

A History of the Spirit of the Game and Observers in the Sport of Ultimate

The issue of whether the Observer system -- as used in North America at the highest levels of competition -- is in fundamental conflict with the "spirit of the game" of Ultimate is an ongoing debate not only in international circles and WFDF but also still in North America itself. The issue is extremely complicated and multi-faceted, and the debate is often poorly informed as too few participants understand the long historical evolution to the current Observer system now used, impacted by a series of notable incidents over time that shaped the process.

The issue of spirit of the game was a central theme throughout the *ULTIMATE--The First Four Decades*, by Pasquale Anthony Leonardo and Adam Zagoria, published by Joe Seidler in 2005, which catalogued the history of Ultimate. The following selections from that book provide an overview of the key debates and events that led to the development of the Observer system as it is currently used today. I would note that, despite the level of concern about the purity of the original principles of Ultimate, the founders at Columbia High School fully expected that referees would be used if Ultimate took off. Further, while observers are now used at the top levels of competition in North America, most games are still played without any Observers and most North American Ultimate players would say spirit of the game is still alive and well.

- Robert L. "Nob" Rauch

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 9 (1970)

To Ultimate players like Silver, Hellring and Hines, Guts was boring, plain and simple. Using the school's equipment, they mimeographed copies of the rules to their new game under the heading "Ultimate Frisbee." The only limit to the size of the field was that "The two goal lines must be parallel and should be somewhere between 40 and 60 yards apart, depending on the number of players." There were no lateral boundaries, no allowance for pick or travel calls. The rules allowed for 20 or 30 players per side, but, in actuality, the number was often whittled to seven. The end zones were unlimited. A player standing a foot from the goal line could score with a fifty-yard bomb, if space permitted. Games were timed, with 60 minutes considered "standard."

The rules also addressed the issue of officials. "A referee or referees may officiate, and, if so, their decision must be final. If no referee is available, the two teams play on an honor system, settling disputes by flipping a coin or by some other such method." Though they were permitted, officials were not present in the early games of Ultimate played at Columbia. "We didn't have referees," Silver said. "There wasn't a referee around that late at night at the parking lot there at Columbia High School. So we had to play a game that was on an honor system, and we had to play a game that was gentlemanly."

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 40 (1978)

Development of the 7th Edition rules was significant in a number of ways. The rewrite was done by Kalb, Kennedy and Roddick under the aegis of the new Ultimate Players Committee. This edition was printed by Wham-O as an IFA brochure in 1978. It was the first edition to drop the Wham-O Master Tournament model as the official disc of play, replacing it with the Wham-O 165-G. It also was the first edition to formally incorporate the spirit of sportsmanship as written by Roddick, in the preface to the rules:

"Ultimate has traditionally been considered an alternative athletic activity," the rules stated. "Highly competitive play is encouraged but never at the expense of the bond of mutual respect between players or the basic joy of play. Protection of these vital elements eliminates some behavior from the ultimate field. Such actions as taunting of opposition players, dangerous aggression, intentional fouling or other 'win at all costs' behavior are fouls against the Spirit of the Game and should be discouraged by all players."

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 48-50 (1980-87)

During the 1970s, the "Johnny Appleseeds" of Ultimate, as Joel Silver later called them, had spread the game to college campuses primarily in the Northeast and Midwest. With the notable exception of the Santa Barbara Condors, it was difficult to find a decent Ultimate team anywhere that didn't trace its origins to someone at Columbia High School or one of its scholastic competitors from the New Jersey Frisbee Conference. During this period, Ultimate was dominated by teams from two places: New Jersey and Santa Barbara. Between 1974-81, Rutgers (three national championships), the Condors (three) and Glassboro (two) won all eight of the official and unofficial national titles.

Yet during the 1980s, the face of the game would change dramatically. More and more people would get turned on to Ultimate at college, and the majority of them had absolutely no connection to the Columbia High School crowd. As players graduated and took their first steps into the “real” world, they brought Ultimate with them, spreading the sport from campuses to cities across the US. The balance of power shifted as a result. Colleges and universities, such as Rutgers, Glassboro, Cornell and Michigan State, were no longer the dominant teams. Instead, club teams from Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, St Louis and Dallas emerged as the new national powers. The UPA lost its major financial backer, Wham-O, but still grew to include 4,500 members by 1987. By that time, the association included not only a Women’s Division, but Open and Women’s College Divisions as well.

