

Manifesto of an Average Ultimate Player

by Howie Jacobson

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It's taken many years, but I've finally decided that I have become an average Ultimate player. I suppose the point was driven home by Adam Zagoria's profile of Jonny the Knife and Ken Dobyns in the October 1997 issue of the UPA newsletter. By comparison to these guys, I lack the competitive drive, the fanatical devotion to winning, the utter disregard for other people's feelings when I step out onto the field. Not to mention, I suppose, the talent. But it wasn't always so.

I participate in a summer league in Mercer County, New Jersey, with a highly competitive B team that always loses in the finals to some other B team whose members all decide to show up that day.

I'm not a great player, anymore. Back in high school, Columbia the Birthplace of Ultimate (in conversation I pause here for looks of tremendous respect and admiration), I was the captain in my junior and senior years. Before that, I helped start a middle school team that beat the high school squad at States. I was tall, fast, thin (and I can be again, I tell you!), and I had the only finger flick in the eighth grade in 1978.

I was highly competitive, and would defend my teammates from rough and untoward play by assuming male defensive posture and stalk the miscreant. I counted on my teammates to wrestle me to the ground before I got seriously hurt. But the point is, I mattered on many levels. I was someone the other team had to worry about. I would routinely rack up double digit block, assist, and goal stats. When I didn't show up, my team would often lose.

I'm sure many people assumed that I would play in college, join hot club teams, get photographs of my laying out self all over the UPA newsletter, and generally be a big fish in the Ultimate pond, maybe even hanging on to become a senior statesman at the first Ultimate Olympic appearance.

It didn't happen for reasons that don't even interest me, let alone you. Discovering other interests in college, shifting priorities, not wanting to spend quite so many hours practicing on fields so far away from the dorms I thought I was the visiting team; that should suffice. But at the same time my quasi-professional aspirations were dying a natural death, I was slowly becoming an Ultimate fanatic in other ways. Spirit of the Game ways. Save Humanity from its own Foibles ways.

Coming from the Columbia High School (pause for reverent, misty-eyed response) tradition, I had heard all the mythology about the Spirit of the Game. I saw it in practice, from the fact that we were inculcated to call our own fouls, to the combined-team underage beer parties that followed practically every game we played. I knew that the Founders (guys I imagined with powdered wigs and metal Frisbees) had consciously

invented a counter-cultural game, a protest against the win-at-all-cost mentality that had already killed a number of their classmates in Vietnam, as well as alienated them from what they saw as the corporate, country-club, status-seeking lives of their parents' generation.

Ultimate, where there are no referees to make what is not seen legal. Ultimate, where players are responsible for their own behavior. Ultimate, where there are no grown-ups to coach us and sponsor us and program us and turn us into little copies of them. Ultimate, the name itself, reminds us not to confuse means and ends, not to confuse winning the game with wrestling two hours of pleasurable, respectful, responsible enjoyment from life itself.

All this mattered little when I was in High School, in the same way that I suspect most lawyers really don't carry around tattered, folded, aging copies of the Constitution in their pockets, but I knew about it, and could talk a good Spirit of the Game.

The importance of all this did not occur to me until my first year out of college, when I got a job as a teaching intern at a very expensive prep school. Wanting to fit in a little bit at this junior temple of the competitive ethos, I volunteered to become the third assistant offensive line coach for the eighth grade football team. (I used to play touch football in gym.)

After a disheartening loss at an away game early in the season, the squad took out their frustrations during the bus ride home by mooning the world and throwing unmentionables out the windows. The team was disbanded for the season by the administration, and the real coaches went back to the work of teaching gym and molding the JV and varsity squads into disciplined, fighting units.

That left 25 eighth-grade tough boys, and me. The administration asked if I couldn't keep them occupied during what had been their practice times until January. I agreed, and offered to teach them Ultimate. It was then that the difference between football and Ultimate stared me in the face.

Actually, the first thing staring me in the face were the 25 ruffians who couldn't have looked more scornful had I been standing in front of them in tights playing polkas on the accordion. The way they sneered at that little bit of plastic, when all they wanted was to wrap their hands around a *pigskin*, the way they shot each other looks when I explained the rules, that you couldn't move from a pivot position, that there was no intimidating physical contact, that all fouls were called by the players, without refs, that having fun was more important than winning.

Of all the things I said that day, that last one was the most ridiculous to many of them. To be fair, they were listening to me rather than slamming each other like rutting rams because they were being punished, because of all the unmentionables. They were not in any mood to take in sports talk that was not about pain, stomping, and the American way.

I had them throw for a while. You know what that looked like. Huge, hyper-hyzened tosses that soared to treetop level and came down with thuds far away as they tried to impress each other and me with how hugely huge they were and how much they didn't care if they couldn't throw the stupid thing.

After a while (I plugged my ears so I couldn't hear the discs scream), I called them in and showed off the way many of us average players can. An accurate backhand. A sidearm pull way past kids standing farther than they think they should be. Airbounces, sidebounces, and hammers, hammers, hammers. That was my way in. They were appropriately impressed. I would forever be their image of the Frisbee God.

I had a great time with these guys. Enough of them really weren't the testosterone-driven rude boys and death warriors that they were posturing to be. The bus ride had already started some of them wondering about the phenomenon of team-think, and it was fairly easy to turn most of them back into fun-loving little boys, jumping up and down with excitement at their first disc achievements. I even began making some headway with the Spirit of the Game thing, tapping into the wonderful adolescent desire to rebel against everything that their society stands for.

