

Disc Jockeys

Ultimate Frisbee is no walk in the park. It's a fast, furious and fiercely competitive sport

By Sarah Bowen Shea

Hear the words "ultimate" and "Frisbee" together, and immediately you envision barefoot students in tie-dyed shirts, lazily tossing a disc to a golden retriever.

Wrong. In Ultimate Frisbee, a hyper hybrid of basketball, football and soccer, two teams of seven players whiz around a 70-by 40-yard field, trying to keep the disc moving until a teammate catches it in the end zone and scores a point. Depending on the tournament, games are played to 13, 15 or 17 points; they can run as long as two hours.



Frisbee can be the ultimate in fun. Otto Gruele

The only way to advance the Frisbee is through the air, so players go gonzo trying to get open. Play changes hands when a pass is incomplete, intercepted, knocked down or goes out-of-bounds. The result? "You're sprinting the entire time," explains Nicole Crncich, a four-year Ultimate Frisbee veteran and a member of Home Brood, a team from San Francisco that finished fourth at the '98 national championships.

Players have loosely assigned roles. Handlers, typically more experienced players who are talented throwers, stay close to the Frisbee and make long passes to middles and deeps, who usually catch better than they throw. Still, as Chris Browning, Home Brood co-captain, says, "Everyone has to run, throw and catch. It's not like we have a quarterback or center-forward. That makes Ultimate a true team sport."

Ultimate's creators, a group of New Jersey high school students in the 1960s, wanted to keep rules to a minimum and the responsibility for fair play in the hands of the players, so there are no referees. Any player who recognizes a foul has the responsibility to call it. "I like not having refs," says Crncich. "It fits in with the good-sportsmanship philosophy of the game."

Practices for competitive teams usually last three to four hours, three days a week, during a season that runs from spring to late fall. Some teams, like Seattle's Women on the Verge, two-time world champions, also throw in a weekly sprint workout at a track. A session typically starts with about 100 warmup tosses. "Throwing is about finesse, not power. People could be bodybuilders and not be able to throw a Frisbee very well," says Sara Gersten-Rothenberg, who plays for Women on the Verge. "Throwing improves so much with practice." The focus then switches to running, strategy and, finally, scrimmaging.

Needless to say, the commitment necessary to become a threat in competitive Ultimate can dominate your life. "It's like a family -- it becomes your whole world," says Crncich. To

wit: One of the main reasons Gersten-Rothenberg chose to settle in Seattle, after becoming an Ultimate addict at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., was because of the city's rich Ultimate scene. Other hotbeds include Boston; Boulder, Colo.; Chicago; and the San Francisco Bay Area. In these regions there are tiers of teams (coed and single sex) for various levels of skill and intensity. "The women I play with are tough," says Gersten-Rothenberg. "I definitely get fired up from playing with them."

Teams travel frequently to tournaments across the country and even abroad. (This year's World Club Championships are in Scotland.) Many high-level players say they can't remember the last time they took a vacation that didn't involve Ultimate.

Given its devoted following, maybe they should rename the sport. Our suggestion: Cultimate.

To find out about teams in your area, contact the Ultimate Players Association at 800-872-4384 or www.upa.org.