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## Developing Flying Disc sports – the spirit and the beast

### Abstract

This paper addresses influences from other sports into Flying Disc sports and aims to highlight an opportunity and a risk. It gives two scenarios for development which builds on such influences. The scenarios are:

- *Development for Clarity*, aimed at a better game for the players, which also opens up opportunities for sponsors that look for their own niche.
- *Commercial Outreach*, aimed at adapting to media requirements and to make ourselves commercially more interesting

This paper also aims to identify the essence (here called the Spirit of Flying Disc) of our family of sports. I summarize the three connected main building-blocks of the Spirit of Flying Disc under following headings.

1. *Counter-culture*  
The urge to be part of a non-establishment platform for expression.
2. *Focus*  
The rules of the game focus on what constitutes a positive contribution to the game, not on the limitations on what is allowed. The Spirit of the Game is a vital part of this.
3. *Fascination*  
The flight of a disc is a beautiful thing, with strong connotations of the first two building-blocks. Generally, flying disc players love it.

This paper is a warning for the second scenario, based on an analysis of the two scenarios in the light of the Spirit of Flying Disc. The reason is that it risks a devaluation of what flying disc players value, without achieving commercial competitiveness for the sport. I conclude that utilizing influences from other sports while refusing to compromise our core values creates a better game for flying disc athletes *and* a game that is interesting for sponsors to be visible in. Adapting too attract media attention is not the answer for Flying Disc sports.

## Two scenarios for the development of Flying Disc Sports

I believe that all sports – big or small, team or individual, established or struggling – have something that is truly their own. Two aims that often are repeated in any small sport, including flying disc, are to create growth and to attract sponsors. The goal, implicit or explicit, is to be ready to compete in the marketplace and ultimately maybe earn to a spot at the Olympics. What is the best way to achieve this? The established and Olympic sports have a head start. No sport is going to successfully compete with other sports, or other activities and platforms for that matter, by being a copycat. On the contrary; the task at hand for an ambitious leadership of a sport must be to improve their sport by utilizing what is truly their own. The head start of the established and Olympic sports should be used for influences on what improvements their own sport should make.

The need for this type of improvement is easily agreed on by most people active in flying disc. The differences of opinion are rather to be found in what the goal of such an improvement should be. In two development scenarios that answer this question, I see the opportunity for improvement for the players (a scenario that I call “*Development for Clarity*”) and the risk of a development aimed at meeting the marketplace (a scenario I call “*Commercial Outreach*”). I have seen established, larger sports from the inside – its lack of sportsmanship or loyalty to the game combined with its drive for commercial success and personal power – and I am not impressed. In fact, I feel compelled to issue a warning. It is a very short step between these two scenarios that really represent two different paradigms.

### Development for Clarity

The established sports have a better understanding of media requirements, how to make events more interesting for spectators, how to make the sport commercially more interesting and so on. This understanding can be used to create a better sport for flying disc athletes. In this scenario, flying disc sports actively gather influences from other, more established sports and utilize these inputs to become more accessible, conceptually clearer and so on. A typical example is introducing player hand signals in ultimate in order for players and spectators to understand more quickly what is going on on the pitch.

### Commercial Outreach

The understanding in established sports of media and commercial requirements has a down side. The aims of the development in this scenario are to adapt to media requirements, to make ourselves commercially more interesting and so on. A typical example is introducing referees in ultimate in order to meet expectations of the market place.

There is the risk that these influences from mainstream sports are adopted to the extent of us becoming one. I use the concept of mainstream to highlight the fact that the sports we use for influences do not have access to what is truly flying disc. In doing this, I am making the assumption that flying disc sports have something that is uniquely ours. I elaborate on this in depth below under the heading *the Spirit of Flying Disc*. I also assume (and argue) that this spirit separates us from many of the sports to which we look for influences. The risk in the *Commercial Outreach* scenario is that we look to them for a template to fill in.

## The Spirit of Flying Disc

In order to position Flying Disc in these two scenarios, we need to pin-point the attitude to life and sports of players and leaders of flying disc sports. I believe that this attitude has three building blocks: *Counter-culture*, *Focus* and *Fascination*.

### Building-block no 1: Counter-culture

The first ingredient in the Spirit of Flying Disc is the will to express oneself in an alternative setting, of being part of a counter-culture minority. Frisbee started in the significant year 1968 – a year when most of the Western hemisphere was looking for anti-establishment alternatives. Ultimate and got off the ground in this atmosphere. Frisbee was a part of the counter-culture which attracted non-traditional athletes. Frisbee players were shying away from traditional recreation, questioning authority and seeking alternative expression. Now, in the beginning of the new millennium, pretty much everyone wants to express themselves in their own way, make their own decisions on how to live. Counter-culture struggles in the face of a society of multiple choices; society no longer requires uniform expression and habits, so there is no authoritarian mainstream to counter. In effect being main-stream, counter-culture loses its effect. Flying disc thus loses one of the key ingredients that attracted the early players.

