

ERA 1: THE FOUNDERS

Wesleyan Ultimate, 1975–1981

From a note in the Argus to a team with a name, a culture, and something worth handing on

The Letter

The first great act in the history of Wesleyan Ultimate was not a layout, a huck, a zone, or a championship run. It was an invitation.

In the spring of 1975, Bob Lacy wrote to the Argus with an almost comically modest proposition. Frisbees were already flying all over campus, he observed, and there happened to be a game called team Frisbee. Yale had written suggesting that Wesleyan form a team and play some games. Lacy had played before. If anyone was interested, he would try to organize something. Experience was not required. Winning was not required. “I don’t care whether or not we become really good,” he wrote. “I just want to have fun.”

Fifty years later, that sentence reads less like a casual disclaimer than a founding document.

Lacy did not announce a program. He did not claim a tradition. He did not promise excellence. He offered a place to belong. Leave a note in P.O. Box 370, he said, and we will figure it out. That was enough.

Lacy had brought something unusual with him to Middletown. He had played at Staples High School in Westport, CT for Al Jolley, one of the early evangelists of a game that had only recently been codified at Columbia High School in Maplewood, New Jersey (CHSVF). Jolley had learned of Ultimate through his Maplewood connections and built a team at Staples. Lacy remembered that after Staples beat CHSVF once, the Staples boys did the only sensible thing available to teenage pioneers in a sport with essentially two high-school teams: they declared themselves national champions. CHSVF later returned the favor emphatically. The important thing was not the title. It was the transmission.

CHSVF to Staples. Staples to Wesleyan.

And even that lineage has a pleasing Wesleyan wrinkle: Jolley had studied at Wesleyan in preparation for teaching and encouraged Staples students to consider the college. So when Lacy arrived in Middletown, Ultimate was not quite a foreign organism landing on campus. A thin filament already connected Wesleyan to the sport’s first years.

Lacy’s genius, if we can call it that without embarrassing him, was that he did not over-organize the thing. He recruited apartment mates from Williams Street, put out the word, and went to the athletic department expecting to be laughed out of the office. Instead, in what he later called “true Wesleyan style,” the athletic director asked what they needed. Not much, as it turned out: a few discs, a little money, and transportation. The department let them use a van for away games. No coach. No elaborate budget. No institutional blueprint. Just enough oxygen for something new to breathe.

The first team learned by playing. There were no sophisticated drills because there was hardly a body of sophisticated Ultimate knowledge to inherit. The strategy, as Bill Ritchie later remembered it,

sometimes amounted to yelling “Go deep!” with conviction. But the invitation was real, and the game was real, and soon enough Wesleyan had a team.

The First Game — and a Small Historical Mystery

The Argus account of Wesleyan’s first game captures the wonderful improbability of the whole enterprise. In late April 1975, the newly formed team traveled to Storrs and beat a fledgling UConn team, 15–11. Bill Bath scored two quick goals. Bob Bischoff became the key distributor. Bill Ritchie supplied long throws. When they tired, Dan Scholten, Lyle Rudensey, John Brainard, Marty Hume, and captain Bob Lacy kept the thing together. Brainard, the article reported, used his reach to snatch passes away from startled UConn players.

It was not merely Wesleyan’s first game. It was a victory.

There is a delicious historical loose end here. The May 9 Argus story says the game occurred “two Saturdays ago,” which points to Saturday, April 26, 1975. Meanwhile, the early history of the sport places the first organized National Collegiate Championships at Yale on the same late-April weekend, with Rutgers eventually defeating RPI. Lacy’s own recruiting letter had been prompted by Yale, which was urging Wesleyan to form a team and had proposed dates.

So why was brand-new Wesleyan in Storrs while the more formal collegiate tournament was taking shape at Yale?

We do not yet know. Perhaps the invitation was informal. Perhaps Wesleyan was too new, too late, too unknown, or simply committed elsewhere. Perhaps there is a letter or schedule still waiting in an archive to explain it. The uncertainty is worth preserving rather than smoothing away. Early Ultimate was not born with a central office and a perfect record book. It spread through friendships, phone calls, letters, improvised schedules, and people who knew people. Wesleyan’s first game belongs to that world.

