



Ultimately, it's about having fun

Ultimate Frisbee addicts have to be seriously fit to race up and down a field chasing a flying disc. But the game, played without referees or trash talk, is mostly about having a seriously good time

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When Joanne Minns moved to Montreal a year ago, she found a unique way to meet people.

"I posted my name on the bulletin board of the Montreal Ultimate Association," she said.

A rookie to the game, not only did she end up making new friends, she found herself addicted to a new sport.

"I play three or four times a week in the summer and once or twice a week in the winter," she said.

Talk to any ultimate player, and they will tell a similar story about how quickly the sport becomes an addiction.

"Once you throw a perfect disc, you're hooked," said Toby Goodfellow, a three-year veteran of the game.

Ultimate is booming in Montreal. With 1,700 active members playing in its summer and winter (indoor) leagues, the Montreal Ultimate Association has outgrown its original location at the Douglas Hospital in Verdun. The league's 90 teams now occupy 10 fields spread across the city and a select number of indoor sites in the winter.

Not bad for a game that was developed in 1968 by a nerdy bunch of New Jersey high school kids. Originally called Frisbee Football, the game has developed into a fast-paced, non-contact sport that demands speed, agility and the ability to throw a disc with precision.

"Handling a disc is not like handling a ball," Goodfellow said.

Discs float, curve, zip, bounce and skip, making their flight unpredictable in inexperienced hands. But a skilled veteran of the game can make the disc do just about anything.

"Someone who can handle the disc well can do damage," Goodfellow said.

It took Goodfellow about three months to feel comfortable tossing the disc and to understand how it moves. Seasoned players use a variety of throws - backhand, forehand and overhand - to send the disc in flight.

But throwing the disc isn't the whole game. Being fleet of foot also helps. Good cardiovascular endurance is important - especially among rookies who are short on strategy and throwing technique.

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The object of the game is to move up the 64-by-37-metre field until one of your teammates catches the disc in the opponent's end zone. There's no running with the disc; rather, players have 10 seconds to pass to one of their six teammates on the field.

Defenders try to intercept passes without making physical contact. The battle for the disc, whether it be airborne or on the ground, is where the gamesmanship takes place. Players dive, leap and outrun their opponents in order to claim possession.

Despite the competitive nature of ultimate, there are no referees. Instead, the sport relies on decorum and mutual respect to settle any disputes.

"It's about fun, fair play and trusting the other person," Minns said.

Goodfellow said novice players sometimes have difficulty playing a sport without referees, but maintaining the spirit of the game is more important than the right call.

To ensure ultimate isn't tainted with the trash talk found on so many playing fields, spirit points are awarded to teams that keep the game fun and respect their opponents.

Cheers before and after games are encouraged, and players often lighten the atmosphere by singing songs or playing in goofy clothing - quite a refreshing difference from sports in which winning is more important than how the game is played.

Mike Kropveld has been playing ultimate for 12 years. In a league where the average player is in his or her early 30s, Kropveld, 55, is considered a veteran. He credits ultimate, and his physiotherapist brother-in-law, with keeping his legs young enough to run alongside players 20 years his junior.

Kropveld says he plays three times a week all year round. "Wherever I go, I have a disc in the car."

Seeing players like Kropveld excel at the game reminds Minns that ultimate is a game for all ages.

"The mature players are some of the best players - and that's encouraging," she said.

She also likes the fact that ultimate is a coed sport (teams normally have four men and three women on the field), which means she can share the love of the sport with her boyfriend, who also plays. In fact, Minns said it's a great way to meet members of the opposite sex.

"It's not a singles group, but a lot of players end up finding partners through ultimate," she said.

Kropveld also likes the coed aspect of the sport. He's played on a lot of different teams with players of all ages, and he always manages to have a great time. So much so, he can't imagine life without his frequent fix of ultimate.

"I don't see myself stopping anytime soon," he said.

"I'm in good shape and my speed is good. The question is: What is going to happen when I don't play?"

To contact the Montreal Ultimate Association, call (514) 221-2212, send e-mail to info@montrealultimate.ca or go to www.montrealultimate.ca

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