As the game swelled in popularity, it faced a host of thorny issues, some old, some new. Many players wanted the sport to remain a recreational pastime, free of observers, referees, uniforms, prize money and all the things that accompanied “big-time” sports. Others wanted just the opposite: to see the game grow and progress to the point where it received television coverage, attracted sponsorship and perhaps even qualified for the Olympics. A small cadre of people—Sholom (Eric) Simon, Andy Borinstein, Robert “Nob” Rauch, Kathy Pufahl, Steve Mooney and others—worked to get Ultimate covered in national magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*, *UltraSport*, *Fortune*, even *Penthouse*. Noted author George Plimpton even narrated a documentary of the 1985 Nationals.

The new men’s and women’s club powers, meanwhile, took the sport to never-before-imagined places, places that Jared Kass and the Columbia High School founders never could have dreamed of. The game retained its “anti-sport” ethos at the same time that many players took the game more seriously. During this period, club teams not only adopted a more serious attitude, but also developed hard-core training and all sorts of innovative strategies. The early 1980s were to Ultimate what the late 1960s and early 1970s were to jazz and rock music. While the majority of players adhered to the Spirit of the Game, some crossed the line. Racial epithets were hurled on the field. Trophies were spiked. Eligibility rules were pushed to the limit. Ultimate players were forced to take a long, hard look in the mirror and ask: How important is this so-called “Spirit of the Game,” and how can we balance it against the athlete’s natural competitive drive? Do we need observers or referees to settle disputes on the field? Do we want our game to remain a pastime, or do we want it to join the mainstream? And if we want it to go “big-time,” what are the risks and rewards of pursuing that path?

No sooner had the new organization [the UPA] taken its first baby steps, then another set of thorny issues cropped up. These ranged from questions over the role of referees to the issue of timed games versus those played to points to the role of women in Ultimate. In April of 1980, the very first issue of the UPA Newsletter came out. It announced that there were now 350 registered teams in the US, and that everyone “from California to Maine, Florida to Washington will receive current, localized and general interest information and perspectives on Ultimate from a variety of sources...” The lead article on the front page centered on “The Referee Question.” Written by Tom MacNiven of the Dallas Sky Pilots, the article advocated “active observers” for Ultimate. A story on the third page, written by Greg Sharp of Santa Barbara, entitled “The Role of Referees in Ultimate,” called for the same thing. When the people on the East Coast saw these headlines, “they went ballistic,” Simon recalled. “They said, ‘This is proof that Wham-O and the West Coast people want to take over Ultimate. What are they doing to our game?’”

But Kennedy said he never meant to take a side on the issue of observers; he was merely happy to have a story worthy of running on the front page of the new publication. “That article was not a philosophical statement,” he said. “Somebody submitted a fairly well written article and it was on target having to do with Ultimate. A lot of people said, ‘What is this guy doing? Who does he think he is?’ I didn’t champion either cause. I was just presenting an article that was presented.” As noted earlier, the first set of Ultimate rules allowed for the use of a referee, if one was available.

“People think that we had a real vision of the sport without referees,” recalled Irv Kalb, the Columbia High School and Rutgers’ captain. “But anyone interested in the sport was playing the sport. We didn’t have the luxury of having referees. It grew a lot, this thing of the sport without referees. This was not the original intention.” The first collegiate game, between Rutgers and Princeton, featured a referee, as did the 1974 New Jersey High School championship game between Columbia High School and East Brunswick. Kalb, wearing a striped shirt and equipped with a whistle, served as the official in the high school championship.

Yet, in a November 1980 UPA Newsletter story, Kalb gave one of the most articulate and well-defined explanations of Spirit of the Game ever. He wrote that when the game began at Columbia High School, there was no need to write Spirit of the Game into the rules because “lifelong friendships created such strong personal ties that basic mutual respect for each other was a given. When the group would practice, there was no ‘enemy’ to be beaten; only some friends with their shirts on and others with their shirts off.” Only as the game spread was there an attendant

“loss of understanding of its basic philosophy. Teams began to spring up from just reading the rules or hearing about the sport by word of mouth.” That necessitated a clause in the rulebook emphasizing “Spirit,” that he said was present in the average “pick-up game” among friends. Kalb preached against “good fouls,” those committed in a basketball game to prevent a breakaway lay-up. “In a game of Ultimate, assume you are on defense,” he wrote. “The man you are guarding has a step on you and is about to catch a sure goal. Within the framework of Ultimate, to intentionally foul this player to prevent him from scoring must be unconscionable!” This ability, to refrain from such fouls, “is what makes us different.”

