

Gentlepersons Have a Fling at Ultimate Frisbee

By James G. Driscoll

From Westport Conn.

May 12, 1973

A superb fish chowder for lunch, but my attention focuses mainly on Al Jolley and Bill Murphy as they explain the game called Ultimate Frisbee. Al is showing me a local newspaper clipping about the Staples High School Frisbee team, and a woman at the next table leans over and asks if she can read it.

"Is Frisbee actually a team sport now?" she asks. "That's fantastic!"

Indeed. Flipping the popular plastic disc has become a team sport, and flying is in. Al Jolley, a math teacher, is faculty advisor to the Staples team, which claims in great high glee to be the national champion of Ultimate Frisbee. The contention is based largely on Staples' smashing victory this spring over Columbia High School of Maplewood, N.J. Columbia, originator of the game and pride of New Jersey Frisbee, couldn't cope with Staples' sticky man-to-man defense and lost ignominiously, 18 to 8.

Columbia, however, played the game without four of its stalwarts, one of whom, team Capt. David Leiwant, promises revenge in a rematch. "I hope they use the man-to-man defense again," growls Leiwant, a track sprinter. "I doubt if there's anyone on their team who can cover me or the other three who missed the last game."

Blustery Ambience

The good-natured hokum of blustery threats is part of Ultimate Frisbee's ambience. So is fierce competitiveness during a game, but no pressure at all during practices. Bill Murphy, Staples headmaster, compares the game in that respect to club football, which students play simply because they like it. Al Jolley calls it "the game of the people" and says any Staples student can play on the team: two girls are team members.

I came to Connecticut to learn about ultimate Frisbee, watch a scrimmage of the Staples team, and pick up some Frisbee-throwing techniques to pass on to you. Almost everyone has flipped a Frisbee, and millions of the discs will soar aloft this summer on beaches, in parks, and in backyards. Perhaps with the help of this column, you can dazzle your friends with Frisbee prowess.

Ultimate Frisbee, invented in 1969 by a few Columbia High School students, is a "fast moving, competitive game played by two seven-man teams," the official rules say. After watching a spirited scrimmage here, I must concur.

Ultimate Frisbee combines aspects of soccer, hockey, and football (with less roughness). The game consists basically of quick passes from player to player as they dart down the field. A score is made by completing a pass over the goal line: one player throws the Frisbee to another, who catches it.

In an easygoing atmosphere, the Staples squad straggled onto the field wearing their blue sweat shirts with FriSbee on the back: the big S stands for Staples. After warming up by expertly throwing the Frisbee around – they use a large tournament model, 10 ¾” in diameter – the players divided into two teams, with members of one team tying red kerchiefs around their heads for easy identification.

The game starts with the throw-off. Each team lines up on its goal line – the field’s 50 yards long, or sometimes longer – and one player skims the Frisbee down the field to the receiving team. A receiver may catch it or let it fall to the ground untouched, but if he drops it, the Frisbee goes over to the other team.

Dn Buckley, generally thought of as Staples’ best all-around player – he missed the game with Columbia – flung a screaming liner down the field to start the scrimmage. Lanky Bob Keye caught it, and his team flashed into action. Pass, pass, pass. The players say they can catch a thrown Frisbee, within reach, better than 9 out of 10 times, and I believe it.

An agile defender knocked down a pass, thereby winning possession of the Frisbee for his team. He picked it up and, pivoting about on one foot like a basketball player (you can’t run with the Frisbee), looked for a teammate to pass it to. An opponent tried to prevent a good pass, or block it, by waving his hands and keeping close.

Here’s where knowing a variety of ways to throw a Frisbee becomes valuable. There’s the standard backhand throw, something like a backhand tennis stroke. You hold the Frisbee with the convex side up; place the index finger on the Frisbee’s edge, the thumb on top, and the other fingers underneath. Some players curl the index finger on the underside too.

In the forehand throw you flip it with thumb on top, and the other fingers below. For the underhand throw, make believe you’re a softball pitcher and use the backhand grip.

The Jersey Throw

In the Columbia game, Staples players were impressed by a dislike throw of a Columbia players, so they’ve copied it, calling it the “Jersey throw.” And Larry Ikeda of Staples invented the exotic reverse backhand that looks as if would break his wrist. Larry’s ambidextrous, and it’s awfully difficult to block one of his passes.

What’s the attraction of Ultimate Frisbee? Why are there 15 high-school Frisbee teams in New Jersey, plus teams at Princeton and Rutgers universities?

Bob Lacy, one of two students who organized the Staples team last year, likes the game because it moves fast and he can play it well. It attracts top students like Bob; the Staples team has a high-point average.

Lure of Informality

Another attraction is its informality. Al Jolley acts as advisor, not as coach, and often joins in scrimmages. Jane Elmer and Sharon Appling are welcome on the team, and play quite well. Sharon scored a goal against Columbia, thereby becoming the first coed in Ultimate Frisbee history to do so in an Interstate coeducational game.

There are no referees, and if a player hits an opponent's arm while he's trying to pass, he calls a foul on himself, and the Frisbee is returned to the player who was fouled. In that respect, a gentleman's and gentlewoman's game. Yet a player can be injured in such a fast game. Bob Kaye hurt his ankles in the scrimmage after leaping high to intercept a pass with one hand.

The rematch between Columbia and Staples, scheduled later this spring, promises to be hard fought and close. Columbia with Leiwant and the three others who missed the first match will be a stronger team. And Staples will have Dan Buckley this time.

If Staples manages to win again, thus keeping the "national championship," there'll be one more world to conquer. A former Staples player has moved to Montreal and is organizing a team at his school there. There may be a game between Staples and the Canadian team, and if Staples wins... well, "world champion" sounds even better than "national champion."

(The official rules of Ultimate Frisbee are available at 10 cents a copy from CHS Varsity Frisbee Team, Columbia High School, 17 Parker Ave., Maplewood N.J. 07040)