. Observers or anything else are the exception.

3/1/2013 10:25 AM
Pros: challenges us to be better people. Does not award flopping. At its best, brings about a sense that players on both teams are working together even beyond the competition to win. Cons: brings out the best and the worst in people. Very difficult to make a call with integrity when it might hurt one's chances of winning. Often appears to run counter to human nature (which I argue is a good thing, since human nature is so frequently base and amoral).

3/1/2013 9:13 AM

It doesn't work consistently with male players on the highest level. Other than that, it generally works.

3/1/2013 8:57 AM

lots of poops

3/1/2013 1:06 AM

4. What was the level of play (competitiveness, spirit level) when you began playing? What changes/similarities in these have you noticed during your time?

Part of my experience was a shift from college to club, but I think even within the college level things have changed drastically. When I began playing college in 1999 women's teams placed a lot of emphasis on cheers and by the time I left in 2004 that was not a priority. I think college women's ultimate had shifted to be more comparable to college men's ultimate and had adopted more of a focus on being competitive. There was still camaraderie but it wasn't so "rah rah."
3/27/2013 8:31 AM

I miss the cheers after the game the most, and still work to get my college players to cheer other teams, but when they do that, they are the exception to the norm. The competition has always been very high, but I think too many younger players are losing contact with the camaraderie and the concept of why self-officiating is superior. Those elements can be coached, but many of the larger programs I see today put winning first and developing somewhere down the line of their priorities.

3/17/2013 5:36 PM

Spirit is probably about the same. The athleticism of players, at all ages/levels had improved incredibly.

3/13/2013 3:24 PM

I think that at the club level there is less intimidation and nastiness now than there was when I first started playing (eg, NYNY, not to say that they were pure evil). I also think that the top teams have simply agreed to play a more physical style. I think that the use of observers has helped a lot.

3/11/2013 3:08 PM

I'm from Canada and in general we play a more physical game. At international competitions we often score low in the "contact" category of WFDF spirit scoring. With all the growth I have seen some concern about losing this wonderful concept and subsequently are aware and I'm involved with players trying to reemphasize it's unique qualities and benefits. I know of one top international club team that, after receiving very low spirit scores at worlds and the USAU club series, took it upon themselves to improve
their spirit. They were successful, finishing first in team spirit at their next international competition. Recognizing it's value they recommitted to incorporating it more into their game, using sit down meetings and practicing spirit during their practices.

3/8/2013 1:03 PM

In Atlanta league play and club play moth were very high. Poor spirit got introduced by Wilmington, NC in the mid-90's and was absurdly accepted by many teams citing Wilmington's competitiveness. As the college game grew, where parity is very high, poor spirit proliferated and call for observers began. In the US, it seems that poor spirit is now accepted. In other parts of the world its not tolerated.

3/8/2013 7:50 AM

It was very relaxed high school kid pick-up, and we never kept score until it got late or dark, and then someone would yell "game to 5!". That attitude continued through most of my college career, playing pick-up with my friends at school. I still enjoy that lax attitude from time to time, but the more I play and the more leagues I participate in, the more I notice organized strategy, more plays being called on the line. The spirit level is, for the most part, still very high. People who play ultimate don't play to be cool or fit in with their friends. They play because they love the game and what it represents.

3/7/2013 11:33 AM

People were just as competitive in the 90's as today, though not as skilled nor athletic. At the elite level I think today's teams are as spirited as the top teams in the 90's. Chain and Revolver in particular seem to play hard contested games with relatively few calls.
My level of play has always been light hearted. Even when playing the most competitive games (college regionals etc.) Myself and those around me were focused on the good times rather than the end result.

Competitiveness was very high, spirit was generally considered important, though there were individuals who abused the self-officiation system. I've seen my alma mater go through phases where it was considered a very unspirited team, and I found that upsetting.

The influx of youth and collegiate players, especially the unguided, has left Spirit of the Game in constant decline.

