

## 9 'Anyone can play this game'

### Ultimate frisbee, identity and difference

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#### Introduction

Anyone can play this game.

(Will/Interview)

It is a common claim made by 'Ultimate frisbee' players that 'anyone' could play their game. In this chapter I explore 'Ultimate players' struggles over their (athletic) embodiment and identity. My research shows that although Ultimate players reject and limit identifications with dominant sporting ideals they also continue to embrace some of their qualities. This process of identification suggests that maybe not 'everyone' will be able to become part of the Ultimate community.

Before examining the identity construction process, I give some background about Ultimate frisbee, the basis structure of play. I will then show that Ultimate players are concerned with presenting a new and 'different' sporting and cultural identity: one that is gender sensitive even egalitarian, rejects extreme competitiveness and physical aggression, and is all-inclusive. Yet, despite their claims, and ideals, Ultimate largely fails to produce practices and meanings that are beyond the dominant structures, ideals and practices of existing sports.

#### Historical development of Ultimate frisbee

'Ultimate frisbee'<sup>1</sup> is a sport that was invented late in the 1960s by a group of white, middle-class American High School males in the suburb of Maplewood, New Jersey.<sup>2</sup> They named themselves the 'Columbia High School Varsity Frisbee Squad' even though they, 'had not played any games, had no formal team or rules and someone's mother had made their team jerseys' (Zagoria 1998). Ultimate<sup>2</sup> was originally one part of a larger frisbee culture (Johnson 1975), but it is now the leading form of 'disc sport', except for perhaps disc golf.<sup>3</sup> The sport of Ultimate and culture originates in 1967–68 at a time of social turmoil in the United States. It was the time of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement and broader transformations in world politics, such as the heightening of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. It was a time of 'high anxiety' for American

and sporting ideals (Edwards 1973; 1970). This anxiety is reflected in the guiding principle(s) that players are expected to embody:

*Spirit of the Game*: Ultimate relies upon a spirit of sportsmanship [sic] which places the responsibility for fair play on the player. Highly competitive play is encouraged, but never at the expense of mutual respect among players, adherence to the agreed upon rules of the game, or the basic joy of play. Protection of these vital elements serves to eliminate adverse conduct from the Ultimate field. Such actions as taunting of opposing players, dangerous aggression, belligerent intimidation, intentional fouling, or other “win-at-all-costs” behaviour are contrary to the spirit of the game and must be avoided by all players.

(Ultimate Players Association 2002b)

The ‘Spirit of the Game’, and its significance in the formation of Ultimate identities, is the focus of extended discussion later in the chapter.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimate is primarily played in Euro-Western countries, but is also quite popular in Japan. In total there may be as many as 150,000–200,000 participants worldwide. The United States contains the largest number of players, teams and leagues, though the Canadian cities of Toronto, Vancouver<sup>5</sup> and Ottawa all contain very large well organised leagues. There is a range of local, national and international competitions comprised of men’s (‘open’), women’s, ‘mixed’, youth, and masters divisions. Ultimate is largely self-funding through the payment of league membership and tournament fees.

The Ultimate community’s process of identification is in part accomplished by projecting what are broadly considered to be the ‘negative’ aspects of sport onto other players and identities such as American football and or ice hockey. For example, direct physical aggression and intimidation is rejected, in principle, and Ultimate players are expected to not taunt other players as is common in these ‘other’ sports. These ‘unsporting’ behaviours and other qualities are supposedly outside of Ultimate identities and culture. The chapter will show that Ultimate players’ identities sublimate or suppress those characteristics that are normally associated with stereotypes of working-class and or black sporting bodies and identities. Ultimate players appear both to reject and celebrate the physical aggression of what are nominally working-class and ‘black’ sports.

One way of analysing Ultimate could be to compare it to historical precedents in mainstream sports and ideals. For example, the ‘Spirit of the Game’ seems to reflect the idea of a ‘gentleman’s [sic] agreement’ that is similar to the early rules of English football:

It was never even thought that a player would intentionally do anything to hurt an opponent. Such conduct would be ‘ungentlemanly’, and that was an unpardonable offence; [...] the lowering of self-control to depths of ungentlemanly conduct was something which could not be tolerated.

(Elleray cited in Collwell 2000: 202)

Another way of analysing Ultimate would be to situate it in previous research on the nature and meaning of 'alternative' sport. In an age when sport cultures are supposed to be increasingly commercialised, 'McDonaldised' and globalised (McDonald and Andrews 2001; Miles 1998; Maguire 1999) it is important to note that Ultimate was founded on and continues to be defined by rejecting or going against the flow of these broader cultural processes. Beal's (1995) research on skateboarding shows how another (sport) culture was formed through the rejection of standardisation and corporatisation. Beal suggests that skateboarding has been transformed from what was essentially an aesthetic play form, defined by its anti-establishment ethos, into a competitive and corporate sport and commodity. However, the activity of skateboarding as Beal points out has not been entirely co-opted by standardisation and corporatisation (see also Beal and Wilson, this volume). However, its commercial form does interestingly cash in on the 'style' and 'attitude' which made skateboarding an 'alternative' activity in the first place. Ultimate though was established as a sport and as such represents a different social form, but does contain a similar ethos of 'being alternative'.

However the central purpose of this chapter is not to draw comparisons with other sports, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which players are struggling to position themselves within and against not only sporting ideals but broader cultural ideals and issues. Where Gruneau (1983) has argued that sport mobilises middle-class biases in the formation of social relations I would extend his argument to suggest that sport simultaneously mobilises racial, sexual, bodily and gender biases.

