

Al Jolley and the Publicity Campaign that Helped Launch Ultimate Frisbee

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Every successful movement has two beginnings. The first is the moment of invention; the second is the moment when the wider world discovers that the invention exists. Ultimate Frisbee was invented by students at Columbia High School in Maplewood, New Jersey, but one of the people most responsible for introducing it to the public imagination was a young mathematics teacher in Connecticut named Al Jolley.

Jolley understood something that many inventors overlook: a great idea does not spread on merit alone. It spreads because people hear about it. During the early 1970s, long before social media or the internet, awareness depended on newspapers, wire services, and personal relationships. Jolley and his Staples High School students built an extraordinary publicity campaign that carried Ultimate from a local curiosity toward national recognition.

The campaign began modestly. After receiving a copy of the Columbia rules from his sister and seeing the game played in Maplewood, Jolley introduced Ultimate to students at Staples High School. The team practiced on rough fields, welcomed girls alongside boys, designed distinctive blue turtleneck uniforms, and eagerly searched for opponents. They persuaded nearby Weston High School to form a team, creating one of Connecticut's first interscholastic contests. Every game became an opportunity to tell a story.

Jolley appreciated that newspapers were not merely record keepers; they were engines of legitimacy. The first audience was the Staples High School newspaper. Students saw classmates playing a completely new sport that emphasized honor, teamwork, and creativity rather than violence. Coverage inside the school built curiosity and attracted new players.

Next came the Westport News. One article announced that Frisbee had become Staples' first coeducational interscholastic sport. Another celebrated the team's victory over Weston. After Staples defeated Columbia High School in the first

known interstate high school Ultimate match, local papers proclaimed the achievement with photographs and exuberant headlines. In good fun, the Staples players even declared themselves 'national champions.' The boast was tongue-in-cheek, but it was memorable, and memorable stories travel.

Those local stories caught the attention of Patricia McCormack, a respected journalist who wrote both for local newspapers and United Press International. Her syndicated feature, 'Will Saucer's Apprentices Take the Fun Out of Frisbee?', introduced readers far beyond Connecticut to the startling idea that Frisbee had evolved into an organized, coeducational team sport with uniforms, strategy, and official rules. Syndication dramatically amplified the audience. Suddenly, Ultimate was no longer simply Westport news.

The decisive breakthrough came when James Driscoll of the National Observer read about the Staples team and traveled from Washington to see the game for himself. His full-page feature, 'Gentlepersons Have a Fling at Ultimate Frisbee,' published in May 1973, accomplished something remarkable. Rather than treating Ultimate as a novelty, it treated it as an authentic new sport worthy of serious national attention.

Driscoll described the pace of play, the athleticism, the self-officiating ethic, the inclusion of women, and the intellectual character of the players. He portrayed Ultimate as modern, idealistic, and refreshingly different. For readers across America, this was likely their first encounter with the game. The article effectively announced that Ultimate had arrived.

Seen as a whole, Jolley's work resembles a carefully constructed public-relations campaign. The sequence was almost textbook: generate school interest, earn local coverage, expand to regional reporting, secure national syndication, and finally achieve a prestigious national feature. Whether or not Jolley consciously planned every step, he consistently recognized every opportunity to place Ultimate before a larger audience.

His students became partners in the effort. Winning games mattered, but telling

the story mattered just as much. Every article encouraged another school to consider forming a team, another student to ask for the rules, another teacher to imagine organizing a club.

The results reached far beyond Staples High School. Graduates carried Ultimate to universities including Wesleyan, Brown, Penn, and Connecticut, helping create one of the earliest networks of collegiate teams. The publicity and the people reinforced one another: newspaper stories generated curiosity, and the expanding network of teams generated more stories.

History often celebrates inventors while overlooking the evangelists who persuade others to believe. Al Jolley belongs among those evangelists. He taught mathematics, but he also understood communication. He recognized that a new sport needed narratives as much as rules, photographs as much as scoreboards, and public imagination as much as athletic skill.

The heroic dimension of Jolley's story is therefore not simply that he coached an early Ultimate team. It is that he helped give a fragile new game a public voice. From a school newspaper to hometown headlines, from local reporting to United Press International, and ultimately to the pages of the National Observer, Al Jolley demonstrated that publicity can change history. Without that chain of stories, Ultimate might have remained a fascinating regional experiment. Because those stories were told, countless readers discovered a sport built on trust, inclusion, and joy—and many of them went out to start teams of their own. In that sense, Al Jolley was not only one of Ultimate's pioneers; he was one of its first and greatest storytellers.