

Before the Bees

How a game born in a New Jersey parking lot traveled through Staples High School, the national press, and finally to Wesleyan

A prehistory of Wesleyan Ultimate, 1968–1975

A Team Before There Was a Team

The history of Wesleyan Ultimate does not begin at Wesleyan. It begins, properly, with a chain of people who kept seeing more in a plastic disc than the people around them did. A teenager saw a game and imagined a sport. High-school students wrote rules for it, then persuaded other schools to play. A mathematics teacher in Connecticut recognized that a game without opponents needed evangelists as much as athletes. Newspaper reporters discovered that this improbable new sport made unusually good copy. And finally one of the Connecticut players arrived in Middletown carrying, in effect, a small piece of this culture with him.

That is the long game in this story. Wesleyan did not invent Ultimate, and in April 1975 it was not even particularly early among colleges to organize a team. But Wesleyan was connected to the game before it had a team of its own. The connection ran through Al Jolley: Columbia High School alumnus, Wesleyan graduate student, Staples High School teacher, organizer, publicist and one of the sport's early Johnny Appleseeds. The final link was Bob Lacy, a Staples player who brought the game to Wesleyan and helped turn a few people throwing a disc into an institution that would survive for fifty years.

Maplewood: A Joke That Became a Sport

Ultimate's creation story has the useful quality of sounding slightly implausible even after one knows it is true. In the late 1960s, at Columbia High School in Maplewood, New Jersey, Joel Silver—later the Hollywood producer—proposed a school Frisbee team. Silver had encountered a form of Frisbee football through Jared Kass at a summer program at Mount Hermon. Back in Maplewood, Silver and friends including Bernard “Buzzy” Hellring and Jonny Hines began turning the loose game into something more durable. They played in a parking lot, sometimes under lights, with coats or the surrounding landscape doing the work that painted lines would later do. They

wrote rules. They gave the game a name. They treated an object associated with beaches and backyards as the center of a competitive team sport.

There was mischief in the enterprise from the start. Silver's proposal had the air of a student-council prank, and the Columbia players were not above theatricality, boasting and invented grandeur. But beneath the joke was a serious organizational instinct. The crucial accomplishment of the Columbia group was not simply devising a pleasing way to move a Frisbee down a field. It was codifying the game so that strangers could reproduce it. A game played only by friends is recreation. A game with written rules that can be mailed to another school can become a sport.

By 1970, Columbia students had produced early written rules, and Columbia was playing other schools. Larry Schindel and Irv Kalb became particularly important in the next generation. Schindel, working with other Columbia players, sent rules to high schools around northern New Jersey and invited them to form teams. Millburn responded; other schools followed; a New Jersey conference emerged. The players were learning a principle that would define Ultimate's first decade: expansion happened person to person. There was no league office, no recruiting department, no governing body with regional representatives. Someone had to send the rules, make the call, persuade a friend, find a field and arrange the game.

The same instinct followed Columbia graduates to college. On November 6, 1972, Rutgers and Princeton staged what was billed as the first intercollegiate Ultimate game, deliberately placing it on the 103rd anniversary of the first intercollegiate football game between the same schools. About a thousand people came. Television, radio and newspaper reporters were there. Rutgers leaders openly told The New York Times that one purpose of the event was publicity: they wanted the game to catch on. Ultimate's pioneers were already behaving as if publicity were part of the sport itself.

The Wesleyan Man in Westport

One of the people receptive to this new game had an unusually useful biography. Al Jolley had grown up in Maplewood and graduated from Columbia High School in 1960, years before Ultimate was invented there. He studied mathematics at Rutgers and then entered Wesleyan's Master of Arts in Teaching program in the mid-1960s. His Wesleyan years mattered less because he played Frisbee there—he did not—than because they placed a

future carrier of the game inside Wesleyan's extended family before Wesleyan Ultimate existed.

Jolley spent part of his teacher training at Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut, and joined the faculty as a mathematics teacher in 1966. He was not the archetype of a varsity coach looking for the next sport to conquer. His natural network ran through students he knew in class, Scouting and a church youth fellowship. He liked young people, liked games and liked the outdoors. Frisbees were already around. What was missing was a structure.