### Constructing identity and difference

In this chapter, I will draw attention to three dominant aspects of Ultimate culture. The first is gender politics, which has been an open and ongoing concern in Ultimate. The second is the 'Spirit of the Game', which is a code of conduct that is intended to separate Ultimate players' from extreme competitiveness. The last section will address the meaning and importance of Ultimate players' celebration of 'laying out' or 'going ho' which is a phrase used to describe the physical act of diving to the ground to either catch or intercept the disc. Gender equality has always been an important issue in Ultimate and is one sign of its anti-establishment 'alternative' character. However, it will become apparent through an analysis of Spirit of the Game and 'going ho' that Ultimate identifications express a concern with more than gender.

The focus of the chapter is on the *processes* of identity construction and thus if I were to produce a typology of 'different' sports and identities it would suggest a stability of identity that does not exist. As this chapter contends, Ultimate identities don't fit neatly into any existing categories, histories and discourses. They are 'mix and match,' and are culturally and historically contingent. In order to understand the ambivalence that structures Ultimate identities I begin from the position that we engage with sporting forms in constrained ways because sport forms are always *already* structured through practices and notions of social difference.

Difference is understood here as an organising feature of how we know about the world and how relations of power and identity are organised. Identity is based on the construction of difference. In the process of marking the limits, boundaries and 'inside' of an identity we also construct its outside. What is outside is not considered as part of the identity. However, it makes sense to argue that the construction of the 'outside' is a constitutive or defining aspect of identity. The construction of an 'inner' and an 'outer' can be seen as a binary opposition. Jacques Derrida (1974) argues that one side of a binary opposition is usually the dominant one, the one that includes the other in its field of operation. For example, 'rational' and 'irrational' appear as obvious opposites, but we can see that the rational has the power to define and position the irrational as an external, extraneous, aberrant feature of the dominant identity. For example, in Western cultures the irrational is rarely granted the power to define the rational (Hall 1997).

Identity then must always be unstable as what is outside or beyond it is virtually endless and cannot be pre-determined. Thus identity formation is always a process not only of inclusion, but active ongoing exclusion and the drawing and policing of boundaries. Jacques Derrida (1974), Homi Bhabha (1986) and Stuart Hall have all noted that the processes of identification are structured in ambivalence.

Difference is ambivalent. It can be both positive and negative. It is both necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self a sexed subject [...] and at the same time it is threatening, a site of danger, negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the Other.

(Hall 1997: 238)

In the formation of any identity those ideals, bodies, embodiments which are constructed as different, as Other are also embraced and rejected in a process of *disavowal*:

[Disavowal] ... is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official, one secret, one archaic, one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division.

(Bhabha 1986: 168)

Thus I will focus on those words, ideals, images and actions that seem to engender moments of ambivalence and disavowal as they arise in Ultimate culture.

This chapter is based on my continued participation in Ultimate as well as interviews, conversations and observations that were part of my doctoral dissertation (Thornton 1998). The research was conducted based on the theory and methods of 'critical ethnography' (Thomas 1993). I have participated in Ultimate as a player for over ten years in Canada, America and the United Kingdom. However, the majority of the empirical data presented here is from the

Canadian Ultimate scene. A number of researchers have conducted critical ethnographies on other sport cultures, bringing similar theoretical and methodological commitments to the analysis of sport cultures. (Klein 1993; Beal 1995; Fine 1987; Hilbert 1997; Polsky 1967; Wheaton and Tomlinson 1998).

### How the game is played

Ultimate is a non-contact disc sport normally played by two teams of seven players. Ultimate players use the term 'disc' to describe the 'frisbees' that they play with. Although widely used in common vernacular frisbee is a registered trademark that refers to a range of flying (sports) discs. The discs that are normally used by Ultimate players are not actually 'frisbees'. The standard disc Ultimate players use – the '175 Gram Ultra-Star Professional Sportdisc' – is similar in design to the original trademarked frisbee (Ultimate Players Association 2002a). This is one reason why players regularly drop the frisbee half of the name and call the game 'Ultimate'. Players distinguish themselves from people who merely 'play with a frisbee' in their back yard or on the beach by the use of the term 'disc'. Ultimate is generally played outdoors on grass fields similar in size to American football, but can be played on any flat open space and is played indoors as well. The first games of Ultimate were played on a paved parking lot (Johnson 1975).

The object of the game is to score goals or points. A goal is scored when a player catches the disc in the end zone that the player is attacking. End zones are rectangle like areas at each end of the playing field that are marked either with boundary lines and or small orange plastic cones. The disc must be passed through the air from player to player. Players cannot hand the disc to their team mates as is done in rugby and American football. Nor can they use their feet to pass the disc and they cannot intentionally re-direct (or 'mack' or 'tip') the disc to a team mate. Like basketball and netball, players are not allowed to run while holding the disc. Throwing or passing it to another player moves the disc around the field.

The disc may be passed in any direction. Any time a pass is incomplete, intercepted, knocked down, or contacts an out-of-bounds area, a turnover occurs, resulting in an immediate change of the team in possession of the disc. This is similar to how play proceeds in basketball and soccer. Thus the game has a continuous flow to it. Players make their own 'calls' and interpretations of infractions of the rules. They also make decisions on whether or not a player has gone out of bounds in order to catch the disc. Players do not wait until the 'whistle blows' as is the case in sports with referees and line judges. They make calls from within the flow of the play.

There are no referees in the game of Ultimate. The major reason why there are no referees is that the originators of the sport were consciously rejecting their use and meaning because referees are a central feature of mainstream sports. The sentiment that is popularised in Ultimate circles is that referees open up the way to *not playing fair* because one can get away with breaking the rules *if it is not seen by a referee*. Thus, in ideal terms, Ultimate players put the burden of responsibility for fair play squarely in the lap of each and every player.

### Ambivalence in gender difference

I want to begin the discussion of gender difference by examining the ways in which gender comes into play in the interpretation and structuring of the seemingly mundane aspects of playing a game of Ultimate. Ultimate players' awareness of gender tends to conflate gendered (social) limitations and biology as the bases of difference(s) in male and female athletic performance. Although I focus on the 'lay out' in relation to gender identification here, it carries significance beyond just gender identity. I will return later in the chapter to an analysis of the meanings attached to the lay out to illustrate that class and race differences, in particular, are also central features of Ultimate players' identities.