Does this mean that flying disc loses its appeal? It probably would, if flying disc sports were to retain their character. Nowadays, flying disc balances the original mentality with modern, more professional attitudes towards sport. Examples are: prize money in disc golf, world championships in all disciplines, semi-professional or even professional practice regimes, sponsoring, ultimate being a medal sport at the World Games and companies focused on flying disc products or apparel. Flying disc is increasingly showing more and more of the characteristics of traditional sports. However, there is a definite something about flying disc athletes that still sets our sport apart. Spirit awards still abound, referees are still not used and there is a definite pride in being a Frisbee player specifically. And we are still masters of our own maverick sport. Arguably, it is still the best fun there is to be had.

### Building-block no 2: Focus

#### The game first, then the win

The second ingredient is the focus of the rules, the organisation of competitions and the players themselves. In flying disc sports, the rules primarily do not give the demarcations for what is allowed, but are focused on identifying core of the competition. Ultimate, being a team sport, is the most complicated flying disc sport in which to use such rules. I will discuss the other flying disc disciplines later on. In theory, ultimate has zero tolerance for the “means to an end” actions – pulling jerseys, taking the good foul. This is made possible by the fact that all players recognise the actions of other players testing the limits of the rules as not being part of the core of the game, and that all players have the mandate to call the foul and stop the game. It also fosters a spirit of all players taking responsibility for their own decisions and actions. In addition, it focuses the sport to the key idea of the continuing game, not to the result of the match.

An explaining note to the issue of core vs. demarcations issue. In the development of different projects, it is not unusual to set the structure and demarcations of the work. There is an inherent risk in this when it comes to the creativity of the people involved; the risk is that one focuses on keeping inside of the demarcations, not at reaching the goal. There is the risk that the group creates a box to think in. If we a little more often would have reasoned that we

would identify the core of the project, this core supplies a compass for future decisions and does not need to worry about hitting boundaries while working.

It is of course not this simple. You do not so explicitly identify the core or set the demarcations of a project. But there is an important difference in your mind-set of the people involved if the work takes the core or the demarcations as the starting-point. Transferred into sports, this line of argument can be put to use to shed some light on the spirit of the game. Giving the demarcations of a sport is stating that “You may not ...” (A team handball referee will surely give you a suspension if you tackle with straight arms). Giving the core of the game is the approach that the rules describe how the game is played and that everything that is not in the rules is illegal.

### Limits and demarcations

Demarcations for what is allowed can never be completely objective, no matter how thoroughly developed and clearly written, how well the referee and the players do their job. Inherent in set limits, there will always be the urge to test the limits, simply because there is the win to be had. “If I cross the limit, it is up to the referee to award the penalty.” If we did this in ultimate; “If I cross the limit, it is up to my opponent to call the foul.” This is the origins of the good foul, pulling on jerseys and trying to get opponents off mental balance. These actions and attitudes are supported by referees not always seeing the incident or not finding the cause (infraction) worth the effect (penalty or stopping the game).

If we put up a clear limit for when we cross into illegal behaviour, this limit also has the meaning that anything within it is legal. Legal behaviour is then identical to acceptable behaviour. Whatever the referee does not see or penalise is allowed. Attitudes that out of the sporting arena seldom are accepted become business as usual, or even welcome. “In that situation, stopping their break was worth a yellow card.” This fosters a spirit of not having to take responsibility for one’s decisions and actions. I can safely hand over to someone else the assessment of whether I am doing the right thing, or behaving in an acceptable manner.

### The core

If preconditions of other team sports is that the players will try to take advantage of the organisation (referees and rules), then ultimate is organised on the precondition that the players are willing to focus on the positive contribution they can make to the match. In ultimate, there is therefore a distinctively different view of what is legal and what is illegal. Instead of defining what is illegal, the ultimate rules define what constitutes a positive contribution of the game: passing, running, marking, scoring and so on. Anything that is not in the rules is illegal, which gives ultimate the opportunity to have zero tolerance against anything that is not a positive contribution of the game.

An important key to this opportunity is that every player makes the assessment of the actions that go on around her. Suddenly, there is no referee to trick, because the very player you act against is in fact a referee for this situation. This referee (your opponent) will instantly detect that you are out of line, and will very likely think it worthwhile to call the violation. (The lack of a dedicated referee is made possible by the lack of punishment. This is also where the weakness can be found; there are no sanctions to use against those who decide to focus on the win over the game.)

### The Spirit of the Game

In Ultimate, the focus on the core of the game is manifested in the Spirit of the game. This is the dedication to flat out commitment to the game, to playing to the utmost of your abilities, whilst still acting with integrity and respect. In a small sport where rules are focused on the core of the game, games and competitions are with your opponents rather than against them, because they are your friends. In a sport where everyone is committed to spirit, it is not possible to demonize your opponents, and your own limitations become your main opponent.