That structure arrived through family mail. Jolley's younger sister was a student at Columbia High while Ultimate was taking shape. She told him about the new game and sent him a copy of the Columbia rules. Jolley later remembered the moment simply: he shared the rules with student friends, and they quickly became avid players. The modesty of that description hides the important act. Jolley did not merely read the rules. He activated them.

The Staples group began playing after school on an unkempt field near the school. When they migrated to the better grass used by the girls' field hockey team, Jolley recalled, they were chased off by girls waving sticks. They played several afternoons a week, sometimes late enough into the Connecticut fall that the cold made their Frisbees crack. From the beginning, girls played with boys. They eventually acquired a recognizable uniform: blue jeans, light-blue turtlenecks marked with a Staples Frisbee monogram, and often red bandannas. The effect was half athletic team, half cheerful insurgency.

The Problem of Having Nobody to Play

A new sport faces a problem that an established sport never has to think about: enthusiasm is useless if there is nobody on the other side. Staples could scrimmage forever, but that would not create a competitive world. Jolley and his players therefore had to manufacture their own opposition. They encouraged nearby Weston High School to organize a team. They corresponded with Columbia. They tried to turn acquaintances into opponents.

This is where the early history of Ultimate begins to look less like the history of a sport than the history of a network. Every new team increased the value of every existing team. One school produced a second school; graduates produced college teams; those teams produced schedules; schedules produced

rivalries. The people later honored as Ultimate's "Johnny Appleseeds" were valuable not because they perfected a forehand or invented a defense, but because they understood, consciously or not, network effects decades before anyone used the phrase.

Staples became the first important outpost beyond New Jersey. Its games with Weston demonstrated that the Columbia rules could travel. Then came the larger test: Columbia itself. Jolley had corresponded with the Columbia group and arranged a game in Westport for April 14, 1973. Beforehand, on a visit home to Maplewood, he found the Columbia players practicing at night on their paved lot and watched them closely. He returned to Staples with a peculiar over-the-head throw he had seen there. The Staples players called it the "Jersey throw." Even espionage in early Ultimate was amiable and homemade.

April 14, 1973: Beat the Inventors, Then Tell Everyone

Staples beat Columbia 18–8. The result came with a qualification that would become part of the lore: several leading Columbia players had missed the trip, reportedly after the senior prom. Columbia would return later with a stronger roster and decisively win the rematch. But none of that diminished what Staples had in hand on April 14. A Connecticut team had beaten the school that invented the game.

Jolley and the Staples players did something consequential with the victory. They turned it into a story. The Westport News had already been paying attention. On March 30 it introduced Frisbee as Staples' first coeducational interscholastic sport. Coverage followed the Weston game. After the Columbia victory, the paper ran photographs and a jubilant account under the banner of the "Wrecker Frisbee Champions," declaring that Staples could claim to be national champions because it had beaten New Jersey's best. The claim was intentionally ridiculous and strategically excellent.

This was not cynical publicity. The joking was part of the culture. Columbia itself had mixed competition with performance and bravado. But Jolley understood that a sport this new had to be interesting before it could be important. "We aggressively sought to get newspaper coverage about Ultimate whenever possible," he later wrote. The school newspaper covered the team. The Westport News covered it. The Columbia win also appeared in the

Connecticut Post and the Norwalk Hour. Each article made the next article more likely.

The Hidden Relay: Westport to UPI to Washington

Here the Staples story becomes more than a charming local episode. It becomes a case study in how information traveled in 1973.

Patricia McCormack lived in Westport and wrote for local newspapers and United Press International. She saw the coverage of Staples' victory and produced a syndicated UPI feature with the wonderfully skeptical title "Will Saucer's Apprentices Take the Fun Out of Frisbee?" Her premise was comic: the carefree Frisbee, symbol of unstructured recreation, was in danger of becoming organized. There were teams. There were uniforms. There were rules. There were girls on the Staples team. Perhaps, she joked, the future would bring Frisbee stars, scouts and something like a Super Bowl.