Still, human nature dictates that not everyone adheres as closely to Spirit as Kalb would have liked. Observers had been used in the 1978 Cornell-Santa Barbara Nationals final and were utilized again in various games at the 1980 UPA Nationals in Atlanta. Kalb and Simon served as two of the observers for the final, in which Glassboro defeated Boston Aerodisc for its second championship in a row. Observers were employed again at the 1983 Nationals in New Orleans, after fists were thrown in the wake of the Sky Pilots using the ugliest racial epithet to describe Gordon “Gordo” Christmas, an African-American member of New York’s KABOOM! According to those present, the Sky Pilots said they would not play until Christmas got off the field. “This game was for the final spot next to the Condors in the semis,” wrote Adam Weishaupt in the UPA Newsletter at the time. “It was marred by people who are too intense, getting out of hand because so much is on the line. The game left the human level completely and was played out on a simple, twisted hate level with racial insults, personal attacks and the real threat of violence. This was a black mark on a great national championship.” Observers would be used off and on throughout the 1980s amid a hotly contested debate about the sport’s future.

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 67 (1987)

Spirit Takes a Hit

While the college ranks now had both a Men’s and Women’s Division, the club world was facing other issues. In 1986, Gary McGivney succeeded Murphy as national director of the UPA. When McGivney took over, the game was becoming rapidly more aggressive, with teams like Windy City, the Dallas Sky Pilots and KABOOM! becoming notorious for their win-at-all-costs mentality. “This was the period in our sport’s growth where the Spirit of the Game was really in danger from overly aggressive and outright dangerous play,” McGivney recalled. “Defenders would blatantly run into receivers knowing the disc would go back to the thrower, or worse, hoping they would drop the disc.”

A letter to McGivney summed up the mood of many of the game’s younger players: “I have long been torn between encouraging Ultimate to become more of a real, respected sport yet still trying to preserve the unique individuality of the ‘alternative to athletics’ beliefs prevalent in many sections of today’s game,” the letter said. “But if we continue to fight and swear over foul calls, openly get stoned on the sidelines and wear bizarre apparel, we’re endangering our growth.” At the 1986 Nationals, the captains voluntarily gave McGivney and Murphy, who were acting as the head observers, authority to give players yellow and red cards in the semifinals and final, meaning that they could be kicked out of games for unsportsmanlike behavior.

No red cards were given, but in the final between Windy City and Flying Circus, the game was stalled by one, 25-minute argument. Even after his team won the game, Windy City captain Jordan Halpern spiked the championship trophy. That led to a now-famous Newsletter quote from Titanic’s Steve Mooney: “The history of Spirit of the Game was shattered once and for all when Windy City spiked and smashed their victory trophy. Goodbye Ultimate and long live Uglimate, the fast-paced, exciting new sport disc game.” Against this backdrop, McGivney devoted his directorship almost exclusively to writing editorials about improving Spirit of the Game and bringing an end to “Uglimate.” He also traveled extensively, attending captains’ meetings and tournaments around the country, preaching the Spirit of the Game. “To get on television, we have to cut down on the arguing times,” McGivney told UltraSport magazine. “I could even see using instant replays to settle arguments.”

The instant replay never came, and McGivney’s concerns about the sport’s future continued to be legitimate. Meanwhile, after the 1986 Nationals, a group of New York City players met in a New York dive bar with the idea of hatching a new powerhouse consisting of the city’s best players. That new team would go on to shake the game at its very foundation, boldly taking Ultimate where it had never gone before.

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 72-73 (1987-1994)

The top teams weren’t very mellow in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There were two dominant dynasties in the Club Division: New York won Nationals in the Open Division five straight years beginning in 1989, while the

Maine-iacs won four Women's titles in a five-year period from 1990 to 1994. Dominating the sport with intensity and focus, New York and the Maine-iacs defined how the best teams played Ultimate.

