

An Ultimate Revelation

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My first game of Ultimate Frisbee since last August's playoffs is a summer league pre-season pick-up game between the softball fields and the girls' soccer program. I stretch for a really long time, bowing to the gods of each major muscle group, entreating them for another season in the sun. I survey the sidelines, tallying the light and dark shirts. I decide to stay light; slightly more playing time, I calculate.

On my first point, I feel giddy with the thrill of playing. I feel young, lithe, and stupid, like the animal babies on PBS nature programs. I'm now on defense; the opposing team moves downfield. I see someone breaking for the goal, turning his defender around. I leave my man to help out, muttering to myself, "I've got this." The guy I had been covering races to the other side of the goal and receives a taunting hammer that descends so slowly that it could have sold advertising. My teammates are slightly bewildered. "Did you yell 'switch'?" one of them wants to know. Someone I don't recognize comes up to me and begins explaining the rudiments of man-to-man defense. I have fallen from grace.

A couple of goals later, I'm still trying to redeem myself. It's difficult, for a couple of reasons. I'm being covered by a former college track star who amuses himself on offense by sprinting the length of the field several times on each possession. I spend my offense catching my breath in the anonymity of the deep stack. Also, two fingers of my non-throwing hand are splinted. I'm gratified by the attention I receive (most of my injuries are between me and my ilio-psoas muscle, and don't lend themselves to public manifestations other than a dopey limp). But when I explain that the fingers aren't broken, just sprained, and that it happened playing basketball, all inclinations toward sympathy vanish. Basketball? Eyebrows rise. I should have known better.

Finally, my chance comes. I'm so far away from my track star that I'm open on the turnover. I break for a corner of the goal with enough intensity to merit a beautiful looping throw. As the disk and I converge, I notice for the first time that the field slopes up to the back of the end zone. I'm running uphill.

I'm not fit enough to get my intact hand on the disk. Instead, I dive, stick three good fingers up in the air, and watch the disk bounce off the aluminum splint and roll innocently away, like it didn't notice that it just broke my heart.

It must be only a few seconds between when I realize I'm not going to catch it to when I return fully to the game, but I am able during that time to have a fairly lengthy conversation with myself. I goes like this:

Me: Shit! I'm so pissed at myself. I should have caught it! Damn! How in the world did that happen? I'd better show everyone how angry I am that I dropped it.

Myself: Don't be an asshole. Get up and keep playing.

Me: Shit! Did you see that drop? I can't believe it.

Myself: Then I'm an idiot. I haven't played in eight months, I'm 25 pounds overweight, my right hand is useless, and I'm covering Carl Lewis. What did I expect?

Me: But I should have caught it.

Myself: Says who?

Me: I'm a good player. Dependable. I don't drop important throws.

Myself: It's OK. Ultimate is not an easy sport. I shouldn't expect perfection under these circumstances.

So here, in the sloping dirt, I have a religious experience. I think Christian theologians call it "grace." Buddhists refer to it as one of the four noble truths. And classic rock fans know it as Mick Jagger's precept: "You can't always get what you want." I have come face to face with the gods of Ultimate. And they have told me, "Who the hell are you to expect perfection? When you make such a big deal out of your puny little failure, you insult us."

Like most religious experiences, it's difficult if not impossible to convey the significance of the moment to You Who Are Not Me. Especially because, in writing, it's not in the least bit profound. (Recently, a friend whom I consider a genius confided in me that one day he had a revelation so deep that it was all he could think about for days, but he couldn't tell anyone because he felt that everyone else had already known it. The revelation? That he was a human being, and so was everybody else.) My revelation had the same "so-what" quality to it once uttered, but there it was: "I can't always get what I want."

I have another friend (I don't want to drop names, so you'll just have to take my word that I do have two friends) who is a steady and competitive tennis player. One day he was playing badly, very unusual for him. As the match progressed, he became more and more agitated, cursing, swiping balls into the net or the walls between points, even throwing his racket. Finally, at the end of the match, he walked off the court, disgusted with his behavior as well as his playing. The following week, he returned to the court and announced that he would never act that way again. He echoed Mick's words: "I realized that I can't always get what I want. If I play badly, I'm just going to accept it."

Ultimate is a particularly good teacher of that lesson. Like other sports, it pits individuals against each other, trying to thwart each other's moves. If you block, I fail to throw. If you shadow me, I can't get open. Only one of us can achieve our goal at any given moment, and that achievement comes against the expense of another. So by definition, sports reminds us that we can't always get what we want. There's no grading on a curve, no "let's both win," no pretense that this event isn't a parable of conquest and death.

