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Ultimate Origins featuring Joel Silver

*Along with the light bulb, salt water taffy, and a few other things, New Jersey can also hold claim to being the birthplace of one of the fastest-growing team sports in the country: Ultimate Frisbee. In 1968, a bunch of students on the faculty parking lot at Columbia High School in Maplewood first came up with the idea and the rules to the field sport that now boasts nearly 5 million participants worldwide, pro leagues, and consideration for the Summer Olympics.*

*David Gessner, a player of 30 years and writing professor at University of North Carolina-Wilmington, revisits that birth in his 10th book, "Ultimate Glory: Frisbee, Obsession and My Wild Youth," a memoir of both Ultimate's and his own maturation through the 1980s and 1990s.*

For me and my generation it seemed as if Frisbees had been around forever, thrown on the beach or stuffed in our summer closets. But, in fact, the thing itself was still relatively new in 1979. That is not to say that things the shape of Frisbees, or things that flew like Frisbees—cake pans or plates or oil can lids—were new. It didn't take much of an eye or imagination to see that anything round and flat and spinable was fun to throw. Myth has it that it was students on the Yale campus who first started throwing the metal pie tins from the nearby Frisbie Pie Company, yelling out the word "Frisbie!" to alert bystanders if a tin was flying toward them. Aerodynamically, the pie tins weren't much, and it would take the invention of plastic, and an inventor named Fred Morrison, to create a disc originally called the Pluto Platter. Those first discs were produced by Wham-O on January 13, 1957, though it wasn't until seven years later, with the closing of the old pie company and the dwindling possibility of lawsuits, that the name "Frisbee" was imprinted on the discs. It was a fateful moment for what would become the sport of Ultimate, since the word Frisbee, like boing or zowie, is a hard one to take seriously, and the future sport's lifelong inferiority complex likely started right then and there.

From the very beginning people created games for the Frisbee. In fact, for a long time those very words—play catch, invent games—were printed along with the name right on the disc. One of those games was a form of Frisbee football that sprung up spontaneously at colleges around the country, and one of those colleges was Amherst. Then, in the summer of 1968, an Amherst student named Jared Kass took the game to Mount Hermon, a prep school in western Massachusetts where he was teaching in a summer program. The game was a hit, played on the large lawn behind the Crossley Dorm where Kass was staying, but

it likely would have remained a quickly forgotten summer diversion if not for the fact that one of the players who learned the game from Kass was a brash, somewhat loudmouthed but charismatic high school student from New Jersey named Joel Silver. Later in life, Silver would become famous as the producer of movies like “Lethal Weapon” and “The Matrix.” But what most people don’t know is that he was also the individual most responsible for the invention of Ultimate Frisbee.

The game that Silver and his good friends Johnny Hines and Bernard “Buzzy” Hellring would codify as much as create was essentially the same game that I would start playing ten years later.

It is important to remember that Ultimate, which is poised, as I type these words, on the threshold of being played in the Olympics, began its life as a kind of inside joke. When the man who would become the sport’s James Naismith stood up one day in the Columbia High School student council after the meeting was almost over and the call for “New Business” went out, he was not acting unironically. After getting the attention of the council, Joel Silver made a fateful motion.

“I move that Columbia High School create a varsity Frisbee team,” he announced. There were snickers and a little laughter, but there was also a crucial seconding of the motion. And so Ultimate was born, appropriately, as part farce, part performance art.

Later Silver would become known not just as a famous producer of action films but also as an exemplar of excess, a modern-day King Henry the VIII who blew through money, owned multimillion-dollar homes (one designed by Frank Lloyd Wright), rode waves of debt and extreme wealth, and, according to the “Hollywood Reporter,” “indulged in an annual tradition: shipping the staff of the Venice trattoria Vini Da Arturo from Italy to Los Angeles for eleven days to cook such favorites as scaloppine senape e panna (veal with mustard and cream) and spaghetti al gorgonzola for him and his guests.”

Silver has earned a reputation as a prototypical producer, with a temper and temperament that have been frequently satirized in print and film. Almost everyone who remembers him paints a similar portrait: opinionated, rude, smart, loud, but funny, too. This last descriptive is important. Because if he was brash and often got his way, he also had a sense of humor, or, at least, a sense of fun. And gusto, of course. The game that Silver brought back from his summer stint at Mount Hermon in the fall of 1968 may or may not have already been referred to as “Ultimate” by Jared Kass, who taught Silver to play, but that hardly matters. It was Silver who taught it to his friends, Silver who pushed it as a varsity sport, Silver who organized a game between the student council and newspaper (he was a member of both) in the spring of ’69 and Silver who no doubt talked the most shit as the game approached.