The team’s future, the Argus cheerfully reported, was “insured” because Wesleyan had budgeted \$100 for the next year — an amount the writer translated into the more useful economic unit of “a shitload of Frisbees.”

A Team Before It Was a Program

The years immediately after the founding are hazier than anyone would like and, in another way, exactly as hazy as they ought to be. Memory from the period is full of confident declarations followed by corrections, counter-corrections, and laughter. That is not a flaw in the record. It is part of the record.

What emerges clearly is continuity. The team did not disappear after its first spring. Fred Hewett remembered field-goal Frisbee on the football field in the fall of 1975 and trips to Harvard, Brown, UConn, Amherst, and Yale as the club became more organized. Lacy recalled that games were often arranged through old high-school friends: someone knew someone at another school, a call was made, and a game appeared.

This was how a sport grew before schedules became databases.

By 1977 the Argus was treating Ultimate as a recognizable campus sport. Hampshire, already described as a “perennial Frisbee power,” came to Fauver. Wesleyan played Yale. The vocabulary

was changing too. The team was no longer simply a collection of people who happened to throw. It had opponents, expectations, a style, and the beginnings of a reputation.

And it was still fun.

That matters because the great story of Era 1 is not a straight ascent from unseriousness to seriousness. It is a negotiation between two good things: openness and excellence. The first generation established that anybody could come. The next generation began asking how good Wesleyan could become if everybody cared a little more.

Enter Nick Donohue

No one embodies that tension better than Nick Donohue.

Donohue arrived at Ultimate through a very Wesleyan combination of athletic ambition, wounded pride, marijuana, and revelation. He had been a serious high-school athlete and tried lacrosse at Wesleyan. He was good enough to play, but not good enough to feel like himself. Ultimate offered another path. In the fall of 1976, after long nights learning to throw with a friend, he encountered Spike Berry on Foss Hill. Berry asked if he had ever played Ultimate. Donohue had not. They walked over and played.

He found his game.

Donohue was competitive in a culture that had not yet decided whether competitiveness was entirely polite. He wanted practices. He wanted running. He wanted people to show up when it rained. He wanted teammates to improve. He could be overbearing, and he knows it. Decades later he remembered John Dione challenging him during one of his attempted team directives: who exactly had put Nick in charge? Donohue's remembered answer was essentially: I did.

There is an even better testimonial. Years later, Steve Berlin introduced him at a party as "the guy who ruined Ultimate for me." Donohue remembered being stricken. Berlin softened it: Nick had been trying to do something good.

That is the whole Era 1 dilemma in miniature.

The founding promise had been: come play, no pressure, everybody welcome. Donohue's instinct was: yes — and now let's see what happens if we get good.

His teammates, looking back, are kinder to him than he is to himself. Chris Heye remembered Donohue as more competitive than Spike Berry but said his enthusiasm was infectious and that he largely found the balance. The generation that followed remembered the older team as hard-driving, Donohue especially, but also admired the principles and seriousness they established.

The point is not that Donohue solved the tension between joy and excellence. He made it impossible to ignore. That may have been more valuable.

He also supplied the sort of relentless energy without which young institutions die. In one rainstorm, when teammates sensibly concluded that a tournament should not happen, Nick concluded otherwise. Steve Mooney remembered the phone calls: Nick said they were going. Mooney said it was raining. David "Neech" Garfield said there was no way. Nick did not take no for an answer. In another version of the rain saga, Donohue remembered climbing through a Williams Street window to extract John Dione from under a bed because Dione was "resisting the call to duty."

Every durable institution eventually develops procedures. Before procedures, it usually has someone like Nick.

Chris Heye Arrives Carrying a Disc

On September 4, 1977, Chris Heye arrived at Wesleyan with Frisbees.

