

ULTIMATE

Reward

USOC, ESPN Give Nod To Ultimate Frisbee

By Michelle Ryan

Think Frisbee and you might think of casually tossing the disc around with friends at a park or on the beach. But there's more to the sport—yes, *sport*—than that. If there's any misconception about ultimate Frisbee, this is it.

"The major misconception is that it is an unstructured recreational game," said Tom Crawford, CEO of USA Ultimate, the sport's national governing body. "But there is always an element at the top for competition. Our athletes are as good as any at the top of their sport. They have to have endurance and speed."

Though founded in 1968 with plenty of membership growth leading up to its current 35,000+ athletes, USA Ultimate is enjoying a lot of "exciting, high-level

activity" at the moment, according to Andy Lee, director of marketing and communications.

Last year, the sport's international federation was granted recognition by the International Olympic Committee, and USA Ultimate secured a multi-year agreement with ESPN to broadcast its college championships and Triple Crown Tour.

"The most recent and most important [fact] is that we became a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee," Lee said. "We were voted into the Olympic family."

While you won't see ultimate Frisbee athletes suit up just yet for the Olympic Games, Crawford said membership is "a very important first step to a long-term goal." That first step marked the end of a two-year process that involved a 150-page application and "rigorous" audit of the organization—including its bylaws, economic viability, stability, board and staff makeup—to ensure its strength as a stable governing body for grass, beach and indoor versions of the sport in the United States.

Alongside achieving that milestone, USA Ultimate was invited to participate in the inaugural World Beach Games organized by SportAccord and the Association of National Olympic Committees to be held in 2016.

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Photos courtesy of USA Ultimate



The Draw Of The Sport

In sports terms, ultimate Frisbee combines the nonstop action and athletic endurance of soccer with the passing skills of football. Played on a field similar to a football gridiron, the object is to score by catching a pass in the opponent's end zone.

Unlike most sports, ultimate employs no referees, but instead places that responsibility on the players themselves. This aspect of self-officiating, called the Spirit of the Game, is practiced at all levels of competition from local leagues to international contests. USA Ultimate is composed of youth, college, masters, club and beach divisions, as well as national teams. The sport is played in more than 80 countries by an estimated 7 million men and women, girls and boys of all ages.

While the aspect of self-officiating draws kids into the sport, according to Crawford, it has the added benefits of teaching responsibility, character, negotiating skills, leadership qualities, good sportsmanship and conflict resolution.

The Ultimate In Awareness

Within ultimate Frisbee circles, the national and international recognition the sport is getting is exciting, but perhaps it's nothing like the blessing of ESPN to make awareness of it go mainstream.

"Ultimate is a new sport to ESPN as of last year," Lee said. Already, clips from competitions are making the popular "SportsCenter Top 10 Plays" segment.

Along with USA Ultimate's collegiate championships, the all-sports channel is broadcasting the organization's Triple Crown Tour, the highest level competition for ultimate players around the world.

The tour is composed of the U.S. Open, a major international tournament featuring the best national and international teams; the "regular season" champion determined by the final rankings competing in tournaments throughout the summer; and the national championship.

Such a competition structure is not new to the sporting world, but the fact that it puts men and women on the field at the same time is. (The sport has a mixed division, in addition to men's and women's.)

Ultiworld, the news site dedicated to all things ultimate, suggests that gender equity could eventually help propel the sport onto the Olympic stage.

Planning The Big Events

As the sport has grown and become more structured with events like the Triple Crown Tour, working with sports commissions and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) has become a necessity.

Now that ultimate has drawn the interest of ESPN, hosting a tournament is a boon for cities who get the bonus of non-tournament coverage of local attractions and eateries.

Aside from the travel and tourism plugs host cities get broadcast to a national audience, they also get the economic impact of an influx of large groups of athletes and their families. Team rosters alone could include up to 28 athletes, with parents, family members and other guests.

Crawford also said international athletes and guests participating in tournaments may arrive as much as a week before to experience local sites.

Cities have a lot of economic impact and national exposure to gain by hosting an ultimate tournament, but Crawford admits choosing a site can be tricky. Ultimate requires a lot of football-sized fields, but many venues tend to be soccer fields and polo grounds because of how well they are maintained. Stadiums are preferred for major events because they better accommodate broadcast equipment and crews.

Once a host city is selected, Crawford said the goal is to create a legacy of sorts. That might mean teaming up with a local organization, bringing in young kids to teach them how to play the game or combining field trips with events so



Planning Tips

- Find a strong and passionate volunteer base to support the event.
- Engage a CVB or sports commission and local ultimate club to serve as co-local organizing committees.
- Work closely with local media on event promotion.
- Partner with local businesses to help keep costs of participation low (lodging, food, transportation, entertainment).
- Organize events within one hour of a major transportation hub at a quality field complex.
- Research weather patterns to ensure optimal conditions.
- Network with local communities at conferences like S.P.O.R.T.S.
- Create a festive environment with local businesses and vendors on site. ■

they can see the action up close. "That really appeals to cities," he said.

The Ultimate Future

Because of that lasting relationship, it's no surprise that youth is the fastest-growing division of ultimate right now. "We're going through a strong growth cycle," Crawford said. "It's exciting to be part of."

Just in the last few years, ultimate has experienced 30 percent growth with likely more to come, considering the impact of U.S. Olympic Committee membership, international participation and the ESPN partnership. With even more cities hosting events, the growth of beach events and indoor ultimate, the number of USA Ultimate's events could easily double. ■