There are Frisbee scholars who, deep within their monastery walls, quibble over who really deserves the credit for inventing Ultimate, and many of them claim that Silver has been given too much credit. But whatever else you want to say about Joel Silver, one thing is clear: he was the type of person who could get excited about an idea and then carry that idea to its conclusion. Even then he was a producer. People had been throwing pie tins and then plastic around forever by that point but there was a need for a prime mover, and as it turned out, that prime mover was the man who would later bring us “Lethal Weapon” and “Xanadu.” Leave it to others to work out the details and spread the sport. He was the fountainhead.

He was also an under average athlete, who never particularly excelled at the game he invented. No matter. In P. T. Barnum fashion he talked up the game between the student council and the school newspaper, the “Columbian,” and would later rightly call the paper’s team, which he captained, “undefeated,” after its 11–7 win. The game itself only vaguely resembled what Ultimate would become, with amorphous blobs of players gathering around the disc, crowding the thrower, but there were hints of grace, mostly in the way the Frisbee flew. This was the first officially recorded game of Ultimate and it was trumpeted in the “Columbian” with this headline: “Paper Snatches Frisbee Title.”

Members of both the paper and student council would go on to form the first official Ultimate team, Columbia High School Varsity Frisbee. There is a photo from that time that perfectly captures the spirit of the team. The players all wear their Columbia High School Varsity Frisbee shirts and at first glance it looks like a normal photo of a normal sports team. But if you take a closer look, you can see something in Silver’s posture. With his chest puffed out and head thrown back he is a parody of athletic vigor. This is more a satire of glory than glory celebrated, with Silver as Teddy Roosevelt standing with his Rough Riders, smiling broadly, but this Teddy, if proud, is also aware of the absurdity of a Frisbee victory, of Frisbee glory. The players, after all, were from the paper and the student council, geeks not jocks, and they, like their whole generation, were more under the spell of “Mad” magazine than “Sports Illustrated.”

Look even closer and you’ll see that Silver is holding a kind of topsecret briefcase/notebook with the words “International Frisbee Association” printed in a circle on it and that he has his arm around an older man, decidedly not a high school student. This is the school’s janitor, Cono Pavone, who Silver has listed as the coach. At the other end of the line is the school’s septuagenarian security guard, Alexander Osinski, who is listed as the team’s “general manager.”

“We saw it as an anti-sport,” Silver would later say. “We loved the idea of this structured game all based on what was essentially a gag.”

Others, however, began to take the new game a little more seriously. Buzzy Hellring bugged Silver and told him they needed to write up the rules. Silver was reluctant—why if the game was a joke?—but gave in. Together with Johnny Hines they wrote up a set of rules that would be reverently referred to by later players as “the first edition.” While these would establish many of the rules that are still used, sometimes in modified form, today, they were also suffused with a sense of humor.

The game is played until one of the players dies,” the rules read, “or one team gives up.”

The copyright is held by Silver, Johnny Hines, and Richard Denberg, with Denberg listed only because his father owned the printing business that printed up the rules. On the second edition of the rules there was a picture of Michelangelo’s David with Silver’s face superimposed and mention of the year 1898, when politicians met to throw out the historic first Frisbee.

There were cinematic as well as ironic touches to the early rules. For instance, the Ultimate equivalent of a kickoff occurs when the team that has just scored throws the disc to the receiving team, which waits to receive on its own goal line. This would become known as the “pull,” a name coined by Silver, who lifted it from the skeet-shooting scene in the James Bond movie “Thunderball.” A decade later, when I waited to catch the pull, I had no idea of the name’s filmic aspect or origin.

There was some debate over who deserves the credit, or, depending on your point of view, blame for burdening the sport with the pretentious adjective Ultimate. Silver says that Hellring wanted to call it Speed Frisbee and that he told him it wasn’t cool enough. Silver suggested Ultimate. It is also possible that the sport was called that by some as far back as the Amherst–Mount Hermon days, when Jared Kass—who, remember, taught Silver the game—declared after making a great catch that “This is the ultimate game.” Future Frisbee scholars will no doubt argue endlessly over this matter of origin, but the point is that, for better or worse, the name stuck.

Silver himself graduated in 1969 and stopped playing, except in a few alumni games back in the Columbia High School parking lot, and he would soon head to Hollywood for more lucrative, and gaudier, pursuits. But there was no question he had started something.

“Someday they’re going to be playing this game all over the world,” he said to a friend during one of the very first pickup games.

*From ULTIMATE GLORY: Frisbee, Obsession, and My Wild Youth by David Gessner.  
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