His parents dropped him off. He wandered campus carrying a disc, because that was what one did if one was Chris Heye and there was any possibility that somebody nearby might know how to throw. On Fauver Field he saw Donohue throwing 40-yard forehands. Heye's retrospective estimate was that perhaps twelve people on Earth could do that in 1977 — and he and Nick were two of them.

He ran over. Do you play Ultimate? Yes. When do we play?

That was the conversation.

It is hard to invent a better origin scene for the next stage of Wesleyan Ultimate. The team had acquired two people who were not merely interested in the sport but obsessed with its possibilities.

Heye brought technical imagination. Donohue brought force of will. Their presence raised the level around them. Heye remembered that when he arrived, there were enormous differences in throwing skill. A good forehand was still unusual. The offense could be brutally simple: get the disc to someone who could throw, send someone who could catch, and hope the geometry worked.

Soon it worked more often.

In Heye's first year, Wesleyan beat Williams in a rain-soaked game that survives in memory as a miniature epic: a late throw, a receiver falling or flipping, a catch, game over. There were also scheduling mishaps. At one point Wesleyan apparently invited two opponents on the same day, discovered the error when both arrived, and converted administrative incompetence into a round robin.

This was still not a program in the modern sense. It was a group of young people inventing the administrative and tactical grammar of a sport while playing it.

1978: The Bees Become Visible

By the spring of 1978, Wesleyan Ultimate had become visible enough to leave a much richer paper trail.

The team was now "the Bees." Bill Ritchie's *Argus* reports describe a group that had clearly moved beyond novelty. Wesleyan lost a hard-fought opener to powerhouse UConn, 21–16, in ferocious wind. Chris Heye and Dave Flynn were prominent; Spike Berry and Fred Hewett helped control the offense; captain Nick Donohue played through pain. The tone of the article is revealing: losing to UConn was no longer simply an amusing outing. The performance was evidence that Wesleyan might be headed toward its best season.

Then came wins. Wesleyan beat Williams 20–14 and Amherst 16–4 to take the Little Three championship. Ritchie's account included a ritual "passing of the bowl ceremony at midfield," a phrase that future historians may interpret according to their own innocence. Donohue took command in the second half. Heye and Flynn threw long. The Bees were not merely participating; they were beginning to impose themselves.

A few days later Wesleyan beat Yale 19–11 before an enthusiastic home crowd. The game was rougher than graceful. Yale relied on long bombs; Wesleyan answered with what Ritchie called the Bees' "patented give-and-go passing." Donohue and Flynn sustained drives. Bischoff made catches in traffic. Heye and Peter Davis worked against Yale's zone. Wesleyan entered the Southern New England championships seeded third behind UConn and Brown.

They finished third.

That result is a useful corrective to nostalgia. Era 1 became legendary inside Wesleyan, but these teams were not yet ruling the region. They could beat good teams. They could frighten stronger teams. They could also lose.

The Hartford Courant captured the paradox nicely. Its April 1978 feature described fifteen Wesleyan players practicing, planning strategy, and competing against eight New England colleges. The players ran hard and took the sport seriously. Yet they explicitly resisted varsity status. Nick Donohue told the paper that the essence of the game was "to have fun and not just win, win, win."

Of all people, Nick Donohue said that.

The man who could drive teammates through wind sprints, drag them toward tournaments in the rain, and worry that he had become too competitive was publicly defending fun against institutionalized winning. That is not hypocrisy. It is the central insight of this generation: excellence mattered because the game mattered, but the game mattered for reasons larger than excellence.

From Bees to WES-U-Bee to the Nietzsche Factor

Names tell you when a group begins to understand itself.

David Oppenheimer's 1975 Argus story called the new team "the Cards," the generic Wesleyan athletic identity. By 1978, the newspaper consistently called them the Bees. Sometime after that came WES-U-Bee, complete with shirts and the kind of design disputes that prove a club has become a civilization.

Then came the name that stuck.

