

## Why the Stork and His Friends Play Ultimate



Dan "the Stork"  
Roddick playing  
ultimate frisbee

JUNE SIMMS: I'm June Simms.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise with EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English. Today, we talk about a game that many people love, but few have heard of. It is the sport of ultimate Frisbee.

(MUSIC)

JUNE SIMMS: Ultimate Frisbee combines many of the skills and strategic thinking of basketball, American football, and soccer. But players do not move a ball down the field. Instead, they throw and catch a Frisbee -- that disc-shaped object that floats through the air.

Maybe there is something special about playing with a Frisbee. Although the game is similar to other sports, ultimate Frisbee -- usually just called ultimate -- has an unusual culture. For one thing, players are not firm about enforcing rules. Take DC Pickup. This group plays on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Every workday, anybody who wants to play meets on the Mall near the carousel.

An ultimate field is a little longer and a little narrower than a soccer field. But DC Pickup does not have that much space. So instead, one of the players uses cones to mark a field about half the size.

In a few minutes, more people start arriving. A lot of them are on bicycles. One woman brings her dog and ties her along the sidelines.

(SOUND: Barking dog)

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: The aim of the game is to get a teammate to catch the Frisbee in the other team's goal area. Each goal is one point. The first team to get twenty-one points wins. Or fifteen points. Or whatever number of points the teams agree to. DC Pickup does not even play to a set number. The players stop when it is time to go back to work.

The official number of players for an ultimate game is fourteen. Sometimes DC Pickup plays with fewer. And if more people come, they just start a new game.

PLAYER: "Hey everybody, we're up to seven on seven ..."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Everyone brings a dark shirt and a light shirt, so they can change teams if they need to. Shana Wallace has been playing ultimate since nineteen eighty-two. She says the lack of equipment makes ultimate one of the easiest sports to organize.

SHANA WALLACE: "All you need is a pair of cleats, a Frisbee, and some cones. You don't even need the cones."

JUNE SIMMS: There is one other thing you do not need: referees. Ultimate is self-officiated. That means players make all the calls. And if the players disagree, they must settle the problem themselves.

SHANA WALLACE: "If one person says foul, the other person says contest. If it's contested, it goes back to the thrower."

JUNE SIMMS: In fact, playing fair -- more than playing to win -- is really the only rule in ultimate that cannot be changed. Players call the trust between players to do what is right, the "Spirit of the Game."

SHANA WALLACE: "I mean, one of the cool things about ultimate is that that is in the rules, the Spirit of the Game, and the ability to self-officiate. It's written into the rules. And if you can't abide by that, you really shouldn't be playing the sport."

(MUSIC)



**Jim Dougherty**

Shana Wallace throwing the disc to DC Pickup teammates in an ultimate Frisbee game on the National Mall.

**CHRISTOPHER CRUISE:** Dan Roddick was one of the first ultimate players, back in the nineteen seventies. He was so tall, the other players called him "the Stork." He says that ultimate, like other disc sports,

has always been kind of unusual. What does that mean? First, a lot of ultimate teams have unusual names. Examples include Karmakazee or Gravity Tractor. Dan "The Stork" Roddick says many teams also wear unusual costumes.

**THE STORK:** "Berkeley Flying Circus was one of the greatest. And they played in full clown gear. Just, I mean, the rubber noses, the fright wigs, everything."

**CHRISTOPHER CRUISE:** "The Stork" says one reason the sport of ultimate is unusual might be because of the Frisbee itself. He says the first Frisbee, called "the Pluto Platter," had a message written on the back.

**THE STORK:** "The old Pluto Platter, the first disc that came out in the late 50s, it said 'Play Catch, Invent Games.'"

**CHRISTOPHER CRUISE:** The disc even looked like something out of people's imaginations.

**THE STORK:** "It was like a little spaceship. It had little windows 'round the top, and then the planets were engraved on the outer edge of the disc."

**JUNE SIMMS:** Because Frisbees urged people to create games, "The Stork" says lots of children invented Frisbee sports. One of those children was Joel Silver. As a boy, he played a game that he called ultimate Frisbee. When Joel was sixteen-years-old, he suggested that his school start an ultimate Frisbee team. He and his friends wrote down the rules and taught other kids to play.