Ultimate has a couple of advantages over other sports in bringing that lesson home. First, unlike baseball, basketball, football, tennis, hockey, and bowling, the forces of nature (especially the force of nature known as “wind”) add elements of chance to the sport. Perhaps not to the same extent as golf, but Ultimate compensates by offering salvation and physical fitness simultaneously. The sudden gust that forces a perfect endzone backhand into the grass inches away from the receiver’s fingers. The gentle puff that turns a perfectly good pull on Field One into a near traffic accident. The relentless gale in your face that turns a group of doddering old men and women into an impenetrable zone defense. It’s easy to accept that you can’t control your destiny when your destiny hangs on the movement of six ounces of injection-molded plastic in a hurricane.

The other Ultimate advantage, the meaningful one, is that we have little exposure to professional Ultimate players. Ultimate isn’t on TV; there’s no Mid Atlantic Ultimate League (MAUL); I can’t get Ultimate trading cards with my stick of gum. For that last sentence, I was going to use a couple of famous Ultimate players’ names as examples of trading cards, but I couldn’t think of any. Who’s famous? I remember a book shaped like a disk, green and white cover, by Dan “Stork” Roddick, who was famous in the seventies for an eponymous catch: leg up, hand reaching under leg to grab the trailing end of the disk. And somebody named Zimmerman had the record for longest throw; I read about him on Wham-O boxes. (Does anyone still sell disks in plastic-wrapped boxes?) Once somebody’s older brother came to play against my team in a summer league game; he once had held the world record for maximum time aloft.

But we don’t have a Michael Jordan, Sammy Sosa, Venus Williams, or Tiger Woods of Ultimate. Not that there aren’t players at that level. I know there are. I just don’t know what they look like. (I’m not impressed by the lay-out shots in the UPA newsletter; I’m skying in a high school yearbook shot; the photo was accomplished by me jumping while holding on to a disk. I bent my right knee to hide the fact that my vertical leap was about four inches.) I have no role models of superlative performance, of ability that makes my own gifts seem non-existent in comparison.

This is crucial, at least to me, in establishing a reasonable baseline for my own performance. Every time I play a game, I learn something about myself in relation to others. The game I started this piece about, I learned that I had no business trying to cover the track star. I have since refined this algorithm; now, when we’re manning up, I choose the opponent wearing the most expensive orthopedic device. I live and learn.

I’m convinced that a lot of the bad sportsmanship I see in small-time versions of big media sports (little league baseball, pickup basketball, high school football, etc.) reflects ordinary people mistaking themselves for professional athletes. Why else do people curse and stomp and throw things on a regular basis? I play tennis with a guy who’s consistently OK. He has great talent; occasionally at net it shows. But most of the time he’s mediocre. He’ll predictably take his eye of the ball a quarter of the time. He’ll forget to bend his knees once every three swings. He’ll overswing an eighth of the time. And the amazing thing is, he always gets upset at himself. He ends every match by complaining that he played poorly, that he can do better. He apologizes to his partner,

and promises to do better next time. This is hilarious. He consistently plays at his level. And yet there's a huge disconnect between how good he really is and how good he thinks he should be. I think it's because he watches tennis on television, or has watched enough in the past to have internalized "tennis player" as John McEnroe or Martina Navratilova. That's the standard he unconsciously sets for himself on every point. And that's why he can't make peace with his level of play.

We live in an "as seen on TV" world. My neighborhood may not have had a break-in in three years, but the nightly crime stories on the 10 o'clock news keep deadbolts on the doors and guns under the pillows. As seen on TV. One out of a thousand women has a supermodel body, but most women aspire to be unrealistically thin. As seen on TV. Shaquille O'Neil hits the jumper 60 percent of the time, and teenagers beat themselves up over every miss. As seen on TV. We internalize the fantasies, and start acting in ways that don't match our own truths. When we compare ourselves to the superpeople who populate the media, we ratchet up our self-expectations, and develop the gall to believe that we can and should be perfect. As seen on TV.

In my summer league, there's nobody I can't be on the field with. There are lots of players who are much better than I am; faster, throw more accurately, catch more reliably, jump higher, understand and execute strategy more completely. But they're the same species as me. I can picture myself at their level, in the same way as I can picture myself 25 pounds lighter: it may never happen, and I may never commit to the actions that will bring it about, but I know it's not impossible.