The exact chronology remains delightfully contested. The Era 1 veterans agree that by the fall of 1980 they were the Nietzsche Factor. They also agree that David "Neech" Garfield was somehow at the center of it. The spelling wandered; the explanations multiplied. Chris Heye remembered Nick attaching "Factor" to people's names. Garfield remembered Steve Mooney positioning himself about ten yards beyond Neech so that Garfield would not overrun him — that distance, Mooney called the "Neech factor." Mooney remembered something larger: Garfield was leaving for Africa, an absence so exotic and indefinite that the team named itself for the missing man.

The etymology is less important than the act.

Wesleyan Ultimate had stopped borrowing identity from the university and begun manufacturing its own.

That is a profound step in the life of a team. A roster becomes a culture when it develops private language: nicknames, cheers, shirts, stories, rituals, arguments whose punch lines make no sense to outsiders. The Nietzsche Factor was not a branding exercise. It was a declaration that this odd little society had become self-aware.

Neech, Heye, and the Long Throw

Garfield also gave the team one of its defining on-field relationships.

Heye and Neech threw constantly. They walked around campus with discs. They practiced long throws. Garfield learned to run to space; Heye learned to put the disc where only Garfield could reach it. Eventually everybody knew what was coming. The defense knew too. It often did not matter.

Mooney remembered the combination as almost absurdly reliable: Neech would get a step, Heye would let the disc go, and the play was effectively over. Heye described the ideal throw as one that traveled beyond the defense and seemed almost to stop in the air, waiting for Garfield to arrive beneath it.

This is where young sports become beautiful. At first, everyone is learning rules. Then they learn skills. Eventually two players learn each other.

The Heye-Garfield connection was not a play copied from a manual. It grew out of hundreds of throws and the accumulated confidence that one person would go and the other would put the disc there. The team's sophistication was increasing not because Ultimate had become bureaucratic, but because friendship, repetition, and obsession had produced craft.

Steve Mooney and the Discovery of Structure

Steve Mooney arrived by another route. He was a soccer player, recruited relentlessly by Donohue, who was apparently willing to lose at foosball if it kept him near promising athletes long enough to recruit them.

Mooney began playing Ultimate in 1979 while still committed to soccer. Then he went west, spent time at Berkeley, encountered a higher level of disc culture, and returned to Wesleyan with more skill and a soccer player's instinct that a running game ought to involve conditioning.

Heye gives Mooney particular credit for bringing structure to practice in the fall of 1980. Mooney remembered the logic as obvious: Ultimate was about throwing to space and running, much like soccer, so people ought to get in shape. Sprints and running drills followed. The team's athletic standard rose.

Mooney also supplied one of the clearest retrospective descriptions of what was happening. The right word, he said, was "competitive." Suddenly there were four, five, six, seven people who really wanted to win. Heye. Donohue. Garfield. Mooney. Greg Barrage. Jeff Williams and others. The team sometimes narrowed itself too much, played too few people, ran out of gas, and learned from the mistake.

And then Mooney asked the question that sits over the entire era: "Fun, win — can you do them both?"

That is a lifelong battle, he said.

It is also the Wesleyan Ultimate story in seven words.

Fall 1980: The Team Gets Good

The veterans are unreliable about many dates and refreshingly honest about it. On one point they converge: fall 1980 was the peak.

Heye remembered it as easily the best Wesleyan team of his years. Mooney had returned in shape and could throw. Donohue had gained experience outside Wesleyan and was playing at a higher level. Heye was technically sophisticated. Barrage was good. The supporting cast was deeper. Practices had intensity and, increasingly, structure.

At sectionals they beat the Dukes — the game that survives as the emotional benchmark — and reached the final. They lost to the New York power, but that was almost beside the point. They had crossed a line. Wesleyan could now walk into serious competition expecting not merely to participate but to win important games.

The transformation from 1975 is remarkable.

Five years earlier, Bob Lacy had written that he did not care whether the team became really good. By 1980, the team had become good almost in spite of the modesty of that ambition — or perhaps because of it. People had been given room to fall in love with the sport before they were asked to sacrifice for it.

The culture was still unruly. There was pot. There were arguments. There were shirts nobody had authorized. There were games in weather no responsible adult would recommend. There were cheers, and the cheers mattered: funny, specific, generally not cruel, a way of restoring perspective after the score had done its damage.