The humor did important work. It allowed readers who had never heard of Ultimate to enter the story without being asked to take the sport too seriously too soon. McCormack could describe the rules while teasing the very idea that Frisbee needed rules. But UPI was a wire service. A Westport curiosity had now entered a national information system.

According to Jolley's account, the accumulating press—particularly the UPI attention—caught the interest of James G. Driscoll at the National Observer in Washington. The evidence supports a relay rather than a single dramatic pitch: Staples cultivated local coverage; McCormack amplified the story through UPI; Driscoll became aware of the game and contacted Staples High School asking to visit and see Ultimate for himself. That distinction matters. Jolley did not need to place a call to a famous national columnist and talk him into a story. He and his students had built enough visible momentum that the story traveled to Driscoll.

In public-relations terms, this is the remarkable part. Staples did not possess money, a communications staff or institutional clout. It possessed a good story and the discipline to keep telling it. The progression was almost textbook: school paper, local paper, neighboring papers, wire service, national publication. The team's real promotional achievement was not a single article. It was creating the conditions under which the next journalist could discover the story.

“Gentlepersons Have a Fling”

Driscoll came to Westport. On May 12, 1973, the National Observer published his full-page feature, “Gentlepersons Have a Fling at Ultimate Frisbee.” The article opens over fish chowder, with Jolley and Staples headmaster Bill Murphy explaining the game while Jolley shows Driscoll a local newspaper clipping. A woman at the next table asks to see it. “Is Frisbee actually a team sport now?” she asks. The scene is almost too perfect: the clipping itself becomes a prop in the conversion of another curious outsider.

Driscoll had not come merely to recycle the publicity. He watched the Staples players scrimmage and described what he saw: quick passing, long throws, athletic catches, man-to-man defense, the absence of tackling, the mixture of competition and informality. He noted that two girls were members of the team and that Jolley called Ultimate “the game of the people.” He paid close attention to self-officiating and to the peculiar moral proposition behind it—the idea that players could compete fiercely without surrendering responsibility for fair play to referees.

That framing was extraordinarily favorable to a young sport. Ultimate emerged from the article not as a stunt but as an alternative. It was athletic without being brutal, competitive without being militarized, organized without becoming joyless, and open to people who did not fit neatly inside the traditional varsity system. In the early 1970s, those were not small distinctions. The game looked like something created by young people who had absorbed the era’s suspicion of hierarchy but still loved competition.

For Ultimate, the National Observer story was a legitimizing event. A national newspaper published by Dow Jones had devoted a full page to a game that, only a few years earlier, had existed among teenagers in a Maplewood parking lot. Jolley later recalled receiving inquiries from colleges outside the region asking about rules. Columbia received requests as well. It is difficult to prove that any one article “caused” a particular team to form, and the history should resist that temptation. But the mechanism is clear: national attention made it possible for people with Frisbees already in their hands to learn that there was a game they could organize.

The People Were the Distribution System

Publicity was only half of Ultimate's early growth model. The other half graduated every June.

Columbia players carried the game to colleges including Rutgers and Princeton and then outward across the Northeast. Staples developed its own generation of carriers. Dan Buckley and Ed Davis helped establish Ultimate at Connecticut; Ron Kaufman took it to Brown; Greg Mead went to Penn. The Hall of Fame would later group many of these early missionaries under Joel Silver's apt name, the "Johnny Appleseeds." They did not wait for an association to franchise the game. They arrived on campuses, found friends, explained the rules and made teams.

Jolley encouraged that instinct. His influence was organizational more than technical. In the 2026 conversation with former players, he and Bob Lacy repeatedly returned to the same early reality: the hard part was finding people to play. Once teams existed, the next task was arranging games, often by calling people they knew. There were no websites, no searchable schedules and no social media groups. A phone number written in a notebook could be infrastructure.

This is also the point at which the prehistory of Wesleyan Ultimate stops being background and becomes family history.