I think that most players feel this essential flatness of the Ultimate world. If there are superstars, we don't get them in our faces. We don't think we're them. We don't have to mope if we don't measure up to their achievements. So I think that my religious moment in the end zone dirt wasn't such a huge leap of faith. (Soarin' Kierke-Guard, what a name for a deep back!) It was a moment of self-acceptance that was made easier by my relationship with Ultimate. And I'm working daily to apply it to the other parts of my life in which the lesson isn't so clear.

Ultimate, like everything worthwhile, is hard. In fact, if it were easy, there would be no point to it. Who wants to be good at something trivial? Someone doesn't get their way half the time. Often, that someone is me. Often, my team loses. And I screw up on a regular basis. I make bad defensive decisions in the zone. I lose focus. I get clumsy. But I also shine. I get sucker blocks. I execute a great give-and-go. I dive and catch a bid for a goal. Those moments are precious to me.

It's a cliché, but true nonetheless: it's the moments of defeat that make winning sweet. Without the possibility of loss, there is no possibility of victory. Without the experience of loss, there is no elation in victory.

I learned young that losing sucked a lot more than winning ruled. In 1976, when I was 11 and a huge Yankee fan, Chris Chambliss hit a ninth inning home run during the last ALCS game against the Kansas City Royals to put the Yankees into their first World

Series since I was born. I was so excited, I turned off the TV and ran outside leaping and hollering. This was the greatest moment in my life. About half a minute later, I was done celebrating. The feeling had gone. I just felt like shrugging, despite my desire to be excited and thrilled. But when the Yankees lost the World Series in four straight to the Cincinnati Reds, I felt bad for weeks.

A college roommate who rowed crew used to take great pleasure in complaining about the hardships and trials of practice. The icy mornings on the lake. The endless weight lifting, erg machines, running up hills. One day I asked him if it was worth it. He answered that it was only worth it if his boat won. And then, only because the losing boat had gone through the same agony for nothing. That was the real payoff. I grimaced and grinned, hoping he was kidding. But I'm afraid he wasn't. If sports is a zero sum game, your loss enhances me. Your misery must equal my joy.

If the point of winning is beating the opponent, that doesn't lead to anything we can wrap our souls around. It's hollow, and negative, and doesn't last. The point of winning is that we sometimes lose, and today we didn't. The point of losing is that sometimes we win, and today we didn't. The point of the game – whatever it is – is the game. The highs and lows are all adventures. We cheat ourselves when we deny or push away or castigate the negative. It's our job to experience it all. Heaping abuse upon ourselves for the lows disrespects the gods of Ultimate. It's like giving them the finger.

The disk rolling off my outstretched fingers gives poignancy to my every catch. The utter fallibility of every human endeavor gives depth to our triumphs. Winning – and losing – is about us making peace with ourselves. The point of the game, the Ultimate point, is to unattach ourselves from the outcome as quickly and gracefully as possible.

I'm not saying that we should play the game like zombies, completely detached from the highs and lows. To the contrary; it's great to immerse ourselves in the sensations of success and failure. It's the judgments about those sensations that remove us from the here and now, that keep us numb to the experience of Ultimate. Sports is drama; go ahead and be dramatic if you feel like it. Celebrate a great block. Scream a curse as your huck overleads the cut by 20 yards. Just wink to yourself as you do it.

True confessions: sometimes I'm a shitty father, a shitty husband, a shitty son, a shitty employee, a shitty supermarket customer, a shitty writer. By learning to accept my limitations in these arenas, by applying the lessons of Ultimate, something magical happens. I begin to get better. When I can turn off all the self-talk putdowns and just accept that sometimes I'm insensitive and abrasive and self-absorbed and lazy, and think about what that feels like and just pay attention to myself being myself, I give myself the space to try something different. I open up the possibility of change, of improvement. But when I'm in the headspace of berating myself for being an imperfect me, I have no resources available to try something else. It's like the Ultimate player who drops the throw and then makes such a big drama out of it that they don't get back on defense; then they *really* cost their team. Whatever the situation, I'm learning from Ultimate that the

best thing to do after a bad play is to pay attention to what went wrong and just get back into the game.

I still disappoint myself on the Ultimate field on a daily basis. But now, when I close my eyes to receive a hammer in traffic, or stand stupidly in the near corner of the end zone waiting for my defender to get bored and walk away, or just muff a throw, as I go through the obligatory self-flagellation, I feel like I've made a small sacrifice to the gods of Ultimate. "Respect us," they intone. "Don't take us for granted," they warn. "Be humble and gentle with yourself," they command. "Who the hell are you to expect perfection? Who are you to insult us?"

So now I'm careful not to give the gods of Ultimate the finger. I don't have that many good ones left.

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