There were also limits to the mythology. Wesleyan did not dominate the East. It did not win everything. The heroes themselves spend a remarkable amount of their reunion conversation correcting one another about which tournament happened when and whether they were actually there.

That may be the most Wesleyan part of the story. Even the legends argue with the legend.

What Nick Was Trying to Save

It is tempting to make Donohue the character who brought seriousness into Eden. That would be too easy and not quite fair.

The more interesting truth is that Nick's competitiveness grew from love. Ultimate let him preserve an identity as an athlete after conventional college sports had disappointed him. He later said that this mattered throughout his life. He could remain an athlete without needing to become a professional athlete. Ultimate gave him a place where intensity, improvisation, friendship, and physical excellence could coexist.

That helps explain both his best qualities and his excesses.

He wanted teammates to experience what he was experiencing. He sometimes pushed too hard. He sometimes mistook his own appetite for everybody else's. Yet the team did not become a joyless machine. Heye remembers laughing with Nick after losses, turning bad throws into jokes. Mooney remembers the cheers. The players remember getting stoned, throwing endlessly, driving to games, inventing strategy, and making friends whose arguments were still lively nearly half a century later.

Donohue's real legacy may be that he forced the team to discover a more mature definition of fun.

Fun was not the absence of effort.

Fun could include running hard, caring about the score, learning a forehand, playing through cold rain, getting furious about a turnover, and then laughing at yourself afterward. It could include

standards without referees, competitiveness without surrendering self-officiation, and ambition without allowing victory to become the only measure of the day.

The 1978 Courant interview shows that Donohue understood the danger even while helping create the competitive culture. Varsity status, he feared, might turn the game into “win, win, win.”

He wanted to win. He just did not want winning to own the game.

The Edge of 1981

Success creates its own succession crisis.

The first Wesleyan team had been able to survive because there was almost nothing to preserve. If someone graduated, somebody else could pick up a disc. By 1981, that was no longer true. The team now possessed a culture, a style, accumulated knowledge, rivalries, standards, stories, and leaders whose personalities had become entangled with the institution.

Then they began to leave.

Mooney had graduated and stayed into the fall of 1980 before moving to Boston. Garfield also moved into the Boston Ultimate world. Donohue and Heye reached the end of their Wesleyan years. The generation that had turned Lacy's open invitation into a competitive identity was dispersing.

And here the story folds back on itself.

In the spring of 1981, Wesleyan played Aerodisc, the Boston club that now included some of its own recent alumni. Wesleyan lost. The precise details are foggy, as details from this era often are, but the symbolism is almost too perfect: the institution was now playing against people it had helped form.

The alumni network was beginning before anyone had called it an alumni network.

Mooney, Garfield, Donohue, and Heye would carry Wesleyan habits into the broader Ultimate world. In Boston, Mooney and Garfield played with Aerodisc; Donohue chose Boston in part because Mooney urged him to come and help form a good team. The same people soon helped create other enduring combinations and traditions, including the Rude Boys and the Wesleyan-Williams WESwill teams. Their competitive careers after Wesleyan deserve their own fuller accounting; the surviving material here establishes the bridge, but not enough verified detail to responsibly summarize all of their later national-championship accomplishments.

That bridge matters because it changed what graduation meant. Leaving Wesleyan no longer necessarily meant leaving the team's world.

What the Founders Actually Founded

The easiest way to tell Era 1 would be as a sports story: team starts, team improves, team wins games, team becomes competitive.

But that is not what the founders really founded.

They founded permission.

Lacy founded permission to show up before you were good. Spike Berry and the early crew preserved the idea that the sport should feel light in the hand. Ritchie and Bischoff and the first

competitors demonstrated that this strange game deserved to be taken seriously enough to report, remember, and improve. Donohue founded permission to care fiercely. Heye showed what craft and imagination could do. Garfield embodied the joyous specialist, the runner whose chemistry with a thrower could turn a simple idea into an identity. Mooney brought athletic structure and asked the question every generation would inherit: can we become better without becoming worse?