One of the most important signifiers of an Ultimate player is their ability to throw 'the flick' (also called a 'forehand'). The ways in which it is talked about in Ultimate culture suggests it is an act where dominance and gender difference is embodied. It is, I would argue, an act of locating the unacceptable, the inadequate, and the undesirable: the Other of Ultimate:

[...] more difficult to master than the standard backhand beach-bimbo toss, this tiny little wrist movement can take years of repeated practice to perfect. But is essential both in the game and otherwise. Once it is learned, the player can go to a park and signal to other disc owners that he or she is not just a casual Frisbee catcher, but also an Ultimate player

(Lind 1992: 12; female Ultimate player)

Although written with considerable sarcasm by a female player, this is an insightful point about Ultimate players' identifications and sporting embodiment and the ways in which gender norms are operating in Ultimate culture. The label of 'beach-bimbo' positions non-players and 'non-flickers' as weak, silly feminised (i.e. 'bimbo') subjects. And within Ultimate circles (in games and tournaments) one of the first things that players watch for is how well someone throws their flick. 'He's got no flick' is a comment I often heard on the field at least among less skilled teams. More generally, at all levels of competition, one assesses the entire make-up of opponents' throwing skills. This practice is used both as a strategic ploy, and as a way of locating others in their lack of experience of playing the game. It is quite clearly a way of *identifying outsiders* to the Ultimate community. Thus an act of athletic skill is not merely a matter of technical precision, it is always also a sign of one's position in a hierarchy of power, and the creation of an (abject) Other. In this instance, the Other of Ultimate identity then is prominently signified as an un-athletic form of feminised embodiment.

It has been observed that there has been considerable change, even in the last ten years, in terms of what is, broadly speaking, possible and 'acceptable' in feminine embodiment. Today, 'athletic', lean and even muscular female bodies have come to be seen as socially acceptable, even desirable, while not necessarily destabilising hegemonic notions of femininity. Athletic female bodies are challenging notions of thin, white, heterosexual feminine attractiveness, but

continue to be framed by such stereotypes (Birrell and Cole 1994; Lenskyj 1994; Hall 1996; Cole and Hribar 1995). A closer look at the mundane aspect of guarding or 'marking' opponents in an Ultimate game will demonstrate that this struggle over gendered embodiment is an important issue in this culture.

Normally there are seven players against seven opponents on the field. The general rule for 'co-ed' (later changed to the term 'mixed') Ultimate was that a maximum of five players per team of any 'one' gender were allowed to be on the field at once or the '5-2 rule' in vernacular. (This proportion has changed to 4-3 in recent years across North America.) In the vast majority of 'co-ed' games I observed this was interpreted as five men and two women. This issue and practice continues to be the subject of considerable controversy in Ultimate culture in Canada and the United States (Haman 1994; Price 1994) [more up to date ref?]

During one of my league games a woman on my team was asked to 'play as a man'. That is, she was to guard a male player and substitute in for other males on our team. Generally, women only substitute for other women and men do the same. Women normally guard or mark other women and men mark other men. However, I have never heard anyone one say, 'You play as a woman', to a male. Jennifer said she enjoyed doing this because the males that she ends up guarding are usually the slower or least skilled male players on the team and she 'surprises them with her ability to cover them'. She felt that they were somewhat embarrassed at being guarded by a woman, even though she usually had better skills and more experience. Jennifer also told this tale with some pride. She was a very experienced athlete having played basketball and baseball throughout her life. I have heard her variously described as 'tall, for a woman' and having 'a deep voice' which both regulates her out of dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity at the same moment. She is too tall to *really* be a woman, yet still feminised by the last half of the phrase, 'for a woman'.

This sequence of events (which is a dominant feature of 'co-ed' Ultimate games) also suggests that men want to avoid playing directly against females because they might be shown to be less capable than a woman. It might be okay to be outplayed by another man, but to be outplayed by a woman would throw serious doubt onto one's status as a competent (masculine) player. Thus, it may be that the issue of *men's competence in comparison to women* is skirted around by the general acceptance that same gender guarding is 'only in the Spirit of the Game' (i.e. only fair and reasonable). The practice of men guarding men pits them against their equals, so to speak, and avoids potential 'embarrassment'. It maintains a fairly rigid boundary between direct male and female competition that reinforces the broader cultural notion that women are categorically incapable of equalling men's physical performance.

A regular part of Ultimate player's conversations is that men and women can never be equal physically. Many will accept that 'some women' are good athletes but that men are just 'bigger and stronger'. However, we cannot interpret physical and biological capability outside of social norms and conventions that suggest that women are 'naturally' or inherently biologically incapable of the same physical feats as men. (Hall 1996; Birrell and Cole 1994; Whitson 1990). Feminist

scholarship has provided convincing evidence that the differences between men and women in their physical capabilities are far less significant than the social forces that limit women's and encourage men's engagement with sport. Many have argued that the *overlap* in physical capabilities of males and females is far greater than the differences (Fausto-Sterling 1985; Dyer 1986; Cahn 1994; Hargreaves 1994).

Ultimate as a physical activity seems to assume a 'sportasized' identity and body (Harvey and Rail 1995) in its parlance and practice. The sportasized identity and body is one that already understands the necessary and seemingly 'obvious' features of physical movement and social interaction required in sport. This identification includes assumptions about playing in a team, 'field awareness' and accepting the idea of competition as the only form of play. The sportasized body it has been argued references a stereotypically masculine embodiment (Birrell and Cole 1994). Thus participation in sport, and Ultimate, for women, generally means a transgression of dominant feminine identities.