When I began in 2005, the competitiveness and spirit level were both high. Playing in Club Mixed offered a very high level of competition as well as spirit (2010-2011), while games leading up to and including Men's College Nationals (2009) saw high competitiveness and varying levels of spirit depending on the opposition. The vast majority of teams, however, were a pleasure to play against.

Community was more important than athleticism when I started. Lots of unhealthy habits during games and tournaments, but play was still pretty good. Now play is unbelievably more athletic and healthy lifestyle is crucial to maintaining fitness and stamina at high
levels. You can't really be a doper and play at the top levels any more. Nor can you party too hard between tournament days and expect to survive the second day.

3/4/2013 3:42 PM

I first played as a freshman in College. College as an independent scene was not really in existence yet so I was playing with and against club players at every tourney, and getting smoked. I played club after college for several years improving until I made it onto Johnny Bravo in 97. I feel this career path would look a lot different today with good club players being much younger comparatively.

3/4/2013 11:07 AM

Definitely more athletes playing now. Most teams I played with were above average and placed a high premium on winning. I would not have called many of my teams highly spirited but there were other teams we felt were worse. I have not noticed a huge change in how 'spirited' players are btw now and then.

3/4/2013 9:02 AM

People work harder now. I work out more at 36 than I did at 22 or 25 and am probably a better player although physically on the decline. Spirit and competitiveness and this debate remain unchanged. Older players tend to put a golden haze over the past. But don't be swayed, the same arguments, fouls and bad or good spirit were around then as they are now.

3/4/2013 8:02 AM
The level of spirit has always had an inverse relationship to the stakes of the game being played.

3/3/2013 8:19 PM

Twenty years ago, ultimate was competitive, but not (as the phrase goes) at the expense of mutual respect between players. Most tournament games ended with teams cheering each other (singing, gifts, cheer rivalries and one-upmanship) and tournament parties were well attended by even the most serious teams. There were, of course, notable exceptions to the rule, and those teams and players from that era are still discussed today. Similarities - there is still a conversation about spirited or unspirited play; as long as ultimate is self-officiated when it comes to one-on-one matchups it will continue to be - I think.

3/3/2013 6:20 PM

My time has seen some interesting fluctuations, but remarkably the same spirit/refs/observers conversation were going on 30 years ago.

3/3/2013 6:16 PM

Great players have always been intense and athletic. It seems that as the player pool has expanded, the top teams have added depth as every player is overall better. Teams in the early years had more unskilled players at the bottom of the roster.

3/3/2013 2:33 PM

In the Philippines, the level of play was low, but spirit was generally high (though rule knowledge was somewhat of a problem.) Fast forward 10 years, and the Philippines has twice won silver in the WBUC (world beach ultimate championships. Our regular local
leagues have a minimum of 40 teams and I’ve heard visiting American players say our best players could play elite club in the States. But, with this growth and competitiveness, Spirit has suffered. Maybe the message gets diluted when you’re trying to spread the gospel of ultimate over 7,000 islands.

3/3/2013 5:41 AM

I started playing at a time when spirit was very important. Every game included a cheer at the end, usually a song with made-up lyrics. The counter culture element of Ultimate was what drew people to the game. I saw the gradual evolution away from this as the sport became more popular, and started attracting players who had experience with other competitive sports (esp. soccer). They brought with them their regular sports mindsets, as they tended to be better players, that belief system slowly became the mainstream in Ultimate. By the time I finished playing (2007), all the ancillary activities had disappeared from all levels of the game, from Juniors, to Masters, from rec league to Nationals. People showed up for games, cleated up, played hard, shook hands at the end, and left. Ultimate felt like any other sport, except maybe for the parties.

3/2/2013 3:07 PM

It was high. We played 7 days a week and had conditioning. We would push each other to condition outside of regular practices. Camaraderie was great. Many of my teammates continued on to have very successful club careers. I see it changing on the spirit side a bit. The blatant fouls on the mark. Win at all costs attitude has crept into ultimate more. Less week smoking, or maybe I’m just older now...