In nineteen seventy, Joel's high school played the first ultimate game against another high school. Two years later, two college teams played against each other for the first time in a game of ultimate. The colleges were Princeton University and Rutgers University.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Dan "the Stork" Roddick was a player for the Rutgers team. He was twenty-five-years old and a graduate student in sociology. His team had been playing together for only two months. But other students had heard about the game.

Reporters also heard about it. So when "The Stork" looked up from the field, he saw a thousand people watching.

THE STORK: "They were super into it. I mean, they kind of treated it like football. They 'whoooooaaa' on every time there was a throw-off, and that noise drew even more crowd."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: The first college ultimate game was exciting because the sport was new. And it repeated history. Rutgers and Princeton played the first college football game on exactly the same day more than a century earlier. And in eighteen sixty-nine, as in nineteen seventy-two, Rutgers won.

THE STORK: "There were lots of really, really weird things that went down that day, and we were just reeling at the end of that. We thought, 'Oh, my gosh, this is, it's going to be Monday Night Ultimate on major stations by the end of the month,' you know. It was wild."

JUNE SIMMS: Ultimate never became as popular as Monday Night Football in the United States. Instead, it mostly remains what the Stork calls "alternative." In other words, ultimate does not try to be like other sports. And it welcomes a lot of different kinds of players. In that way, ultimate is a product of the culture of the nineteen sixties, when it was invented.

At that time, many Americans were protesting the country's involvement in the war in Vietnam. They wanted Americans to work together peacefully. They also wanted to have fun.

JUNE SIMMS: So ultimate became a friendly sport without any officials telling players what to do. But that does not mean the players are not serious competitors. Here is "The Stork," talking about one team in California.

THE STORK: "You see these guys come out and you think, 'Oh wow, this is going to be just completely light-hearted.' And the fact of the matter is that they were fantastic athletes. And they were playing with as much dedication and commitment to winning that game as you would have seen in an NCAA football game."

JUNE SIMMS: Shana Wallace, one of the people playing on the National Mall, agrees.

SHANA WALLACE: "You're sprinting and then jogging, and then sprinting and then jogging. You burn a lot of calories, I know that."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Ultimate players run several kilometers in a single game. And they can play three games back to back in a competition. That easily adds up to twenty or twenty-five kilometers. But Shana, at least, thinks running to catch a disc almost does not seem like exercise at all.

SHANA WALLACE: "I used to run miles and miles a day, and I didn't look forward to it. And this I look forward to every day, and it's, it's great."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: The game of ultimate may not be as popular as American football. But "The Stork" says ultimate teams can now be found in many high schools and almost all colleges in the United States. And the game is played around the world.

THE STORK: "Scandinavian teams are very strong. The Swedish team has won many world championships. The Japanese program is very strong. Australia is strong. Almost all of the European countries have strong programs that participate in world championships."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Ultimate is also an event at the twenty thirteen World Games in Cali, Colombia. But as the sport becomes more competitive, it can be harder for people to remember the Spirit of the Game.

THE STORK: "There have been people who've played and have been jerks. And it's required observers to come in and essentially take over the game and that's a disappointment to everybody."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: But bringing in observers is the exception. Most players seem to trust each other. And players say that trust, and the culture that it creates, turns ultimate into more than just a sport.

THE STORK: "Someone said that ultimate doesn't build character, it reveals it."

SHANA WALLACE: "It's just a lot of fun, it's really good exercise, and the Spirit of the Game aspect of it teaches good character traits at the same time, and so it's just a win-win."

(MUSIC)

JUNE SIMMS: This program was written and produced by Kelly Nuxoll. I'm June Simms.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise. Have you ever played ultimate Frisbee? If so, we would like to hear from you. Please share your comments on our website: [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com). You also can find us on Twitter and YouTube at VOA Learning English. Join us again next week for more EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English.

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Contributing: David Branick, who plays and organizes ultimate games in Washington, provided research assistance.