Most players, at least on my team, were somewhat aware of the social and historical nature of why women generally do not play as much sport as men. *Both male and female players*, at times, seemed to reject the ideas of biology as destiny, and a woman's supposed 'natural' inferiority. They rejected the notion that it was fundamentally a problem of one's biology, but rather that access, practice and previous experience were the keys to one's success and enjoyment:

I think that's the nature of our socialization. More men are pushed to play team sport, whereas women aren't and I mean for me I was afraid of it. I mean I played tennis and I danced and I didn't even play doubles [tennis]. That's not a team sport.

(Rhonda/Interview)

One important point at which Ultimate players reveal a more ambivalent relation to athletic performance and gender difference is the attention paid to female players 'laying out' (i.e. aggressively diving on the ground) for the disc. Rhonda's comment below is quite typical as she expresses some glee at the sight of a female 'laying out'.

I saw a woman at the Worlds lay out. She was so awesome. It is hard for a woman to do a lay out because she has breasts. She dove for the disc and just before she hit the ground she would do a front flip. It was wild. She was a gymnast.

(Rhonda/Interview)

It might be argued that if women are seen to be able to embody masculine/athletic power they may potentially subvert and expose the myths of gender being solely determined by biology (see Fausto-Sterling 1985 for an extensive review).

Women stay away from laying out, but when they do it's great and enjoyable to watch. Guys throw their bodies; girls there's a block. They just won't do it.  
(Lucy/Interview)

Lucy's statement on the other hand is an argument for an essential gender difference based on physiology, and as such stands in fairly stark contrast with Rhonda's more socially based explanation. Lucy's later comments also demonstrate the intense focus on women's capabilities which simultaneously constructs men's behaviours and skills as the norm:

Girls don't catch hammers; seem to be afraid of them. If a girl lays out everyone is excited, but if a guy does it is appreciated. If a girl does it, everyone is high.  
(Lucy/Interview)

It is interesting to note that Rhonda and Lucy posit, at different points, women's physiology as the major reason why women do not lay out, then both give examples of a woman doing a 'lay out' with the same body. A lot of men don't 'lay out' either, and men's genitals are every bit as exposed (if not more so) in laying out as women's breasts! So self-protection may be one reason for not laying out, but it is not essentially a biologically-based gender difference. Arguably a male's jock strap provides less protection than a sports bra, though Ultimate women now have access to something called 'tortoise shells'<sup>6</sup> (Canadian Ultimate Players Association 1996). What seems apparent from the evidence I've presented here is that the relation between sport performance and the body is based more in how women and men relate to their bodies than the 'type' of body one possesses. This problem, as I have been suggesting, is a sign and central feature of the ambivalent relation that Ultimate players have to gender difference and sport. The ways in which we perceive the relative 'frailty' – and as Lenskyj (1986) has shown the supposedly delicate nature of women's physiology – is an enduring discourse.

One key to 'laying out' is previous Ultimate play and other athletic experience. It may seem obvious to suggest that athletic skills are developed through repetition and over time. Laying out is quite obviously a developed athletic skill and the elite players with little exception, both male and female, 'lay out all the time' (field notes, Buffalo, October 1993). However, gender norms about the body are so deeply entrenched among Ultimate players and in Euro-Western culture that we are still faced with the notion that 'women don't lay out'.

ADT: Do men react differently to women when they make a difficult play?

Yes. Because it is expected of men, which is silly. But *when women go ho*, it is astonishing to most guys, especially because most women don't do it. Most guys play rougher because they are used to it from other contact sports. Women are not expected to hurl their bodies through the air.  
(Frank/Interview)

[...] *But* if you come to know players and know this woman is really good at this, then it is diminishing returns. You don't get as excited.

(Sharon/Interview)

It seems that women who 'lay out' transgress essentialised gender discourses of biology and nature, and men who do it are considered exemplars of athletic prowess. These examples show that some women, not surprisingly, are every bit as ready to throw themselves to the ground as men. More interesting is the finding that the location of this gender difference apparently stems from two places: in previous similar athletic experience and in some 'natural' physical difference between males and females. Thus there is a high degree of ambivalence in players' understanding of gender and athleticism. Players have seen and reported on females laying out, but they still can't quite accept it as 'normal'. It is also interesting to note that as some women come to be understood as able and willing to lay out their actions become less notable. Therefore, women who 'lay out' move closer to the subject position of the (supposedly) non-gendered 'Ultimate player'. However, it is apparent that the meanings attached to laying out are not neutral, but rather suggest that the 'correct' and normal gender of Ultimate embodiment is masculine.

#### Ambivalence in the 'Spirit of the Game'

Spirit of the Game is to 'be cool.' Play hard, be better, but don't be an asshole. NO deliberate fouling... Be considerate about misunderstood rules, not cocky. No spiking, no trash talking (unless they're friends like that), no dangerous play and make your own calls fairly. And it's 'contest' or 'no contest' no yelling and spitting about it.

(Ultimate Players Association 2002c)

The 'Spirit of the Game' is an important aspect of Ultimate players' claims to being 'different from other sports'. The bases for the claims made by Ultimate players to difference and their (apparent) subversion of sporting norms is defined by the Spirit of the Game in combination with the ways in which it and the rules structure the culture. It emerges in my research as central to the formation of collective and individual Ultimate players' identities. Similar to Canadian and American 'amateur' sport clubs of the early twentieth century (Kidd 1996; Crossett 1990) Ultimate players use the Spirit of the Game clause to construct a distinction between themselves and their Others. The notions of intentional cheating and flagrant violations are generally considered to be features of sports that have referees and lots of direct and constant physical contact like boxing, American football and ice hockey. In comparison to Ultimate these sports are arguably differently racially and class coded in their play and rules (Cole and Andrews 1996). Therefore, they stand in opposition – or at least in competition with – Ultimate ideals. In 'contact' sports, such as ice hockey or American football, players often commit 'intentional' or 'smart' fouls as a competitive strategy. However, this is theoretically, at least, not possible in Ultimate because it would, 'not be in the Spirit of the Game'.