3/2/2013 12:08 AM
Level of play: pre-Discraft Whamo discs meant subtle differences in play (pulls were around 10yds shorter, for example), zone defense was in its infancy, team strategies and tactics were simplistic at best. Spirit: camaraderie between teams was high, I don’t remember many arguments and no fights. I remember making a team mate apologize to the opponents when he spiked the disc after a score (circa 1988). Competition level was decent, but in pre-internet days it was much harder to gauge oneself against the rest of the country; today, with the advent of Ultivillage, NexGen, Ultiworld, Skyd Magazine, The Huddle, etc., teams have access to much better info about strategies and tactics, training, and video of opponents, which has raised the athleticism and overall level of play well above what it was in the mid-late 80s. The top level teams then maybe could still compete for titles, but nationals-level cusp teams and below are much better today.

3/1/2013 6:45 PM

Like many, I started out playing casually, then got more serious as my skill level, time commitment, interest level, etc increased. I’ve played barefoot in the park and with a knee so swollen I couldn’t even bend it. I played against the infamous NYNY dynasty, the Boston DOG dynasty, etc etc.

3/1/2013 6:39 PM

Spirit level was high, competitive was equal. I think that now spirit has dipped (although making a resurgence on some teams) and the competitiveness has become more cutthroat. The addition of better athletes who want to beat the other guy have drastically changed the ultimate mentality.

3/1/2013 5:52 PM
Well, I started playing at lower levels, and the competition got better as I got better and moved into more competitive environments.

3/1/2013 5:42 PM
Pretty much all have been high from the beginning. Tough, hard competitiveness was balanced by great spirit. We definitely used to call fouls on ourselves: if I do it now folks do not understand. In the highest levels the spirit seems slightly diminished.

3/1/2013 5:03 PM
I think the differences are more team by team then they are over time. In HS there was great spirit...but the club teams I saw of that era were no better or worse than they are now.

3/1/2013 4:42 PM
We were always very competitive. Even the UCSD intramural scene was highly competitive among the better teams. Obviously, one you get to the Black Tide and Condors you are at peak competitiveness. I will also say this: When you are on a team with great success, often times the confidence that is a part of that success can be perceived as arrogance, and then opponents think your team is lacking in Spirit. I think that comes with the territory but is often unfair.

3/1/2013 4:26 PM
Highly competitive, decent spirit level, although there were plenty of situations where the top teams took advantage of rules, or stretched them to their benefit.

3/1/2013 3:52 PM
In 1979, we were just kids so really does not apply. I will say that when I picked up at a club tournament around 1993, having only ever played pick up as a kid & a little bit in college. I was a very experienced frisbee thrower in the sense that I loved to play catch with friends, but a very inexperienced ultimate player. However, I was immediately effective & was more athletic than most of the players on the men’s team from NYC with whom I played. (I am, at best, an average athlete in the "non ultimate" world.) The best teams in the area were at this tournament & I was able to run with them & be effective. That would never, ever happen today. the inexperienced 1993 version of me would get annihilated playing men’s club with no practice/experience.

3/1/2013 3:49 PM

I'd rather play with friends and lose than with super competitive jock wannabe's who over compensate for their daddy's inattention when they were growing up.

3/1/2013 2:44 PM

I was lucky enough to play at a high level early on. I've played on teams that were hated and loved. In my opinion, not much has changed over the years. Competitiveness and spirit get in the way of each other sometimes. Happened when I played and still happens now.

3/1/2013 12:46 AM

in terms of spirit not a lot has changed. You have classy players and those who abuse the rules. I first began playing open club in 97 and played until 05. Making open nationals my last 5 years of play. Teams had deeper rosters at nationals as the years went on. Teams also started merging and had more non local ringers, my teams included. The worst spirit i’ve observed have been playing against select college teams at regionals.
Little change. Younger players who are not used to the Spirit of the Game are more likely to think that Ultimate needs observers, refs, etc. and that is why those started being used at college nationals first, and later spread to club nationals.

Competitiveness was very high, as high as it is today. Spirit level was much higher with rival teams partying together off the field. I would easily put high caliber teams of the 80's against teams today.

