

The Ultimate Game: Frisbee's Spirited Following at Exeter | By Mike Catano



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(A) Andrew Hessler '10 looks to make a pass during an Ultimate practice with teammates Matthew Zia '10 (foreground) and Mikio David '09 (background). (B) Alexander Ting '08 demonstrates Frisbee acrobatics while practicing with the team. (C) PEA's Ultimate Frisbee Club was just a year old when it captured first place at the 2007 Cumberland Invite in Maine. Team members included (back row, left to right) Caroline Tracey '09, Simon Wang '08, Joshua Taylor '08, Anna Condella '08, Albert Kao '08, Ethan Currie '09, Daniel Wang '07, Daniel Donovan '08, Eric Wu '08, Coach Jennifer Wilhelm and (front row, left to right) Laura Duane '08, Jen (Yevgeniya) Solyanik '09 and Naoki Yoshida '08. (D) Making an offensive catch, Jen Solyanik played Ultimate Frisbee since its inception at Exeter.

Think tossing a Frisbee is a pastime only for lazy summer days at the beach or park? Think again.

Exeter students have been playing competitive Ultimate Frisbee—a limited-contact sport with similarities to rugby or American football—against other schools in New England for four years now, including tournament play sanctioned by the New England Prep School Ultimate League (NEPSUL). Developed by a group of New Jersey high school students in 1968, Ultimate is played by hundreds of thousands of people in more than 42 countries, and is a medal sport in The World Games.

The basic outline of the game requires seven-on-seven players competing on a 70-yard field with 25-yard end zones. Teams score a point when a player can complete a pass to a teammate in the end zone. Teams play to a predetermined score, such as 15 points. Changes in possession take place in a variety of ways, like incomplete passes, out-of-bounds throws, interceptions and blocked passes.

Unlike so many sports at Exeter with long and storied histories, this coed club sport has more recent and humble beginnings. “I started the team with two friends my lower year, and co-captained the team for that year as well as my remaining two,” says Josh Taylor '08, now an Ultimate player at Middlebury College. “At that point, the team was about 15 people, including one girl.” The team started from scratch, he recalls. “I spent most of the first season teaching the basics of the game—the stack strategy and other types of offense and defense, as well as throwing techniques.”

After just a year in existence, the team took first place in the 2007 Cumberland Invite, held annually in Cumberland, ME. One of three tournaments Exeter attends, this Ultimate Players Association-sanctioned event draws prep, public and private schools from Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

Taylor remembers the excitement of the tournament win. “It was an incredible day,” he says. “One of my co-captains and I were injured, and the final game was a nail-biter. We started out pretty far down, and then rallied to win.”

Brad Hennessy '07, a sophomore at Lafayette College, recalls one play from the tournament. “We used to joke that Naoki Yoshida '08 could fly because he would go so hard that his body would go completely horizontal when he dove for the disc. On this particular play, I swear he flew about 10 feet to grab the disc . . . Yoshi just never gave up on the play.”

So what is it about Ultimate that appeals to players at Exeter—even after they leave? Eric Wu '08, an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon University



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who gets his Ultimate fix playing on a club team called Beijing Ultimate, says, “I stay involved in the sport because good Ultimate players tend to be good people and the environment surrounding Ultimate is incredibly positive.”

This is largely because the sport is governed by the “Spirit of the Game,” or SOTG—a code of conduct that maps particularly well to the Academy’s philosophy of *non sibi*. The official rules of the game state:

“Ultimate has traditionally relied upon a spirit of sportsmanship which places the responsibility for fair play on the player. Highly competitive play is encouraged, but never at the expense of the bond of mutual respect between players, adherence to the agreed-upon rules of the game, or the basic joy of play.”

This means that most games are self-refereed: Players call out their own fouls and line calls, and coaches are not allowed to call out instructions from the sidelines. Coach Jennifer Wilhelm, who played at Green Mountain College and continues her play locally at the club level today, believes the self-refereed nature of Ultimate has a unique appeal to Exeter athletes. “Exeter students really appreciate governing themselves, making a call, and talking it out with the other player,” she says. “It’s something they are used to doing—having a conversation and being civil, and respecting the other person.”

Four years after PEA’s first Ultimate team, positive energy continues to be a keystone for today’s players. “Ultimate’s ‘Spirit of the Game’ is really what makes the sport what it is,” says Daniel Bolan ’10. “It promotes a strong feeling of support between players, and even between teams, while allowing us to play hard. I remember last year [when] we played a team from Hotchkiss. We beat them 15-3, but afterward we all sat down and had lunch, and talked and joked. We had a great time even *after* the game.”

Students like Bolan sign up for Ultimate at Exeter and receive physical education credit. The sport’s club status means the team holds fundraisers to pay for transport, tournament fees, hotels, and so on. This is unlike many of the teams in NEPSUL, such as

Andover and Northfield Mount Hermon. “Many of the teams we play against are actually varsity status at their schools, and we’re competing with them evenly, often winning,” says Ethan Currie ’09. “There’s a lot of enthusiasm and a real desire to just play.”

The Ultimate team is coed, and this creates a dynamic that is different than with other Exeter teams, but complements SOTG well. “The guys are fun to hang out with, and they are so helpful. They teach me a lot,” says Mary Chun ’10. Sarah Sather ’10 adds, “Chunny, Jen (Solyanik ’09), and I enjoy playing with the boys because they are helpful and goofy, but still laid-back. Everyone on the team is nice and cooperative.”

Daily practices at Exeter follow a routine that develops strength, endurance and skill. A familiar routine is the 20/20/10, which is reps of the three main throws: forehand, backhand and the hammer (an overhead throw with the disc flight upside-down). The team also practices defensive techniques—the simplest of which is person-on-person—and offensive plays that require stacking of various types. In a vertical stack, for example, players line up one behind the other, and can cut from the stack to create openings for themselves.

At press time, the spring season’s team had an early win, struggled without a win in its first tournament—the Andover Invite—and won two of four games at the Cumberland Invite. Aware of all her new players (only five returning players on a team of 21), Coach Wilhelm notes that “Ultimate is a complicated sport that takes a lot of field sense to really play skillfully. It requires a combination of skills and being in the right place at the right time,

which takes time for new players to learn.” She continues, “My main goal is to get kids really excited about the sport so they will return next year and build our team skills over time. This year, I want them to learn the basics while having a good time.”

With several games under his belt, Bolan remains optimistic. “For what is basically a brand-new team, we played far beyond my expectations. It makes me excited to see what the rest of the season will bring.”

Taylor reflects, “I am really enjoying being part of such a highly skilled group of athletes [at Middlebury]. However, my memories of playing Ultimate at Exeter are some of my fondest while there. I couldn’t have asked for a better group of people with which to build a team.” ●



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