During the beginnings of Ultimate in the late 1960s sport in North America was undergoing profound and wide reaching changes. All of the major professional sport leagues in North America were expanding and beginning to pay athletes huge sums of money to play games. The crass money making and exploitation by the owners and managers of sport institutions were also being widely exposed. Arguably, these are some of the cultural issues that Ultimate originators were responding to. They felt they were going to develop a game 'with no rules, no boundaries and no star system' (Ultimate Players Association 1988). The ambivalent relationship to corporate sponsorship and competition that has developed, and continues to be a major unresolved issue, has a fairly clear grounding in the origins of Ultimate.

For example, the accepted history of Ultimate suggests a constant and broad based struggle over the way to conduct oneself within sport and beyond. Ultimate players regularly draw on the dubious<sup>7</sup> alterity of 'flower power' and 'hippies' to make claims about its uniqueness and difference from more mainstream sports. However, at the same time many players' actions and words tend to refute the associations with the stereotypes of 'skinny guys', 'stoners and acid freaks' (Zagoria 1998). All of these stereotypes seem to suggest connotations of certain types of whiteness and white bodies personified in the MTV characters 'Beavis and Butthead'. This struggle has developed, in part, due to the history of most of the 'originators', who came out of the late 1960s and are often associated with 'hippy culture' (Ultimate Players Association 1998) One of the few vestiges of this identification are the numerous tie-died t-shirts that are often present at Ultimate tournaments and parties, and the many debates over how to do or embody the Spirit of the Game. It is also common to see team names like 'Purple Haze' that reference the music and culture of the 1960s.

Strictly speaking Spirit of the Game is *not a rule*. Intended to limit 'overly aggressive' and or 'dangerous play' it enshrines an idealised notion of fairness and 'respect for opponents and team-mates', which players are supposed to demonstrate in even in the most intensively competitive situations.

ADT: How does the Spirit of the Game operate in relation to the rules?

I saw it live and then I saw it on TV. In the championship game played this year a player made a spectacular play, a lay out to catch the disc in the end-zone, but, there was some discussion whether he landed in bounds... He made a great effort to touch down the tips of both feet in the end-zone and then rolled over onto the cinder track. A wonderful play. Looking at in slow-motion replay he may have just been out. My memory of it was the guy himself went, 'I'm not entirely sure'. And the defender came in and said, 'It was a tremendous play, let's score it', and it went as a score. And that's the type of spirit I like to see. Unfortunately, it doesn't always happen.

(Eric/Interview)

There is a form of self-regulation, as seen in the above quote, which seems to arise due to the lack of external referees. There are no referees or line judges at any level of play.<sup>8</sup> And significantly the Spirit of the Game does not identify *specific* acts that contravene its limits (except for 'taunting of opponents'). It works more as a broad interpretive device which players use to assess the moral and legal acceptability of one or a series of plays and players. Thus, Ultimate players are intended to be entirely self-regulating in their play and organisation.

What is interesting here is *the struggle* that Ultimate players are contending with and less so the comparison to other sport histories and contexts. Perhaps the struggle over the ideals of 'fair play' represents a deeper issue concerning the nature of sport. It is more interesting to suggest that perhaps sport cannot be played 'fairly'. 'The Spirit of the Game' in Ultimate is intended to function as a moral and ethical guide to the game and its meaning is interpreted in a variety of ways. It is not the sheer variety of interpretations, but rather the *cycle of not being able to decide* on any clear definition that is most revealing.

Another facet of this identification is the notion that Ultimate players are enterprising and stretching the boundaries of sport. There is an almost heroic stance of some of the local and international organisers as they set out to promote a game that rejected the nastier parts of institutionalised sport:

*Ultimate is not like life where losses haunt you forever, there's always another game. It is true Ultimate is a Field of Dreams, where you pursue excellence and glory...Ultimate is a flower child, invented by skinny guys who strove to create a truly new game with new rules...You were pressed again and again to go all out, and then if you failed to catch the disc, to exercise your moral sense in calling the point. And the measure was not some arbitrary boundary, net or goal, nor was it the judgment of some official, but rather your own maximum effort and potential.*

(Quote from 'The Field of Dreams', n.d.)

This notion of being 'enterprising' is one that is at work in this quote and in Ultimate circles. Dissatisfied with mainstream sports being corrupted by competition and elite structures and unwilling to submit to external regulation, the 'ancient' heroes of Ultimate set out to invent 'the Ultimate game' (Zagoria 1998). A game beyond all games, yet, 'made up of all the best aspects of all other games' (Lewis 1994; Ultimate Players Association 1988).

There are a number of connected identifications that are suggested by the quote above and the Spirit of the Game, which include self-regulation, rationality, and an entrepreneurial spirit. The Spirit clause in the rules suggests that the subject of Ultimate Frisbee is intended to be rational, aggressive but fair, willing to negotiate, have an equal respect for all concerned, to accept that they may have made an error and to accede to a rule structure.

Spirit of the Game as used by Ultimate players is arguably founded on the underlying assumption of rational thought and universal good will. This philosophy could easily be construed as a re-enactment of the Enlightenment project of

the modern Western world (Dyer 1997). The premise of Euro-Western science and knowledge is that humans are capable of identifying the specific nature of the world. There is supposed to be a one to one correlation between the objects of human perception and the categories (or symbols) that we apply to those objects. This would include *the meaning* of 'fair play' in sport as an object constructed by human beings. Theoretically, humans are supposed to be capable of identifying and pinning down the exact meaning and causality of human action. Once the meaning of an object or relation is identified it is presupposed to be consistent across space and time (Seidman 1994). In this case, there is an (unrealistic) assumption that the Spirit of the Game is a predefined set of meanings that everyone agrees upon in different places and different times. One of the clear messages in the rules is that one is supposed to call a foul on ones self even if the person who was fouled does not (i.e. be fully self-regulating).<sup>9</sup>

Another, perhaps a more revealing approach is to see the Spirit of the Game, in Foucault's (1995) terms, as a panoptic mechanism of power. It works to construct a pervasive form of moral control and thereby, a broad form of behavioural regulation (Harvey and Rail 1995). Players awareness of this regulatory device serves to define and constrain their behaviour by internalising 'the gaze' of the unseen 'Spirit' in the same way that Foucault's (1995) prisoners reacted to their unseen guards in the centre of the Panopticon (prison). The widespread and ongoing discussions over the definition of the 'Spirit of the Game' serve as the 'regulatory mechanisms' (Foucault 1995) through which players actively participate in their own regulation. There is no agreed upon definition of the Spirit of the Game, but there is a *pervasive sense that one should play by it*. The Spirit of the Game is the Police inside Ultimate players' heads.

