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Ultimate in atmosphere

Area league enjoys year-round community support

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Ultimate is not your average picnic frisbee toss.

This summer, the Ithaca Area Ultimate Alliance's Summer Recreational League has drawn scores of players to compete in this energetic, non-contact team sport and celebrate Ultimate's unique culture.

Since 2002, IAUA has been bringing players of all levels together for summer, fall, winter, and regional draft leagues, pickup games and occasional tournaments.

Take a recent Thursday evening at Cass Park. Sailboat masts rose above the shrubs lining the inlet fields, an occasional jogger huffed by, but the two dozen men and women were focused only on the white plastic disc in Alex Paya's hand.

The co-captain of blue-shirted FLBC was lined up with six teammates on one end of the long field, while Northstar, in black shirts, faced them at the opposite end. "Up in three, two, one," he called. With one motion, he sent the disc soaring across the length of the field.

The blueshirts rushed forward, spread out toward players of the opposite team, and began to follow their marks like bees at a cookout.

One of the blackshirts caught the disc, stopped — while in possession of the disc, only pivots around the stationary foot are allowed — and looked to her teammates, who were zigzagging to free themselves of defenders.

On the sidelines the remaining teammates await their turn to sub into the game, catch their breath, watch the action, and shout encouragement. "Keep up the pressure! Go big!" came from one side; "hard D, hard D!" from the other.

Running, feinting, passing, and sprinting, the blackshirts worked their way towards the blueshirts' end zone. "Up!" a thrower shouted. Andrew Sich dove to the ground, slid across the grass and clutched the hurtling disc for the score.

Run by a loose network of volunteers and relying on the support of local businesses, the IAUA aims to build a community through league nights at sponsoring restaurants and other events.

"But even before IAUA, Ithaca had a very strong history and culture of Ultimate," said Ruth Richardson, who discovered the sport in graduate school at California-Berkeley and is the incoming IAUA treasurer. Some of the original players of Ultimate Frisbee in New Jersey, where the rules were devised in 1967, came to Cornell. ("Frisbee" is frequently dropped from the name.)

The town's two colleges make for an ideal breeding ground, according to Greg Sloan, who began playing in 1982 at the University of Wyoming.

"It has to be a college town to make Ultimate work," he said. "Most of us senior organizers are in our late 40s, whereas most of the players are between 18 and 30."

In games that can last two hours or longer, "endurance and the ability to run a little bit or a lot" are key, he said. Fellow IAUA organizer Pierre Clavel agreed.

"I'm 49," he said, "and trying to keep up with those college kids."

More than just athleticism

Disc skills, however, are as important as stamina. In addition to the basic throws — the forehand ("flick"), backhand and hammer (in which the disc is released almost vertically overhead) — adept handlers have a wide repertoire of throws.

"If you have a gentle wind and you know how to throw the disc, it's amazing what you can do with it," Sloan said. "You can float it, send it like a bullet, give it a soft touch, make it hang in the air, bank it, throw it with different upside down throws."

Converting these skills into points, however, takes awareness and responsiveness, said IAUA member Ruth Richardson, team captain of the Gimme! (Red) squad.

"Knowing where your mark is when you're on the defense (is important)," she said. "On offense, trying to get open. You have to know where every player in the field is and where they're moving and where spaces are opening up."

But the essential trait is spirit. The Spirit of the Game is so central to the culture of Ultimate that the sport's national organization, USA Ultimate, defines it in the preface to its official rules.

"Spirit of the Game mostly means good sportsmanship," said Clavel, who has been playing Ultimate since high school in 1978. "That's what you need because there are no refs."

In practice, SOTG means players rely on themselves to deal with any game violations.

"If there's a foul, the idea is that someone calls it," Sloan said. "And then you reconstruct how the game was before the foul happened and move on. The idea is that if players have good spirit, they would never intentionally foul."

After a game, teams traditionally acknowledge each other with a lighthearted cheer or song. "It's a time to connect with the other team after you release the competitive nature of the game," Richardson said. "Unfortunately, at the elite level, this spirit is falling by the wayside."

For example, though games remain self-refereed at nationals and the world games, trained observers can make limited calls and rulings if situations are not resolved within a certain amount of time. Post-game exchanges have become more perfunctory.

"Ultimate's changing," Sloan said. "As the game gets more popular, we are drawing more traditional athletes. The people who played before tended to be turned off a bit by the usual competitive rigmarole. The rules have gotten more complicated. It's really annoying to me. I just want to play."

Luckily, Ithaca offers an array of options, from the IAUA's recreational league to after-school programs (led by Pierre Clavel), competing club teams, and a nationally-ranked team at Cornell, where Alex Paya used to train for three hours a day, year-round.

"It's as serious as you want it to be," he said. "And it's a really great social sport. I love it, because in the end all that is needed is some players, grassy space and a disc."

Additional Facts

Ithaca Area Ultimate Alliance

MISSION:

Founded in 2002, the IAUA seeks to create a community of Ultimate players of all ages and experience levels that can learn, play and have fun together.

MEMBERS:

150

UPCOMING:

Fall league (beginners welcome)

ONLINE:

iaua.com