

Era2: How Wesleyan Ultimate Learned to Survive Its Own Founders

AI Story Based on January 2026 Zoom Discussion with Era2 Leaders Jeff Staples, Jeff Williams, Arnie C., Dave Weber, Scooter Michaud, Bill Wehrli and Bill Ritchie

Every institution has founders. Very few survive them.

That is the real subject of the Era2 Wesleyan Ultimate Zoom call, covering roughly 1981 through 1985. On the surface, the conversation is funny, loose, affectionate, and chaotic in the highly recognizable style of Wesleyan alumni who have spent fifty years refining the art of talking over one another while pretending no one is talking over anyone. But beneath the jokes about pot, layouts, and emotionally unstable captains lies a remarkably sophisticated story about cultural succession.

The players in this conversation inherited a team that was already legendary.

Unfortunately, it was legendary in the way Viking invasions are legendary.

Era1 — the Mooney, Donohue, Heye generation — looms over the entire discussion like a mythological age of warrior-philosophers who could throw impossible forehands, psychologically dismantle freshmen, and transform Ultimate Frisbee into a kind of experimental social theology. They were brilliant. They were charismatic. They were wildly intense. And according to nearly everyone on this call, they were also exhausting.

Jeff Williams describes arriving as a freshman when Moons, Chris, and Nick were seniors. He and Peter Jacobs were among the only freshmen who “stuck it out.” That phrase alone tells you nearly everything you need to know about the environment. This was not recreational intramurals. This was survival training with a disc.

Then comes the understatement of the entire transcript: there was “a fair amount of abuse.”

Everybody laughs.

Importantly, nobody sounds bitter.

That distinction matters.

The Era2 players are not repudiating the earlier generation. In fact, they clearly admire

them enormously. The founders won. They built standards. They created mythology. They made Wesleyan Ultimate feel dangerous, important, and larger than life.

But they also created a culture that normal human beings could only survive temporarily.

That is where Era2 enters the story.

The hidden genius of the 1981–1985 generation is that they managed to preserve the intensity while removing enough of the emotional shrapnel that the program could continue existing after the gods graduated.

This is historically much harder than it sounds.

Most founder-driven organizations collapse into one of two disasters:

1. They reject the founders entirely and lose their identity.
2. They worship the founders so completely that they become emotionally unlivable museums.

Wesleyan Ultimate somehow avoided both.

The key transitional figure appears to have been Todd Maybrown, who hovers over the entire conversation like a benevolent constitutional monarch. Again and again the players describe Todd as “the bridge” between eras. Bridges are not glamorous. Bridges are infrastructure. And infrastructure is what keeps civilizations alive after charisma burns itself out.

Todd seems to have understood something profound: the team could remain serious without remaining miserable.

This insight changes everything.

David Weber describes the philosophical shift beautifully. Instead of operating as a selective order of emotionally hardened disc aristocrats, the team began recruiting openly. Todd stood on Foss Hill during orientation telling people, “We’ve got an Ultimate team — everyone’s welcome.”

That sentence represents a revolution.

Ultimate at Wesleyan stopped being a closed warrior cult and became a weird democratic republic.

And because this was Wesleyan, the republic immediately became argumentative,

communal, ideological, stoned, and surprisingly effective.

One of the funniest and most revealing themes in the transcript is how casually marijuana is discussed. Pot appears not as rebellion but as environmental background condition — like weather, cleats, or poor tournament logistics. David Weber recalls showing up at practice asking who brought the joints because everyone had become “so serious.”

That line contains the entire Era2 philosophy.

The issue was never competitiveness. Everybody on the call wanted to win. They practiced constantly. They traveled everywhere. They played in the rain. They developed systems, roles, and strategies. By the mid-1980s they were nearly making Nationals.

The issue was solemnity.

Era2 seems to have concluded that joy was strategically important.

Fun was not the opposite of commitment. Fun was what made commitment sustainable.

This turns out to be one of the great innovations in the history of Wesleyan Ultimate.

Many teams can create intensity. Very few can create intensity without emotional corrosion. The Era2 leaders discovered a formula that sounds almost absurdly Wesleyan in retrospect:

Play all the time.

Recruit everybody.