I haven't really seen much change in either. Generally I fin the more competative the league the more the spirit goes more towards my ideal - Playing the game with integrity instead of the less competative spirit level of Cumbaya.

I've been away for the game completely for 3-4 years and tapered quite a bit from 2005 or so; severely tore a calf and that was that. My observation through all of the time that I played was that the competitiveness and spirit level was pretty constant the entire time. The thing that did stand out to me was that when I began playing the best players on teams were almost always in their late 20s and early 30s, with more older players making up the better teams. During my playing years the composition of the best teams got younger and younger. It seemed that people were starting earlier and getting their throwing skills together earlier. In the 80s and 90s the older players partly stayed in the game because they threw a lot better than the younger players. It was also the case in the late 80s that a
college team would basically never beat a decent level Regionals-type team; for example, Phoenix. However, that changed as the years went on to where now a high level college team is almost indiscernible from a decent level Open Nationals team.

3/1/2013 10:46 AM

Obviously the physical level of play has evolved, but the competitiveness and spirit level really hasn't that much. As then, there are huge variations -- plenty of very spirited people, lots of jerks.

3/1/2013 10:40 AM

Level of play has always been competitive. Guys want to win. The game seems more "athletic" now but I do not see a tangible difference in level of competitiveness or spirit.

3/1/2013 10:36 AM

We taught, and were taught, that there were no good fouls in ultimate - contrast with basketball, where the assumption is that a foul is a resource to be used. That seems to have migrated some, especially with respect to throws and marks. The details of the competition have shifted some - certainly the better teams see to do more training at the track than we once did. But from a spirit perspective it's more about the window dressing. I don't like spikes (but those certainly happened in the 90's), I find rushing the field tedious, and the games are goofy. But those meddling kids think my cheers and reluctance to wear a numbered uni are oddball.

3/1/2013 10:25 AM
Do you mean in my specific local pickup game, or in the game overall? When I started playing in college, just after Discraft was made the official disc, competition was intense, but Spirit was a more essential part of the game. Shortly after that, we started hearing stories about NY, NY, and college teams in North Carolina. The stories told of teams that appeared to place winning above spirited play.

3/1/2013 9:13 AM
Very high spirit as to calls—I didn’t contest good calls and I didn’t contest bad calls. As to behavior style, I was often kind if a jerk. So I guess that was bad SOTG.

3/1/2013 8:57 AM
liquid poops

3/1/2013 1:06 AM

5. **Anything you would like to add/contribute to the history of Ultimate:**

I look forward to reading your results! I really appreciate what you’ve done for the Ultimate community.

3/27/2013 8:32 AM
We played ultimate in the 80’s primarily to be active in a sport that encouraged stellar play, fitness, and finesse. We learned that it brought with it an introduction to one of the most incredible communities on Earth. I have friends from ultimate in almost every state and large city in the country because ultimate players are accomplished, intelligent, and fun-
loving. Perhaps other sports allow that type of emotional and intellectual growth, but I don't see it much outside of ultimate.

3/17/2013 5:39 PM

Spirit makes the game of Ultimate unique and to lose that part of the game would be short sighted and just sad. Our sport has no flopping, embellishing or doping because we are guided by spirit. When one hears other pro athletes from other sports describe their favourite moments, they recall playing pond hockey or hoops all day and night with their buddies just for the joy. "I can't play being mad. I go out there and have fun. It's a game, and that's how I am going to treat it." ~ Ken Griffey Jr.

3/8/2013 1:09 PM

Reach out to Patrica van der Halten in Belgium. She'll give you the history of ultimate in Europe and the US pre-internet. Its also pretty cool that you can go anywhere in the world where ultimate is played and instantly get accepted in the community, get offered a place to sleep and a plate of food.

3/8/2013 7:53 AM

I wish I could kiss the group of guys that invented this game. Or at least buy them all a drink.