New York required a hard-core training regimen and explicit acknowledgment that winning was paramount. Once success sprang from these tenets, the controversy followed. There was an inherent, unresolved problem with Pat King's leadership: the Spirit of the Game clause, codified by Dan "Stork" Roddick and Irv Kalb and inserted in the 7th Edition of the rules expressly cited that any "win-at-all-costs" behavior was against the principles of Ultimate. The New Yorkers saw things differently. "To us, spirit meant the respect we showed for the game. Spirit is a commitment to a higher authority of the sport and being the best you can possibly be. We kept pushing ourselves to improve in the absence of losing and that's what human achievement is," spoke New Yorker Dave Blau in 2004.

The Spirit clause seemed to hold back the instincts of the players, and New York fought against it. They always wanted to be taken seriously, as athletes first and hedonistic iconoclasts second. They succeeded in many ways, helping to move Ultimate away from its perceived association with Frisbee dogs and longhairs. They became a high-profile team, featured in *Sports Illustrated*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and profiled by "MTV Sports" and ESPN. The New York dynasty was so powerful and affecting that it seemed as if the entirety of the game emulated them in some fundamental fashion. Teams began to work in New York's 4-man-play offense and found themselves matching New York's attitude in order to compete. "There was one set of rules for the rest of Ultimate, and an uglier, more vicious set that New York imposed upon all they played," wrote former San Francisco player Scott "Masher" Hollinger.

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 83-85 (1989-1990)

New York and Tsunami met again in 1989, this time in the finals. As in 1988, the game was a great one but the Spirit was ill. Like scholars debating constitutional law, the argument over the interpretation of the Spirit of the Game and how it was to be effectively enforced—if it could be enforced at all—came to the forefront in discussing Ultimate's future. In 1988, then-Windy City player Chris Van Holmes wrote an essay entitled "Just Say No To Refs." In it, he cited Ultimate's higher call to the fundamentals of character. "Up to this point, captains and players have dealt with problems through discussion and compromise. The system has worked remarkably well and has several long-term benefits. The need for interaction and negotiation lifts the game above a purely physical contest and helps develop players' character," he wrote.

It was social theories such as this that kept cantankerous players from being reprimanded or kicked out of the game. New York's Jon Gewirtz became the poster boy for bad attitude. Legendary for his trash talk, infamous for his altercations, combative attitude and purposeful aggression, Gewirtz was cited (rightly or wrongly) as the singular bane of Ultimate's existence. "I think a lot of my reputation comes from escalating conflicts," said Gewirtz in 2004. "When someone would do something that I felt was not very spirited, I would do something back to them even worse. I escalated things."

"In the heat of battle, New York would get into a fever pitch and then anyone could step over the line. Nobody was immune," said Dave Blau in 2004. "There were times when we were too wrapped up in winning and didn't take a role in curtailing behavior." "The 1989 final was the culmination of the win-at-all costs, tit-for-tat crap that had been going on for a number of years. Players on both teams believed they were justified because the other team was a bunch of cheaters," said Bob Pallares, then a member of the UPA board and a Tsunami player. But the game was a good one. There were two "greatest" plays in the second half, one by New York's Pat King to Karim Basta for a goal that brought New York within two, and another three points later from Tsunami's Rick Geyer to Vince Bertsch for a score to bring the Tsunami lead back to three at 15-12. Dobyns also made one of his trademark leaping skies over a taller opponent in the end zone for an awe-inspiring goal. New York turned back Tsunami by switching to zone late in the game. They registered five blocks with the zone defense and won back the championship, 21-19. The controversy came afterwards. An inadequate and uninformed group of observers had been used that had little to no effect on controlling the unsportsmanlike behavior of many of the players. They were also ineffective as referees. Passive for most parts, reluctant to make in-or-out calls and hardly able to resolve disputes, the observer system did not work well. "I see that final as being a failed experiment," wrote Van Holmes in a 2004 e-mail. "Observers were given the power of active up-calls for the first, and last, time. The poor training and ineffectiveness of the observers resulted in a long-term distrust of UPA observing crews among elite players." The question remained: Why were observers even necessary? What about self-policing, making the right call and adhering to the Spirit of the Game?

Former UPA Executive Director Gary McGivney spoke to an ESPN reporter in 1986 about Ultimate's unique situation. "You're competing on two planes. The physical game: How well can I throw, run and catch? But you're also competing on a moral plane: How well can I control my actions, how honest can I be, am I in- or out-of-

bounds?" "I understand playing the game on two planes, but it's often impossible. It shouldn't be our responsibility, and sometimes you saw a call only one way," explained New York's Dave Blau. "We worked really hard and didn't want someone to take away our advantage with a call. We loved the observer idea. We felt that it would even the playing field."