Care deeply.

Laugh constantly.

Maintain Spirit of the Game.

Try to win.

Do not become fascists.

Honestly, as organizational philosophies go, this is stronger than most startup mission statements.

The conversation becomes especially compelling whenever it drifts toward larger questions of identity. Scooter Mazhude recalls how the team developed a philosophy of diving for impossible discs. Arnie describes it almost spiritually: “Dive for the impossible.”

This is not merely sports language.

It is existential language.

The layout — hurling yourself horizontally through space for a flying piece of plastic — becomes the perfect symbol for what the team represented culturally. Ultimate mattered enormously precisely because the outside world considered it ridiculous. Wesleyan students, naturally, found this irresistible.

The whole enterprise combined athletic competition with philosophical theater.

And the team names reflected this perfectly.

The earlier generation's "Rude Boys" projected swagger, aggression, and confrontation. Then came "Nietzsche Factor," perhaps the single most Wesleyan team name ever invented: half intellectual parody, half grandiose cultural declaration, entirely sincere despite pretending not to be sincere.

The Era2 players inherited that impossible legacy.

Somehow they managed to preserve the weirdness while making the culture more humane.

This is why the transcript matters historically.

The people on this call transformed Wesleyan Ultimate from a charismatic eruption into an institution.

That may actually be more impressive than founding it.

Founders receive mythology. Builders of continuity rarely do. But continuity is what determines whether a movement survives long enough to become tradition.

And the Era2 generation absolutely built a tradition.

Women became increasingly integrated into the team culture. Recruitment expanded dramatically. New players no longer had to survive psychological hazing merely to participate. People who had never played before showed up and became contributors. The roster grew. The team improved.

Remarkably, they got better while becoming more welcoming.

That almost never happens.

Usually organizations believe they must choose between excellence and openness. Wesleyan Ultimate accidentally discovered that inclusiveness could itself become a competitive advantage. With more players came more depth, more energy, more ideas, and eventually more success.

By the middle of the conversation, the players begin describing themselves less like survivors and more like architects.

Jeff Williams explains that they simply wanted to recruit, play, improve, and have fun. Nobody claims to have had a grand ideological plan. In classic Wesleyan fashion, they accidentally built a coherent philosophy while denying they were doing any such thing.

And yet the philosophy is unmistakable.

Compete fiercely.

Do not become joyless.

Remain weird.

Take Spirit seriously.

Do not confuse cruelty with standards.

One of the most emotionally revealing moments comes near the end, when Jeff Williams remembers Nick Donohue teaching him about respecting opponents and Spirit of the Game. This complicates the entire mythology beautifully.

Because the founders were not merely tyrants.

They were transmitting ethical seriousness.

The Era2 generation did not reject those values. They refined them. They translated them into a culture that more people could inhabit.

That translation may be the central achievement of the era.

By the end of the transcript, the players discuss attending the 50th reunion before Nationals in 2025. Someone remarks that the current Wesleyan team might not win, but they would definitely be “the weirdest team there.”

Everyone treats this as proof of success.

And they are correct.

That sentence means the culture survived.

Not the exact strategies.

Not the exact leadership structure.

Not even the exact competitive status.

The identity.

That is what lasted.

Fifty years later, Wesleyan Ultimate still understands itself not merely as a sports team but as a social ecosystem for highly intelligent oddballs who care passionately about something the outside world may never fully understand.

That is not accidental.

It is the direct inheritance of the Era2 generation.

The most striking thing about the call is how modest everyone remains about what they accomplished. Nobody gives grand speeches. Nobody frames themselves as historical actors. They joke constantly, interrupt one another, and undercut every potentially sentimental moment with sarcasm.

Which is exactly why the story feels true.

Because what these people built was never merely a team.

It was a way of being serious without becoming rigid.

Competitive without becoming cruel.

Communal without becoming complacent.

Weird without apology.

That is an astonishingly difficult balance to achieve in any institution, let alone a student-run sports program held together by captains, road trips, and whatever happened to be floating around Foss Hill that afternoon.

And somehow, against all historical probability, they pulled it off.

The founders built the fire.

Era2 figured out how to keep it burning without burning everybody alive.