

Wes Era 1 — An Oral History

Report on the May 2026 Zoom conversation among early Wesleyan Ultimate players Nick Donohue, Steve Mooney, Chris Heye, David Neech Garfield, Bob Bischoff and Bill Ritchie

A.I. Generated See Archive for full transcript

The Opening Scene

The call begins exactly as one would expect from a half-century gathering of Wesleyan Ultimate alumni: confusion, overlapping jokes, obscure references, immediate arguments over historical accuracy, and at least three people trying to establish who actually invented the team. Nobody wastes time on introductions. Everyone assumes everyone else remembers the same events from 1977, which of course they do not.

Bill Ritchie acts as ringmaster, archivist, and increasingly exasperated moderator. Steve Mooney arrives wearing “Nietzsch Factor” apparel and begins riffing almost immediately. Nick Donohue enters at full velocity and never meaningfully decelerates. Chris Heye appears with a podcast-grade lighting setup and enough detailed memory to threaten everyone else’s preferred mythology. Bob Bischoff drifts in carrying archival continuity like a family genealogist for a civilization that specialized in hammers and marijuana.

And then there is David Neech Garfield — still universally referred to as “Neech” or “Nietzsch” — who remains one of the spiritual centers of the story. Garfield’s presence anchors the conversation in a very specific Wesleyan sensibility: intellectual seriousness mixed with total refusal to take oneself entirely seriously.

Within minutes the group is already debating whether tattoos should be funded with 501(c)(3) money, whether AI avatars could attend future interviews in their place, and who among them first threw a competent forehand. This is not idle nostalgia. This is identity reconstruction by argument.

The tone is affectionate but combative — the natural conversational habitat of people who spent formative years sprinting through rainstorms while yelling about force-middle defense and whether someone had properly cut from the stack.

The Founding Mythology

As the conversation settles, the central question emerges: what exactly happened between 1975 and 1980, when Wesleyan Ultimate evolved from a loose gathering of Frisbee obsessives into a genuinely competitive team with regional ambitions and a growing reputation?

Bill attempts to establish chronology. This proves optimistic.

The early years sound less like an organized program and more like a low-budget frontier settlement. Small groups of players drifted in and out. Some semesters produced actual games; others produced mostly stories. Spike Barry appears repeatedly as an almost mythological recruiting figure, wandering campus until he discovered someone throwing a disc properly and immediately conscripting them.

Nick Donohue recalls arriving in 1976 already possessing advanced throwing skills acquired through endless nighttime throwing sessions while stoned with a friend using SuperPro discs. This detail is delivered without irony and accepted by the group as perfectly normal athletic development.

The team itself was still amorphous. Games happened. Tournaments sometimes happened. Nobody seems entirely certain which tournaments counted. Memories blur together around rain, bad fields, long drives, and occasional humiliations at the hands of established programs like UConn, Purchase, and Hampshire.

Yet underneath the uncertainty, a pattern emerges. The players slowly began discovering that they were not merely participating in a campus pastime. They were inventing a culture.

And like most Wesleyan cultures, it combined competitiveness, improvisation, intellectual vanity, theatricality, and extremely questionable logistical planning.

The Arrival of Seriousness

The turning point in the discussion comes when the group begins describing the shift from casual Frisbee culture into something more disciplined and ambitious.

Chris Heye remembers arriving on campus in 1977 carrying Frisbees and wandering Fauver Field until he encountered Nick Donohue launching forty-yard forehands — a skill rare enough at the time to feel almost supernatural. According to Chris, there were perhaps twelve people on Earth who could throw that pass reliably. Naturally, Wesleyan immediately had two of them.

This period marks the emergence of the team's competitive personality. Conditioning intensified. Expectations rose. Practices became more organized. Nick in particular emerges as a catalytic force — relentless, charismatic, occasionally terrifying.

Several participants describe his recruiting style less as persuasion and

more as strategic harassment.

Steve Mooney remembers being pulled into the orbit through Foss Hill throwing sessions, foosball games, and Nick's repeated insistence that soccer players belonged in Ultimate. What began as recreational participation gradually hardened into identity. Players stopped merely "showing up" and started thinking of themselves as members of a program.

The alumni repeatedly circle back to one uncomfortable truth: the team became good partly because certain people demanded standards that exceeded what the broader community initially wanted. Workouts became harder. Accountability increased. Some people loved this evolution. Others absolutely did not.

No one says this directly, but it hangs over the entire conversation: the transformation from eccentric hobbyists into a legitimate team involved friction, ego, stubbornness, and a willingness to become temporarily unpopular.

In other words, classic Wesleyan leadership.

Rain, Defeat, and Regional Humiliation

One of the pleasures of the conversation is how little interest anyone has in sanitizing the historical record. Nobody pretends the early teams dominated immediately. In fact, much of the discussion consists of remembering catastrophic losses in vivid detail.

Rain appears constantly, almost as another participant in the story. Rain at Hampshire. Rain at Purchase. Rain at UConn. Rain while getting annihilated by better teams.

The emotional geography of early Northeast Ultimate becomes clear through the stories: long drives to Amherst, Hampshire, Connecticut

College, Purchase, and wherever else a vaguely organized tournament could be assembled. Most events involved confusion, poor communication, and somebody arriving unexpectedly because two teams had accidentally been invited on the same day.

The players laugh hardest when describing disasters. Entire tournaments are remembered mainly as sequences of crushing defeats followed by damp locker rooms and philosophical recalibration.

Chris recalls sectionals at Purchase where Wesleyan was “destroyed” repeatedly in the rain. Scores blur together into generalized athletic trauma. Yet these failures mattered. They established benchmarks. The team began understanding the difference between being talented local weirdos and being nationally competitive.

And then gradually, almost accidentally, Wesleyan improved.

By 1980 the conversation shifts tone. The players begin remembering victories instead of merely weather conditions. They recall beating the Dukes. Advancing from sectionals. Competing rather than merely surviving.

The mythology changes at this point. The team stops thinking of itself as a curiosity and starts imagining itself as part of the emerging architecture of elite college Ultimate.

What Actually Endured

By the end of the call, the historical specifics matter slightly less than the social texture surrounding them. The conversation reveals a community still animated by the same intellectual energy that shaped it fifty years earlier.

Nobody speaks in polished alumni language. Nobody offers inspirational platitudes about teamwork. Instead they interrupt each other constantly, challenge each other’s memories, debate forehand mechanics, reconstruct

vanished apartments and road trips, and casually reference events from 1978 with prosecutorial intensity.

The humor throughout is dry, sharp, and faintly adversarial — exactly the tone one would expect from Wesleyan Ultimate alumni who collectively spent decades becoming professors, lawyers, journalists, entrepreneurs, and professional arguers.

What emerges most clearly is that the team functioned as a laboratory for identity. Players were learning not only how to compete but how to organize communities, create standards, negotiate authority, and construct meaning around a shared obsession that, at the time, many outsiders considered ridiculous.

Ultimate was still inventing itself. Wesleyan was inventing its version of Ultimate. And these players were inventing themselves through the process.

Fifty years later, they remain remarkably recognizable.

The details may be fuzzy. The chronology may remain disputed forever. But the essential atmosphere survives intact: smart people talking too fast, arguing passionately about minor distinctions, laughing at their own seriousness, and still — after all these years — trying to figure out exactly what happened out there in the rain.

Compiled from the May 2026 Wesleyan Ultimate Era 1 Zoom interview.