Nob's UPA started to look more seriously at the problem and realized that the lack of UPA support for the observers seriously undermined their effectiveness. He thus began to pursue a more formalized training system with the Certified Observer Pool or COP. It was a hard sell, even for his own people. UPA Managing Director Kathy Pufahl was particularly dismissive of the idea and her position wasn't uncommon. In the December 1989 Newsletter, Pufahl penned an editorial with a strong anti-observer message. "We negate the entire premise of the sport...if we are admitting any form of 'qualified observers' or referees onto our playing fields. The sport faces this conflict continually. Either we choose to roll over, admit defeat, destroy two decades of development and allow the face of the game to change forever or we decide that the Spirit of the Game is worth fighting for."

Some believed that any form of active observer would initiate a "slippery slope" towards the type of referees that other sports used and bring along "over-commercialization, purposeful fouling and excessive cheating," according to Van Holmes. Pallares, a pro-observer UPA board member at the time, remembered the debate: "There were some [on the UPA board] who would resign rather than see any kind of observer, active or inactive, in any UPA-sanctioned event." "There had been discussion on the West Coast of attempting an observer- or refereed-set of tournaments, with officials who made active line calls and settled on-field disputes," he continued. "The UPA flatly refused to sanction or be involved in any way with these tournaments." The belief in teams self-policing themselves was becoming more and more of a dead-end drag at the elite levels of the sport. "Excessive calls are killing Ultimate's beauty, excitement, spirit and marketability. Something needs to change," argued Tsunami's Steve Courlang in a December 1989 Newsletter letter to the editor.

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 87-88 (1991)

The UPA's Certified Observer Pool had been put to use in the years following the 1989 Nationals and by 1991, the observers had gained an amount of autonomy and authority. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it resulted in a major controversy in the finals. An early five-goal lead in the first half by Godiva turned into a three-point deficit in the second. Down 13-10, Godiva rallied behind Kate Coyne and Kate Keough to tie the game at 16s, 17s and 18s, when they finally hit the time cap. A breathless game was being put on display; the next point would win Nationals. "For the first time ever, the women's final was a showdown," wrote Anne Carson in the Newsletter.

Godiva received the disc. They had been working Gloria "Glo" (Lust) LustPhillips all game and she ended up throwing or catching 12 Boston goals. It was no surprise when they went straight to the well with a big huck from Coyne to their money player. Glo and her defender, Chris "Wags" Wagner, came up towards the disc and stopped when it went over their heads on a stream of wind. As the disc zoomed earthward, Wags and Glo tripped over each other's feet and fell in a tangled mess 10 yards from where the disc landed in the end zone. Gloria called foul. But was it a catchable disc? A discussion was had and Glo opted to take the call to the observers.

"Once it was established in the captains' meeting that if either player so requested, we were to make the call, our only options were 'foul' or 'no foul.' Sending the disc back was no longer an option to us," stated Head Observer Mark Dixon in the December 1991 Newsletter. Dixon continued, "We [the observing crew] quickly and unanimously agreed that although the contact was accidental (the defender, Chris Wagner, was playing the disc) it was, nonetheless, significant enough to be a foul." The disc was awarded to Glo on the goal line. A dump to Robin Barney was followed by a quick strike to Coyne and the game was over. This was like ending an overtime World Cup soccer match on a penalty shot after a call made by the referee on incidental contact near the net. "The worst call in women's Ultimate," related Nicole Beck from the Maine-iacs.

The debate over whether or not Glo could have caught that disc is still discussed in certain circles. "There's a video and it's worn out right there ... right with the trip!" related Pierce, now a good friend of Glo's. "We still talk about it to this day," admits Glo with some humor. The problem was clear: The observers couldn't rule "incidental contact" and they weren't allowed to send the disc back to the thrower as a do-over. This wasn't very Ultimate-like. "I was ready to take it back," said Coyne, the thrower. "While this game is played and done, the proper role of observers is far from decided," wrote Wagner in a letter to the editor in the November 1992 Newsletter. She was right and coupled with the less-than-positive review of the observers at the 1989 Open finals, the collective majority of club Ultimate players began to reject active observers and return to the nebulous resolve of self-policing according to the Spirit of the Game.