At the same time, I was teaching many of these same boys in one of the eighth grade World Cultures courses. As their teacher, I had to contend with lots of classroom behavior that was interfering with their learning, and lots of study and homework habits that were subverting it. It was their job to do as little as possible and still get an A, and it was my job to catch them and cajole them. It was their job to pass notes and zone out in class, and mine to police them. And when the tests (my ultimate police weapon) were handed back, many of them played the educational game of "Wadja Get?" – comparing their performances to establish the academic dominance hierarchy.

I began to get it. I started to see the connection between Ultimate and the State of the World, or at least the State of My Classroom. The lessons that these kids had learned in their sporting lives were molding them as students. Don't let the ref catch you. Play only to win. Education was not their goal, otherwise they would have tried to learn. Winning was the goal. Getting good grades, into and out of a good college, and into a good job.

When we studied China and I had them spend a period in silence by the small brook behind the school, they got angry. Why are we wasting our time? they wanted to know. Their orientation was all future. The present was this continual obstacle, this *here* that prevents you from being *there*, where you really want to be. The concept of play, of enjoying the here and now for its own sake, was at the same time their strongest desire and their greatest fear.

That's where Ultimate came in. It was different from all the other team sports that Americans believe mold children, body and soul, into resourceful, hard-working adults. Other team sports emphasized the team, the unit, the squad, *my boys*, against the world.

Ultimate emphasized respectful, joyful competition. The intermediate goal was winning the game. The Ultimate goal was the time well spent, the mutual striving to rise above the ordinary; to compete (Latin for "pull together") to bring out the best in all involved. No referees meant that each player was responsible for their own behavior. The only penalty was the ostracism of the group, the social pressure to raise your standards, rather than the team-think exhibited not only by my Football-turned-Ultimate squad during their fateful bus ride, but by high school, college, and professional athletes as well. In the name of the team, the *us* against the *them*, athletes have raped, gay-bashed, trashed, intimidated, beaten, and even killed.

Not all athletes, not even most, by any means. But there is something about an exclusive team that defines itself by who it beats that can lead young, impressionable minds to make that sort of leap. The team, at its worst, is a gang, in which individual responsibility is abdicated to the strongest, the dumbest, the most drunk.

I started to see my Ultimate coaching as a powerful complement to my teaching. It presented an accessible, enjoyable model of the type of worldview I was espousing. It was a story, a metaphor, and a game all at once. It made a difference in some kids' lives. And it made that difference because it was *different*.

That's why I'm writing this piece. I get sad when I read debates about corporate sponsorship, about making the game more official, about getting referees, about the most successful player, Jonny the Knife, portrayed as a win-at-all-costs mental assassin with whom I probably would not enjoy sharing the field. I get sad because I don't feel that I have the right to get angry, because I'm not that good anymore. I wouldn't benefit from Ultimate in the Olympics. I wouldn't even start for an A team in my own little summer league. Why should I strive to deny those people who have devoted their lives to the perfection of the Ultimate skills the chance to be rich, famous, normal athletes like their equally skilled counterparts in the NBA or NFL?

I'm an average player now, like I said. I'm not great anymore. I don't even hang out with great players (sorry, Unbroken Chain, but it's true). I don't feel like I have the same soapbox as the intense, muscled leapers who grace the UPA newsletter. Maybe I should keep my mouth shut, pay my dues, and every so often fondle my high school yearbook and think about what could have been. (Mentally, I do insert my likeness in those diving action shots.)

But deep down, I feel that I still represent Ultimate better than Jonny the Knife, if he is the kind of person that Adam Zagoria's article portrays him to be. I feel that, small fish that I am, my words need to be heard more than those of Ken Dobyns, who was quoted as saying, "You need a mean streak (to win)."

Of course, much of what I read in the UPA newsletter is wonderful and heartening. I cheer when I read about David Caruba's work with RIP, a New Jersey youth team, in which Ultimate is used as a tool to help young people grow into responsible, mature adults.

I grow misty-eyed at Vince Peterson's GRUB tournaments, in which Ultimate is a vehicle for generosity and social awareness. I nearly explode with pride when I read all the articles about helping Ultimate become more and more co-ed, another important difference between Ultimate and other team sports.

And right next to the Jonny the Knife piece was a wonderful piece by Joel Gray about a partnership between the Northwest Ultimate Association and the Seattle Public Schools. Bravo! A world filled with Ultimate will be a better world for all of us. Introducing schoolchildren to Ultimate will help restore a balance in this society that still has not learned how to exist in peace and harmony with all creation.

Even though I'm not that good anymore, I still teach dozens of kids each year how to play Ultimate. Once they get good enough, I'm not much of a coach. I understand the 3-person cup, and the stack, and that's about it. I can teach all the throws, and get kids to run around the field twice before practice. And I can teach kids to respect themselves, to respect their teammates, to respect their opponents, and to play for the sake of playing.

I hope that when they grow up they will learn for the sake of learning, work for the sake of working, love for the sake of loving, and live for the sake of living. I'd like to think that Ultimate will help with those lessons, most of which I'm still struggling with.

If we're serious about getting Ultimate into public schools, into the public eye, and even on television, then it would be a real shame to jettison the best of what Ultimate has to offer. The world does not need another arena for grown men to act like self-absorbed, nasty gamesmen, or for super-rich, attention-addled post-adolescents to talk trash to each other, referees, and fans.

So maybe it's time for average players to take the sport back from the hyper-competitors. As a resident of this planet, I feel that I have at least as much to lose from the death of the Spirit of the Game as they have to gain from a Wheaties endorsement. And I still have a decent backhand.

Howie Jacobson is founder and principal and janitor of [howieconnect](http://howieconnect.com), a marketing firm that helps businesses attract and serve customers joyfully and profitably. He can be reached at howie@howieconnect.com. To read more of his innermost thoughts, check out his web site, www.howieconnect.com.