3/7/2013 11:34 AM

Most of my knowledge is Atlanta/SouthEast centric. I think Chain's history of a pretty spirited group -for over 30 years- can be tied to the influence of Stu Downs. A great player in his day as well as one widely regarded as an extraordinarily honest player and good
sport. He influenced the attitude of teammates in the 80's and 90's, and still has a lasting effect as that attitude is passed on to younger players.

3/7/2013 8:47 AM

I am forever gracious to the people that taught me this wonderful game.

3/6/2013 12:18 AM

Not at this time.

3/4/2013 7:06 PM

Still the best sport I know. Has grown steadily since I can remember. Would like to see it grow even more. You could make a case, however, that growth has to come from sponsorship, and I think that sponsorship will cause a significant decrease in sportsmanship. I’d rather see Uly stay where it is now - you can find a game in any city and wherever you go, you’re welcome to jump in a pickup - rather than get really big and have SOG suffer even more. Triathlon seems to have it right. Every little triathlon I do is always very friendly - people encourage each other at every turn. And that’s a very big sport with lots of money involved. I wonder how they keep the right mix of spirit?

3/4/2013 3:47 PM

nothing specific

3/4/2013 11:08 AM

I was never the best player but got to play with allot of great folks. Many of which are now doing great on current club teams, coaching or captaining. The sport has changed little, other than organization has gotten much stronger (I still credit the internet for helping
those things). Ultimate is a sport where people form bonds and get together. I still go to reunion tourneys with my former college and club teams. As far a spirit, you know you have it when your invited to play on those teams, you know you were a real dick when you never get to play Fools/Mars/Clambake/Trouble in Vegas, etc.

3/4/2013 8:05 AM
The game is at a very important juncture. Many organizations are vying to own the highest level of play. It will difficult for anyone to do that and also support play for the masses.

3/3/2013 8:22 PM
Oh yeah - a lot of people wore skirts when I started playing ultimate (both men and women). The skirt counterculture (and maybe ultimate as counterculture) seems to have changed.

3/3/2013 6:21 PM
Nothing more than I have already.

3/3/2013 6:17 PM
Best game every invented by man.

3/3/2013 2:34 PM
Yeah, come to the Manila Spirits tournament this year. It’s usually held in mid to late November. Lots of fun!

3/3/2013 5:41 AM
Overall, I don’t think it’s changed too much from when I played.
I wish there was more of an effort to maintain historical records of tournaments and, especially, championships. The data from UPA series events of the 80s and 90s is pathetically incomplete.

look forward to reading the results. The title alone seems perceptive enough that I’m somewhat encouraged.

It is a great sport, and will continue to be a great sport. I have been quite interested in how it is evolving during my years of playing. In many ways I think the roots are being lost, but at the same time several of the traditions will be preserved.

This is a pretty broad topic. What specific question are you trying to investigate? Broadly speaking, ultimate was invented as a goof on jock culture, so any attempt to turn ultimate into what some people call a "real sport," or, basically, take the joke-on-jocks out of ultimate, without a wink and a nod to that original goof, is not going to work. You can’t import the self-seriousness of pro sports into ultimate culture without at least acknowledging that you get the joke. The cultural connotations of the Frisbee demand a sense of irony. Ultimate players trying to strike the muscle-kissing jock pose with a frisbee in their hand, without irony, will come off corny and sad. This is the discussion many younger college players avoid. They see other sports on TV, they wonder "Why not
ultimate?" The Frisbee. It’s a silly toy. If you want to present high level ultimate, you can’t ever forget the joke.

3/1/2013 5:52 PM
I have been playing for over 30 years and plan to continue. Recreational Ulty is as important as Club competition.

3/1/2013 5:04 PM
Discovering Ultimate is one of the best thing that ever happened to me.

3/1/2013 4:27 PM
When I was first introduced to ultimate, there was no concept of SOTG & we were just fine. We played the game like we played any other pickup sport -- football, basketball, etc. When folks say "ultimate would not be the same without SOTG", I believe they are conflating the social wonders of being a part of the amazing ulty community with the actual competition on the field.

3/1/2013 3:52 PM