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 97-99 (1995-1997)

From his earliest days of playing in 1981 at Fairfax High School in northern Virginia, Toad [Leber] knew it was possible to bend the rules and get away with it. He claims he didn't like it and that's why he's always believed that Ultimate needed referees. "When I was a senior in high school I called a disc up that I knew was down. My old man had come to watch. He said, 'How did you keep the disc on the one you dropped?' and I said, 'It was my call, and I said I caught it,' and he said, 'You didn't catch that!'" explained Leber. "It was an epiphany I had—that you could cheat in this game and get away with it."

ECU's 1995 championship win marked the third straight for the outspoken Mike Gerics who had joined ECU in 1994 after three years with UNCW. His reputation as an ultra-competitive hothead had already been established by his on-field antics (often comical in nature) and off-the-field commentary. "Gerics took it to a whole other level. He has this Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality," said Leber in 2004.

Gerics began to define the body politic of the successful Carolina scene. In late 1994 Gerics began posting manifestos on the state of the game to the Internet newsgroup rec.sport.disc (RSD), taking full advantage of the new medium to communicate his worldview to the masses. In early March 1995, he wrote, "Both ECU and UNCW, I believe, represent the new age of Ultimate. I'm not trying to be all philosophical or break bad, I just firmly believe that the future of our sport will include more intense in-your-face, hardcore physical contact and aggressiveness. The future of our sport will include referees." Gerics' vision became a self-fulfilling prophecy. His teams continued to be purposefully aggressive and their overblown on-field manner—clearly antagonistic to the Spirit of the Game and to other teams—necessitated some form of controlling force. "UNCW and ECU in the 1990s played to get observers in order to make sure that other teams played the way we wanted to play—physically and without travels," wrote Gerics in a 2005 e-mail.

Eventually Gerics got what he sought and Ultimate got what it had needed for a long time with the introduction of the Callahan Rules in 1997. However, Gerics was only half right in his assessment of the future style of the game. In the December Newsletter, UPA Executive Director Holly Larrison wrote, "If we are ever to become a spectator sport, the sport must continue to reflect the rules as they are written. I project that it will be the unlikely combination of the incredible athleticism and the Spirit of the Game that will be our most prominently featured attraction. "In my way of thinking, the Spirit of the Game was never meant to prohibit the drive and competitiveness that athletes must have to reach the top of a field, but rather to intensify that challenge—to reach the top with sheer talent, skill and physical discipline and not rely on tactics that undermine the efforts of the opposing team."

Ultimate: The First Four Decades, p. 123-126, 128 (1997-1999)

On April 24, 1998, the Wall Street Journal published a front-page article by Ross Kerber titled "Ultimate Frisbee Gets Down and Dirty, And Some Cry Foul." Kerber's colorful piece focused on slaughtering Ultimate's every sacred cow. He wrote of an "identity crisis" in the sport, contrasting Ultimate's desires for respectability with its very identifiable anti-authoritarian stance. Kerber wrote of a joint "the size of a small flashlight" being smoked by the We Smoke Weed team, players getting in fights at Nationals and Mike Gerics being suspended from UPA competition for spitting on another player—all in the context of a movement in the sport that called for referees.

The Ultimate community flamed Kerber to no end, but he was right. Ultimate was changing and the idea of using referees to curb bad behavior was gaining traction among the larger populace of players. The article ended with an update on Gerics: "While serving out his suspension, he has found a new love—Ultimate officiating at local college tournaments in North Carolina."

Gerics, in fact, had first been made aware of referees one year earlier as a player in a 1997 NUA tournament. The NUA took out the part of Ultimate where players make the calls and handed over the responsibility to a six-person referee crew. "The NUA was an attempt to push Ultimate towards an elite-level league with money. The idea of refs was just a natural step for a group that seemed to sometimes stretch the rules," claimed Raleigh resident Brian Dobyms in 2004. The NUA never took off nationally, but did indirectly inspire another endeavor—the Callahan Rules.

"I knew nothing about the UPA observer program," explained Charles Kerr, then the coach of the North Carolina State open team Jinx. "But the NUA had a warm-up game going on at the 1997 Mid-Atlantic College Regionals. The game was on a field next to ours and it could not have been more clear that something had to be done to speed up the college game." Kerr hated and dismissed the NUA's use of referees to make foul calls, but he was keen on

making the sport “spectator-friendly” by ending game-delaying arguments. With his background as a collegiate promoter, he began to write a new set of rules for the college game. Having an observer make decisions on player-called fouls became an integral part of the rules and the overall goal of making Ultimate s p e c t a t o r - f r i e n d l y.