Bob Lacy Carries the Disc to Middletown

Bob Lacy graduated from Staples in 1973. He had been part of the early team and the Columbia game, and Jolley remembered him as one of the small number of Staples players in that graduating class. Lacy did not go directly to Wesleyan; after taking a year away, he arrived in Middletown. By the spring of 1975, the game that had come to Jolley through his sister and to Staples through Jolley came to Wesleyan through Lacy.

Lacy's own recollection is revealing because it is so unheroic. He does not remember thinking that he was founding anything that would become large. At Staples, he saw himself as an organizer and recruiter more than a star player. At Wesleyan, the same disposition mattered. He found people willing to play and helped make the activity real.

Then he did something small that may have been decisive. Lacy went to the Wesleyan athletic department and asked for help. He expected to be laughed

out of the room. Ultimate was not football, not a varsity program, not something with a long institutional pedigree. Wesleyan's response was practical: What do you need? Lacy said transportation. The athletic department let the new group use a van to get to games.

That van belongs in the origin story. Jolley's Staples team had learned the cost of being unable to travel; school insurance restrictions meant opponents often had to come to Westport. Lacy arrived at Wesleyan knowing that a team isolated on its own field was barely a team at all. The van connected Wesleyan to the emerging cluster of Ultimate programs in southern New England. Games could be arranged against people Lacy knew or knew of—players at schools where other early adopters had planted the sport. In an era when scheduling could mean calling a dormitory pay phone and asking whoever answered to find the person you wanted, social connections were the league office.

April 1975: The Story Becomes Wesleyan's

By April 1975, Ultimate itself was crossing a threshold. That month Yale hosted an early national collegiate championship with eight teams. The sport was still tiny, but it was no longer fragile in quite the same way. Enough teams existed to sustain one another. Enough graduates knew the rules. Enough articles had appeared that a person encountering the game could understand that it belonged to a larger phenomenon.

At Wesleyan, Bob Lacy and the first players were creating what would become the Bees and, later, the Nietzsche Factor. They could not have known that people would still be telling their story fifty years later. Lacy has said as much: at Staples, they were simply having fun and playing the sport; they did not imagine they were contributing to something that would grow enormous. That absence of self-importance is one of the most consistent traits in the early history.

And yet the long view changes the meaning of those ordinary acts. Joel Silver stood up in a student council meeting and proposed a Frisbee team. Buzzy Hellring and Jonny Hines helped turn a loose game into written rules. Larry Schindel, Irv Kalb and others mailed those rules outward and organized opponents. Al Jolley received a copy, gathered teenagers on a rough field, found another school to play, cultivated newspapers and helped make Staples impossible for the press to ignore. Patricia McCormack put the story onto the

UPI wire. James Driscoll came from Washington and gave a strange new sport a full page in a national newspaper. Staples graduates carried the game to college campuses. Bob Lacy carried it to Wesleyan.

None of these steps looks inevitable when viewed from the moment it happened. That is precisely why they matter. New institutions rarely announce themselves as institutions. They begin as invitations: Do you want to try this? Can you send us the rules? Will your school play ours? Can we borrow a van?

For Wesleyan, that is the real beginning. The team founded in 1975 did not spring from nowhere. Behind it stood seven years of improvisation, promotion, friendship and deliberate transmission. Wesleyan's fifty-year Ultimate history begins with a team, but its roots begin earlier—with a Wesleyan-trained teacher in Westport, a stack of newspaper clippings, a national story that almost nobody in the later sport remembered, and a Staples graduate who arrived in Middletown knowing that the first requirement of a game is to find somebody else who wants to play.

Source note

This chapter is based primarily on the supplied Columbia/Ultimate histories, Al Jolley's written recollections and 2026 interview, contemporary Westport and national newspaper material, the Patricia McCormack UPI feature, James G. Driscoll's May 12, 1973 National Observer article, the New York Times account of Rutgers–Princeton, and early-player/Hall of Fame records. Where early sources disagree on dates, the narrative avoids false precision or uses the best-supported sequence. The evidence supports the publicity chain from local coverage to UPI to Driscoll's visit; it does not establish that Jolley personally pitched Driscoll directly.