Players are supposed to discuss infractions of the rules, which can include asking other players for clarification. This is very different from other sporting environments, where a referee or judge makes all decisions and there is virtually no possibility of players changing or affecting a decision. Thus, in mainstream sport *decision-making power is removed* from the control of the athletes *from the outset of play* (Collwell 2000). This is a crucial difference as Ultimate players empower themselves with the right of 'making their own calls'.

The Spirit of the Game clearly has power as both a symbol and a structure and appears to signify a relation *among equals*. Nevertheless, there is an implicit hierarchy in Ultimate, as in most sports, which is similar to that of modern Euro-Western patriarchal capitalist colonialism (e.g. team captain, assigned positions, rules and committees). Part of this structure is the obeying of orders and obedience to 'one's betters' that signifies a deferral to 'survival of the fittest' ideology. Walvin (1987) argues that this colonial identity formation was intended to illustrate masculine, British (racial) superiority. Thus, *those who lead in sport* were the embodiment of a classed, gendered and racially superior identity.

The Spirit of the Game is a guide used by players to organise a similarly superior identification. Ultimate players' embodiment of the Spirit of the Game seems to represent a desire for moral purity and the negation of social difference. Ultimate asks players to abide by 'the highest standards of fair play', which is

similar to other sporting ideologies of the past and the present. However, notions of 'fair play' tend to ignore difference in attitude, ability, access and commitment to an activity. What is different is that Ultimate assumes that everyone can and will abide by the Spirit of the Game *because there is no question of difference from the outset*. 'We' are among equals here and a 'true sporting gentleman' would never cheat another or question their judgment! *It is not in the Spirit of the Game*. The ideal subject of Ultimate is a judge and jury, a referee, a team player, and a leader, all at once. No one could possibly embody these ideals as they lie in contradictory relations of power that imply incompatible positions in a hierarchy of authority.

### Ambivalence in the play: 'laying out'

It is the responsibility of all players to avoid contact in every way possible.  
(Ultimate Players Association 2002b)

Guys are not as intimidated ...they dive for the disc. Guys catch better because of football.

(Lucy/Interview)

As noted earlier, 'Laying out' and 'Going ho' are phrases used to describe a particular action and way of playing the sport of Ultimate frisbee. 'Going ho' is short for 'going horizontal' and is synonymous with 'laying out': diving headfirst and extending one's body fully to catch a 'disc' or knock it down. To 'lay out', is considered by many Ultimate players to be a sign of one's 'Ultimate commitment' to the sport and team. It is also a spectacular and difficult athletic feat to perform and observe. Despite the fact that the rules state that players are to 'avoid contact at all costs', the lay out is only accomplished by making contact with the ground.<sup>10</sup> Laying out and the meanings that Ultimate players attach to it is another example of the ambivalence that structures identities in this community, ambivalence that goes beyond sport and the Spirit of the Game.

AT: Are there similar problems for men and women in learning the game?

Yes, but they're not gender specific problems. One of the reasons I like it so much is that it is something you can do competitively in a mixed setting. Unlike football, it would be more difficult to have a competitive game. *Ultimate skills are not gender specific* which makes it easier to have a competitive game.

(Frank/Interview)

There is an inconsistency in Frank's comments here and his comments referred to earlier (see page 185). His comments point to ambivalence about gender. Frank concedes (earlier) that it *should not* be surprising to see women layout, but he then states that men and women could not play (American) football together. He says that women would not be able to handle the physical contact of football, a 'skill'

not required or desired in Ultimate. So while it is okay in Frank's interpretation for women to play Ultimate, they are rejected as possible football players. When examined together, these two statements are powerful exemplars of the ambivalent desires within Ultimate identity. Frank's statement is significant because it is also, I suggest, a racial and class coding due to the association of contact sports, like American football, with black and working-class bodies (Messner 1991; Cole and Andrews 1996). The association of the working-class and blackness with the body and not the mind has a broad cultural resonance (Holmlund 1994; Dyer 1997; Fleming 2001). By de-emphasising the body as the site of physical and or social dominance Ultimate players are emphasising skill and intellect, and in their own terms 'Spirit'. Thus the feminisation of Ultimate, something Frank's 'wife can do', elides non-physicality with femininity and middle-class whiteness. If we apply a binary logic to the racial dimension it would seem that Ultimate is something that non-physically aggressive middle-class *white men* can do, too!

Going ho is an embodied knowledge of one's limits and then testing those limits. Desire, Butler has suggested is 'in some sense always a desire for recognition' (1992: 89). The recognition of others and self forms a community, and thus desire forms the boundaries of that community. Desire is always related to difference in the sense that what is desired also simultaneously constructs and suppresses what is detested (Hall 1990). Thus what is by implication, and by action, constructed as detestable in Ultimate is *overt physical contact and aggression*. However, Ultimate players seem to demand that the act of 'laying out' be celebrated, yet overtly reject those other sporting embodiments that are defined precisely by physical violence such as boxing, American football or ice hockey. Working-class and black bodies practically and symbolically populate these sports.