Meanwhile, co-captain of his college team at the University of Georgia, a wiry Will Deaver decided to look into new rules for his upcoming college tournament, the November 1997 Athens’ Classic City Classic (CCC). “That summer I had watched the horrific Worlds’ final where the teams argued the entire time, call after call,” Deaver recalled. “I had also watched several college finals that went on far too long. I was reading about these problems on rec.sport.disc (RSD) and it started getting to me. “I began to think of what rules tweaks we could do for the CCC. I sent an e-mail to the captains of teams coming to the tournament, asking them for input on ideas for experimenting with the rules—especially in regard to time limits. Charles Kerr e-mailed me back.” Kerr and Deaver became fast friends and spent two months going over a smorgasbord of ideas for effective rules. Neither had much, if any, knowledge of past UPA experiments with observers. To them, they were charting a new course.

Time limits between pulls, time limits for arguments, penalties for infractions, limited game lengths and enforcement of the rules by an active, on-field observer—all of which became part of the rules Kerr and Deaver wrote—have all been used off and on, unsuccessfully, for a decade or longer on the club circuit. But players proved more open to change in the College Division. “We ended up calling them the Callahan Rules,” said Kerr, who had founded the Callahan Award just the year prior. “It was sort of by default. I guess I was extending the Callahan name. Henry Callahan himself was very forward thinking.” “People started to associate Callahan with ‘new and improved,’” said Deaver. One important aspect of “new and improved” to be avoided was the presumption that the Callahan Rules were pro-referee. “Players make all foul calls,” wrote Deaver on RSD in 1997 in response to a withering protest from Austin, Texas, player Don Barry. “Observers interject their objective opinion when there are contested fouls that would normally result in the inevitable argument and the unsatisfying do-over.” “I think there was a concern that if college Ultimate didn’t change to speed up play, the future was likely to be NUA-style referees, and neither Will nor I wanted that in any way,” said Kerr. A Callahan observer’s primary objective was to keep the game moving.

Charles Kerr was also on to something else new to the college game: sponsorship. With the Internet boom economy touching down in 1997, Kerr discovered a telecommunications company, Nortel Networks, that was eager to reach tech-savvy college students. Kerr got \$25,000 from Nortel and used it to sponsor four tournaments: the Classic City Classic, Stanford Invite, College Easterns and the Yale Cup in New Haven, Connecticut. The tournaments got publicity, free posters, discs and, most noticeably, the new Callahan Rules. The Nortel Series lasted only one year but had a tremendous effect on the players. The College Division became more defined and the tournaments appreciated the attention. Ultimate started to feel like a real nationwide sport with a real season. The first Nortel tournament was the Classic City Classic where Kerr and Deaver’s Callahan Rules were first tested out.

All games were played to 15. When a team pulled, players had to be behind the end zone line or it was a violation and after two violations by the team pulling, the receiving team got the disc at mid-field. Pulls that landed in the end zone had to be played from where they landed and not brought up to the line. Pulls that landed out were a “brick” and brought in 20 yards to the middle of the field. A defensive team could catch the disc in the end zone for a goal. Halftimes were 10 minutes, on the clock. Timeouts were 90 seconds. The offense had 80 seconds after a score to signal they were ready to receive the disc, and the pulling team had 90 seconds. A turnover inbounds had to be put in play within 10 seconds; 20 seconds if it was out-of-bounds. All of these rules were enforced, which was the most remarkable part of the Callahan Rules in regard to the long history of self-regulated Ultimate.

The CCC was an innovative success. Not everyone was down for the cause, but according to Deaver, “most people were totally psyched to play the new rules.” After the CCC, the Callahan Rules traveled across the country with the Nortel Series. Kerr and Deaver printed guidebooks for observers and had lime-green observer shirts made. The Callahan package came with a referee whistle (rarely used), scorecards, a stopwatch and a batch of Nortel discs and posters. Kerr and Deaver were serious about doing it right. By the fall of 1998, the strong popularity of the Callahan Rules in the college ranks was evident. Kerr and Deaver approached a revitalized UPA board and Kate Bergeron, then the national college director, with a proposal to use the rules for the 1999 College Nationals. But there was a problem—the UPA didn’t feel comfortable using a different set of rules for one of its divisions. The Callahan Rules needed to go through UPA approval first.