The answer, in Era 1, was never settled.

Good.

Healthy cultures do not solve that question once. They keep negotiating it.

The 1975 team was radically open because there was no status to protect. The 1980 team was more demanding because it had discovered excellence. The task for the people arriving in 1981 was to inherit both truths without allowing either to destroy the other.

That is why the mass graduation at the end of Era 1 was more than a roster problem. For the first time, Wesleyan Ultimate had something substantial enough to lose.

Could a new group inherit the standards without merely imitating the personalities? Could they keep the laughter without becoming casual? Could they compete without turning into the varsity culture the founders had distrusted? Could a team named for an absent teammate survive when many of the people who had made the name meaningful were absent too?

The founders could not answer those questions for them.

They had done something more useful. They had left them a living argument.

The Disc in the Air

There is a moment in a long throw when the work has already been done but the result is not yet known. The thrower has released it. The receiver is running. The disc is hanging out there in space.

That is where Era 1 ends.

Behind it are Bob Lacy's letter, the first win over UConn, the borrowed van, the Williams Street apartments, Spike Berry's easy welcome, Bill Ritchie yelling "Go deep," the Bees, the rain, the Little Three title, the Yale win, the Courant photograph, Donohue's wind sprints and self-doubt, Heye arriving with a Frisbee in his hand, Neech running under another long one, Mooney bringing soccer legs to practice, WES-U-Bee shirts, the invention of the Nietzsche Factor, cheers after games, arguments over dates, and friendships sturdy enough to survive all the arguments.

Ahead is 1981.

The old leaders are leaving. The next players are looking up.

The disc has not landed yet.

SIDEBAR: Beyond Wesleyan — The Boston Bridge

What the current source set supports — and what still needs documenting

Era 1 did not simply end at graduation. It spilled outward.

Steve Mooney moved to Boston after the fall of 1980. David “Neech” Garfield also entered the Boston scene, and the Era 1 oral history places both of them with Aerodisc, one of the strongest clubs in the country. Nick Donohue remembered choosing between jobs in New York and Boston and being pulled toward Boston partly because Mooney was there and wanted to build something together. Chris Heye’s path also remained deeply connected to elite Ultimate.

The same network helped generate the Rude Boys and later WESwill, the Wesleyan-Williams team that carried relationships across generations. In the veterans’ telling, these were not side adventures. They were continuations of the social machinery built at Wesleyan: recruit your friends, invent a team, travel somewhere improbable, play hard, and make the weekend memorable.

The project notes indicate that Mooney, Donohue, and Heye later won national championships on Boston club teams. The files used for this essay do not contain enough precise, independently stated detail — teams, years, tournament results, and roles — to present that championship record confidently. Rather than turn memory into fact, this sidebar marks the subject for a short follow-up research pass. The larger point is already clear: Wesleyan’s Era 1 players did not merely participate in the early growth of Ultimate. Several moved directly into the sport’s emerging elite club culture and helped carry Wesleyan relationships with them.

HISTORIAN’S NOTE: The Yale Tournament Question

One date deserves further digging. The May 9, 1975 Argus report says Wesleyan’s first game occurred “two Saturdays ago,” which points to April 26, 1975, at UConn. The project chronology also places the first organized National Collegiate Championships at Yale on that same late-April weekend. Bob Lacy’s original letter says Yale had encouraged Wesleyan to form a team and had already suggested possible game dates. Why Wesleyan went to Storrs rather than Yale is not established by the current evidence. This essay intentionally leaves the question open.

Source Note

This narrative was built from the Era 1 oral-history interviews and the surviving contemporary material assembled for the Wesleyan Ultimate History Project, including Bob Lacy’s 1975 Argus letter; David Oppenheimer’s report on the first UConn game; 1977–78 Argus coverage; the April 1978 Hartford Courant feature; later recollections by Bob Lacy, Bill Bath, Spike Berry, and the Era 1 veterans; and the 2026 Founders and Era 1 Heroes Zoom interviews. Where memories conflict on dates or sequence, the essay preserves uncertainty rather than manufacturing precision.