Laying out is a signifier of 'going all out', one's commitment to the game and to 'sacrificing one's body' which are central to dominant bodily ideals of mainstream sport. The desire for physical evidence of *Ultimate's athletic legitimacy* is further established by the way in which bruises and scrapes are shown and talked about on a regular basis. These marks are 'badges of honour' among all Ultimate players. Though physical contact is openly rejected the markers of physical contact or injury are celebrated (as documented in other lifestyle sports, see Chapter 1). Knee braces and surgery scars are a regular topic of conversation (I should know I have had my own knee operated on due to an Ultimate injury). One of the regular prizes sometimes given out at tournaments is for 'worst injury'.

It appears as though the abject category of direct physical aggression is a necessary part of the formation of the Ultimate identities. Not able to knock people down, wrestle or punch, 'laying out' recuperates vestiges of extreme physical aggression and reassures Ultimate players that they too are 'real athletes'. Other forms of athletic prowess are admired, like running speed and jumping ability, but the most praise is reserved for 'laying out'. Certainly, no one is given the same type or amount of recognition for being able to catch, which is definitely more important than the occasional spectacular dive in terms of winning.<sup>11</sup> It is in this celebration of 'laying out,' Ultimate players preferred image of themselves, where we can see the intersection of a series of points of difference.

I heard it regularly repeated, 'This is not [American] football!' on plays where someone made contact with another player. I also had more than one player say to me, 'Oh sorry, I'm used to playing [ice] hockey', after they had run into me. These statements are crucial to the construction of Ultimate's difference to other sporting identities. Ultimate players have a general disdain for overt physical contact and American football in general. The rules on contact also highly constrain potential bodily harm to everyone concerned. Some of my female team-mates have specifically identified the 'non-contact' rules of Ultimate as one of the most important reasons that they were attracted to the sport:

The physical contact in a game might cause women to shy away from the game, unless they are somewhat used to it. Maybe all-women's ultimate would attract more players. *Some women would never play a sport with a man on the same field without a referee.*

(Lucy/Interview) [emphasis added]

I take this philosophy and practice of non-contact to be fairly unique and central to understanding the game and players of Ultimate.<sup>12</sup> It defines an identity that is productive of different bodies and relations to one's body and the bodies of others within and beyond sport. The important aspect of this difference as I have shown is how it relates to common or dominant sporting ideals.

Yet, ultimate embodiment is also clearly about exhibiting physical dominance over an Other. Within the play of the game the forceful occupation of space and aggression against others is prominent. The exemplary act of 'Going ho' is about mastery of the individual body (another side of discipline), which reveals the individual body to be enmeshed in relations of power and domination with other bodies. There is a sense that I as an 'Ultimate player' can control my body so well that I do not need to knock someone down in order to accomplish my objectives. This conception evokes the arms length, yet deadly, control processes of modern capitalist governance and military organisations (e.g. 'surgical strikes' or 'collateral damage' in the double-speak of American military language). The central point here is that one can and does assert force and dominance on the bodies of others without placing one's own body in direct physical jeopardy. There is some danger in Ultimate of physical injury to oneself in 'laying out', but it is of a fairly limited type.

There is a progressive value in the non-contact nature of the game, however, the emphasis that Ultimate players place on showing off scrapes and bruises, seems to serve as a reminder that this is a 'real' (manly) sport where one does get hurt: Ultimate players are not 'hard', but neither are they 'soft'!

### Theoretical reflections

There is a deep ambivalence that resides in Ultimate players' images, talk and behaviour. This ambivalence is expressed in the rejection of overt physical contact in Ultimate and the desire to keep the flow going in games via the 'Spirit of the Game'. It is also the case that physical prowess and dominance are still

encouraged, but is obscured by the emphasis on avoiding contact. The readings of 'going ho' that come from my informants show that the act is always read through the normative lens of aggressive sporting masculine physicality of contact sports which are also coded as working-class and black (Carrington 1998; Dyer 1997). This issue deserves much more attention in the social and cultural study of sport than I have been able to provide here.

Lucy's statement, 'Women tend to shy away from laying out', represents a gendered reading of athletic bodies. However, women and men who 'go ho' are accorded the highest praise for their physical abilities. Thus the most extreme act possible is also worthy of the most praise. Therefore, Ultimate players talk and rules suppress physical aggression, but then in the final analysis, celebrate it.

The abject qualities of physicality and physical violence associated with 'other' sports returns as the most desired ways of being in Ultimate culture. Richard Dyer (1997), Stuart Hall (1990) and Frantz Fanon (1967) have all shown us that the demonisation of physicality and aggression are the foundations of white male, bourgeois, heterosexual identification. Dominant (white) masculine identities rest on the repression of physicality and the assertion of spiritual purity/superiority. The Spirit of the Game, the non-contact rules and the celebration of 'going ho' signify a circle back to the knot of anxiety that founds Euro-Western masculine sporting embodiments.

This knot of anxiety is manifested in the way the game is played and the ambiguous relation to physical aggression in Ultimate. It may be a different sporting activity but the desire for competitive individualism and self-autonomy is what seems to drive the players. The *desire* to continue to resurrect failed (colonial) modernist figures of the 'good sport', like those that are evoked by the idealistic versions of the Spirit of the Game, are perpetuated in Ultimate culture. It is at the moment of indecision between play and pleasure, and dominance and competition that 'ultimate masculinities' (Thornton 1998) might be seen as a sign of the struggle between the modern and the postmodern (Lyotard 1986; Seidman 1994). The *fear* of ambiguity is a cornerstone of modernist science, knowledge and identity (McRobbie 1994). Ultimate players' *identifications* express a profound uncertainty: How much or how far can we go with broad inclusion, non-violence and competition before Ultimate looks like every other sport? Or it could be more incisive to argue that players are more concerned with how far they can go before Ultimate is not considered a 'real' (masculine) sport. Frank's comment above about football and 'playing a game with his wife' are informing here. Thus, Ultimate is centrally concerned with how and what it is *to be*: a body, to be masculine or feminine, to be spiritual, to be an athlete.