The UPA’s standing rules committee (SRC), run by board members Paul Socolow, Troy Frever and Chris Van Holmes, set about touching up the rules. The SRC-version of the Callahan Rules came to be called the “Experimental rules,” or “X-Rules,” and it was this work that set the stage for developing the 10th Edition rules that

are currently in place. The X-Rules were essentially the Callahan Rules with a few minor changes. The popular “defensive goal” (later dubbed a Callahan Goal due to its association with the Callahan Rules) was removed—but returned the following year. Some penalties for infractions were changed or removed, but the use of observers on the field of play was left in—a major breakthrough in the history of observers.

There was one change by the SRC that was even more important. In the Callahan Rules, an unresolved, disputed foul call would automatically resolve in favor of the defense. The SRC thought this could encourage cheating. So the X- Rules allowed two choices in the instance of an unresolved call: 1) the players involved in a dispute could decide themselves to re-do the play or 2) the observer, also, could rule to re-do the play.

It was this simple change that solved 15 years’ worth of observer problems and put an end to countless time delays from arguments, fights and bad calls. The responsibility for fair play was kept with the players who still made all calls while observers were not forced to make black-and-white rulings as they had in the past. Once that and a few other rule variations were melded onto the Callahan Rules’ effective use of on-field observing and time-keeping, it was clear that a bloodless revolution had taken place. Ultimate had found a way to maintain and preserve its unique honor code while making the sport better for players and spectators alike. A vote was put out to the top 50 college open teams (at the time, the women’s game was not logistically ready to implement the new rules) two months before Nationals on accepting the X-Rules. Forty of the 50 teams voted to use them for the 1999 Nationals and a new course for Ultimate was permanently set.

“The level of sportsmanship in college Ultimate in the last five years has been phenomenal,” Kerr proclaimed in 2004. “The observer system does exactly what most folks in Ultimate want: It keeps control of the game in the hands of the athletes themselves,” cited frequent Nationals’ observer Mike Gerics. “I see Ultimate as a ‘grand experiment’—can you play a sport at the highest level where the onus of fair play is on the players themselves? My optimistic view of human nature is yes you can, but there are two things that make it possible,” said SRC member Troy Frever in 2004. “In the long term, the first thing is pressure where players get shunned and stop playing. The short term is the observer system. If done well, the observer system can lend support and succeed.”

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As the number of players grows, non-player groups such as coaches, parents, observers, media, administrators and organizers—even spectators and sponsors—will begin to exert more influence on the sport. The domain once occupied solely by the players will have to be shared with non-players.

Fifteen years from now we’ll probably see observers at most college and elite club games, as well as at high school state championships. The player-coach role will begin to fade, as most high school, college and some club teams will have non-playing coaches. Administrators and organizers, both from inside (UPA, leagues) and outside of the sport (schools, recreation departments) will start to structure games and events based on concerns external to the game, such as liability, spectators and sponsors. Parents will be lining the sidelines (literally and figuratively), providing much needed financial, logistical and moral support for their kids, teams and leagues. Media coverage and sponsors may increasingly provide exposure and financial support for players, teams and organizations. For a while, most of these “non-player” groups will most likely be made up of players or ex-players. It’ll be Jim Parinella watching his kids play; Melissa Proctor observing a few games on the weekends; and various alumni coaching at their alma maters.

As these non-playing roles evolve and become an established part of the sport’s culture, they will develop their own priorities and agendas, some of which may create conflicts. While many parents are attracted to the self-officiated aspect of the sport, some administrators and parents, as well as players, will want officials to be involved in games. The UPA’s observer system will establish a structure that allows the oversight some people want, while still letting the players get the unique experience of self-officiated competition. However, its very existence will add another element to organizing play. The authority of coaches in a player-officiated sport also presents unique challenges. The extent to which coaches’ involvement in on-field play is acceptable is currently being worked through and a standard will be set in conjunction with training and certification. All of these groups will have to work together towards a unified vision for Ultimate.

While the culture surrounding the game may change, we hope Ultimate itself will still maintain its spirit. As Ultimate continues its growth and is forced to incorporate the interests of more players and non-players alike, its leaders and players face opportunities and major challenges. Perhaps the greatest challenge will be to make the choices that take advantage of Ultimate’s growing popularity, while remaining true to the sport’s unique and fundamental character that make spreading it worthwhile.