



Monday, November 16, 1998

Flippin' out over disc-go fever

Thirty years ago it was a laid-back, toy-tossing pastime in New Jersey, but the sport known as Ultimate has caught on. More than 10,000 Canadians - some of them world champs - are going gaga over Frisbee

Rick Collins National Post

Mitchell Scott is one of Canada's best athletes. But you won't see this 28-year-old Vancouverite, or his world champion teammates on any sports network. Their game stats are not included in any newspaper. And at first glance it's easy to see why. After all, any sport played with a Frisbee, calling itself Ultimate, will likely always be the Rodney Dangerfield of team sports.

It's Halloween weekend on a sloppy field near the University of Victoria, where a muscular man wearing pink cotton socks, a matching mid-thigh skirt and chiffon top is looking for respect. Scott isn't giving him much. Looking decent in drag, Lou Bures takes off on a 50-metre sprint into an open area calling for a pass, he fakes left and cuts hard across the field hoping to shake Scott, his pesky defender. Just as the pass arrives, his man-on-man shadow, dressed in a more conservative white cotton T-shirt and shorts, launches himself like some sort of surface-to-air missile just in time for the block. If this was football, the gloating would begin right here, right now. The standing around. The muddy high-fives walking back to the line and into the huddle. The beer commercial soundtrack. The resting. However, Scott gets to his feet in quick transition from defence to offence, and throws a perfect 50-metre pass to the end zone for a score.



"Usually we dress like soccer players, with numbers and jerseys," says the tall, lanky Scott, in defence of his challenging sport. "We're

just having some fun here after a long season." But right now the Bures team, known as the Seattle-based Beauty Queens, are not having much fun on this All Saints' Day. The Loggers from Western Canada are poor hosts, beating the Queens in the semifinal game of a casual tournament known as the Pumpkin Pull. More than 30 mixed teams from as far away as California and Manitoba have squared off since Saturday. There are more hugs, big hair and flying plastic here than at any Tupperware party in the suburbs. And despite the cloak of buffoonery, with teams here dressed in a myriad of clever costumes, Ultimate

is slowly shedding its reputation as the rogue, hippie version of traditional American football.

For the uninitiated spectator who wanders past this cirque sans soleil, Ultimate is easy to, uh, catch onto. The high school boys in Maplewood, N.J., who invented the game in 1968 were looking for a simple, non-conformist game to play using the coolest toy of the period - a disc (Frisbee is a trademark name). To them, a non-contact passing game played by two, seven-person teams seemed to be the perfect sport, thus the name - Ultimate. But over time the laid-back toy-tossing exploded into the team sport of the future, combining the running of soccer with the stamina of hockey and the cutting, jumping and passing of basketball, Ultimate is now one of the fastest growing sports in the world. It is also a marketing



whiz's dream unrealized. Healthy men and women dressed in high-tech fabric, chasing each other and the friendly little politically-correct plastic disc across a grassy field. Can you say beer commercial?

Although most people haven't even heard of Ultimate (the sport crept onto university campuses around 1975), there are now 10,000 active players in Canada. Most are recreational evening and weekenders who play throughout the summer and indoors in winter, including a nine-team corporate league at IBM in Toronto, a 200-team league in Ottawa, and 300 men and women who competed at this year's

university championships in Edmonton. As well, an elite group of Canadian men's and women's teams travel to tournaments all over the world, competing with other such fanatics mostly on weekends at their own cost. In the U.S., there are paid collegiate coaches as teams prepare for the NCAA national championships held every spring. Last year the University of British Columbia women's team out of Vancouver shocked the Americans by getting to the finals against Stanford. They lost, but Canada has quickly become an Ultimate powerhouse, despite the country's reputation of perpetual frozen tundra.

Played with a high-tech plastic disc, on a field similar to football, the object is to score by catching a pass in the opponent's end zone. A player must stop running while in possession of the disc, but can pivot and pass to any of the other six receivers on the field. Just like basketball, Ultimate is a transition game in which players move quickly from offence to defence on turnovers that occur with a dropped pass, an interception, a pass out-of-bounds, or when a player is caught holding the disc for longer than nine seconds. At the Pumpkin Pull, they claim play is casual, but the running seems

endless. Mitchell Scott and the Loggers continue their domination over the Queens. After two quick give-and-go passes near their own end zone, Toby Marcoux unloads an 80-yard bomb with enough arm to make Doug Flutie proud. Scott and his man pursue the disc in a one-on-one showdown better than any penalty shot drama hockey can offer. The disc hovers and spins, curving just past the outstretched arms of the flying defender as Scott makes an acrobatic one-handed catch and crash lands for the goal. Don Cherry, he of highlight video fame, would have gone gaga.

The teams have 20-player rosters, and substitutions are allowed only when a point is scored. Games are played to 15 or 17 points (one point for each goal) and there is no time clock. And perhaps most significantly - similar to self-refereed, three-on-three basketball - Ultimate's rules are enforced entirely by the players on the field. Even at this past summer's world championships, where Canada's men's, co-ed and masters division teams won gold medals, there were no referees. "It's the one great thing that separates Ultimate from all other sports," says Scott. "We rely solely on a clause in the rules called 'the spirit of the game,' which essentially means we will avoid a win-at-all costs attitude." This benevolent vision of sport sounds like something conjured out of a haze in the 1960s, but seeing is believing. There are relatively few arguments as players seem to take responsibility for themselves - something more established sports could do well to emulate. Back on the field, Lou Bures, who learned to play Ultimate at college in New York, throws his hat to the ground as the game ends. "Damn, I hate losing to you Canadians," he drawls tongue-in-cheek, as opposing players laugh, hug and compare game notes. "Your first mistake was teaching us how to play," is the quick response from the Logger's sideline.