I contend that the play, rules, and meanings of Ultimate represent a broader cultural formation of identity and difference. In a world where dominant groups are claiming that social regulation has broken down and social *difference* has run amok, difference and heterogeneity threaten disorder (For a review of conservative fears see Fiske 1993; Grossberg 1992; Marqusee 2001). In Ultimate, this fear is expressed in the practices of insisting on collective decision-making, gender

egalitarianism and constrained competitiveness. However, in practice women are largely excluded, except when they conform to masculinist standards. It is also the case that mainstream competitive ideals and structures are firmly entrenched in this culture, and decision-making tends to be in the hands of a small group of individuals. Many female players express every bit as much competitive drive and fear of feminisation as many male players. However, it is the subtle, but nonetheless obvious negation and fear of feminised characteristics (e.g., 'slow play', 'weak throws', 'fear of laying out') that delineates the boundary maintenance of Ultimate identities. Ultimate players are unable openly to embrace extreme physical aggression, as it is inconsistent with their rules of play and their rejection of dominant sporting embodiments.

'Real' players 'lay out' and don't throw like 'a beach bimbo'. The fear of not being seen as a 'real' sport I argue is most profoundly expressed in the regulation of the boundaries of physical aggression. Players do not want to be physically violent, but they still express a desire for physical dominance and experience pleasure through physical exertion. This identification is expressed by Ultimate players' reservation of the highest praise for those who 'go ho'. So in this way they are embracing a broader, more common concept of sporting masculinities in spite of their desire to maintain a distinction between themselves and the stereotypical images of physicality associated with working-class and black identified sports.

The corruption and duplicity of athletes have disrupted and unsettled modernist notions of 'the good sport' (Andrews 1996). Ultimate was formed in response to models of vicious competition and greedy athletes (Lewis 1994). It is arguable that Ultimate players came along to reassert the possibility of 'fair play' and 'good sportsmanship'. Ultimate players' rules and slogan of 'Spirit of the Game' suggests a strong tie to this sense of nostalgia for a (non-existent) mythic time of untainted free play. Long-term Ultimate players and organisers constantly invoke 'the Sixties' as a reference point for their origins and they pine for the supposedly lost idealism of those days. Many other players reject much of this idealism and are openly more interested in winning and dominating (Lewis 1994). Those days, I would argue, were only the glory days for middle-class straight white men, or more accurately, they were one of the last points at which such an identity could be assumed without question.

### **Conclusion: an unfinished project?**

Ultimate players claim to be developing and living new forms of (gender) embodiment and identification. Do these new identities express or exhibit changes in existing gender, race, class, and body dominance? Butler (1990) argues that it is in the situationality and repetition of parodies of the ideals of gender (and identity) that possible transformation exists. Ultimate players play around with sporting embodiment. However, for any parody to be transformative it must, 'produce a set of meanings that the structures they appear to be copying would preclude' (Butler 1992: 87). Ultimate largely fails to produce

practices and meanings that are beyond the dominant structures, ideals and practices of existing sports. Generally, in Ultimate, when identities are marked or signified it is for purposes of differentiating them from the unnamed general reference group of heterosexual, white able-bodied males. Ultimate frisbee represents an interesting, if unrealised, potential for the subversion of dominant sporting identities. Despite Ultimate players' best intentions their own performances may not be so much politically transformative or progressive so much as *the production of a new space* in which to play around within established boundaries of identity.

### Notes

- 1 Throughout the rest of the chapter I will use the abbreviated term 'Ultimate' when referring to Ultimate frisbee. This is common practice among Ultimate players who generally only use the full phrase 'Ultimate frisbee' when talking to cultural outsiders.
- 2 For more detail on the history, rules and current state of Ultimate visit the Ultimate Players Association website <<http://www.upa.org/>> or World Flying Disc Federation <<http://www.wfdf.org/>>
- 3 Disc golf sources claim that world wide up to 500,000 people play on a 'regular' basis and that there are approximately 6000 members of the Professional Gold Disc Association. About 90 per cent of the disc golf courses as of the year 2000 were located in the United States. See <http://discology.co.uk/pdf/DiscGolfDemographics.pdf> (accessed November 18, 2003)
- 4 The Spirit of the Game is a very important aspect of the culture and I discuss it elsewhere in more detail (Thornton 1998).
- 5 The Vancouver Ultimate League claims to be the largest in the world. Go to: [www.vul.bc.ca](http://www.vul.bc.ca)
- 6 These are little plastics cups that fit inside of a sports bra to help protect women's breasts while playing.
- 7 The so-called 'hippies' of the 1960s went onto become the 'yuppies' and 'entrepreneurs' of the 1980s. Essentially commodifying their 'alternative' experiences in the form of art, poetry and film, not to mention taking up positions in Universities. Thus, the alterity or anti-establishment characterisation of hippies is suspect.
- 8 However, there are now pools of 'official observers' for some high level competitions like the World Championships and UPA Nationals. To this point though these 'observers' can only be 'invited' to make judgments on boundary calls or clarifications of rules.
- 9 This raises questions such as: could we ever be so fully conscious that we could do that? How do we account for difference and interpretation inside such a world? Is the point that one calls a foul or that one should avoid making an infraction?
- 10 If pushed, one might argue that laying out is a foul on oneself!
- 11 Even a cursory review of the many Ultimate websites and newsletters will reveal the prominence of images of players 'laying out' for the disc. Follow the various hyperlinks to see the many images of laying out on World Flying Disc Federation home page at <http://www.wfdf.org>
- 12 Other sports such as Korfbal and Netball have similar rules on contact. However, players in these sports are highly constrained to specific zones of play and Netball is not, as far as I know, a 'mixed'/'co'ed' sport. Thus there is a much larger chance of players running into each other on in an Ultimate game.

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