### Allround and disc golf

The rules and players of all flying disc sports are dedicated to positive contributions of the competition, to the core of the game. Like snowboard or ballet, playing allround frisbee allows players to aim for exerting absolute control over their bodies, for our players in terms of what their bodies can do with a disc. My focus is on what I can do with my body, not on what my opponents might be doing with theirs. In disc golf, players are aiming for control. Every day, every throw, in any weather, on any course, I know exactly where I want the disc to land – in the basket. My aim is making my body perform with absolute precision. Again, we recognise the focus on my own performance.

There are other sports where the rules focus on the positive contribution to the game: ten-pin bowling, golf and tennis, just to mention a few. To be perfectly honest, I do not see the reason why there needs to be referees in tennis. Tennis already has the character of gentleman's sport, likely because of its roots in the social upper-class. Had it had its roots in a similar counter-culture attitude, there could easily have developed a spirit of tennis similar to the spirit of flying disc – which might even have made referees redundant.

### **Building-block no 3: Fascination**

Flying disc sports also have the flying disc in common. Could not the disc be that elusive something that sets flying disc sports apart from other sports? It can but not on its own. It is my personal belief that the disc in itself does not bring the flying disc community together more than the ball brings soccer and basketball together. However, the ball does not have the connotations that the disc has. The hovering and exact precision of the flight of a flying disc is a beautiful and characteristic thing, and maybe the one thing that got most of us playing in the first place. But the key, I think, is the fact that the disc embodies the two other building-blocks – the will to individual expression and the focus of the game, including the Spirit of the Game. It is in connection with flying disc sports that we learned about spirit, about our alternative approach to sports and to the way we win and lose. There is also all the reason to believe that a Vinnova golf disc driver has the same connotations for a golfer as the discraft Ultrastar has to an ultimate player, even though they might use different terminology. With a disc, in any of its different versions, in your hand, you are entitled and expected by yourself and others to a mind-set that is unique to flying disc sports.

### **Analysis**

I have described the three building-blocks of the essence of our sports as the Spirit of Flying Disc under the headings of *Counter-culture*, *Focus* and *Fascination*. None of these three building-blocks are at risk in the *Development for Clarity* scenario. We would be adopting the items from other sports that highlight the Spirit of Flying Disc. In the *Commercial Outreach* scenario, the fascination of the flight of a disc is not at risk. However, the counter-culture and rules focus features are definitely at risk in the Commercial Outreach scenario. You cannot be committed to counter-culture in a template from the established culture. When the market

place enters the proceedings, our principle of rules which give “core before demarcations” risks getting out of hand.

### Flying disc and the establishment

Will there one day be an Olympic gold medal for tossing a Frisbee? Should we ever get to the point where that is a real prospect, I would personally worry about whether we will survive our own success. The Olympics (and the World Games for that matter) require a very real level of professionalism from everyone involved; management, administrative officials and players. It requires Flying Disc Federations of stability and size. It requires attention to media and their requirements on our sports. It requires an aptitude for politics and the media. It requires influence and money.

This must all be balanced with the Spirit of Flying Disc, with the players’ aim of finding their own alternate expression and their questioning of authority. Our origins in the counter-culture are still a key part of our development. It is my belief that in the long run, these origins and these approaches to life are not compatible with the adjustments needed in our sports for us to be a part of the family of “traditional” sports. Teams like the *Maine-iacs* and *New York, New York* have tried to redefine Spirit as a commitment to winning the game. Arguably, such efforts have led to new levels of determination and athletic excellence, but also to the beginning of acceptance of aggressive mindsets.

This aggressiveness clearly point to the one inherent weakness in using the Spirit of Flying Disc as the stepping-stone for development. The Spirit of the Game is one of our best showcases but its lack of punishment opens up opportunities for unacceptable behaviour in the very people that are the ambassadors of spirit. The way forward is to make games and rules transparent enough so that everyone can understand what is going on, for example through hand signals in ultimate, and by using peer pressure on the players, for example through defining the responsibility of the team captains and holding them to it. Observers and referees do not belong in the atmosphere of rules which give the core of the game, they belong in games with rules that give demarcations of what is legal.

### And the alternative?

The Commercial Outreach scenario builds on recognition of our sports based on the merits it has from the point of view of traditional sports. I believe that this will cost more than we can hope to achieve by it. Media coverage might make people aware of our sport, but it is unlikely to make them start playing it. Flying disc traditionally spreads by word of mouth. The maverick character of the sport and the flight of the disc are still likely to be the main reasons why people start playing flying disc sports. In order to fully appreciate the Spirit of Flying Disc, you need to experience it first hand. But when throwing a Frisbee (or whichever brand you prefer), and when having friends explain to you what it all is about, you are easily hooked. Furthermore, building on Spirit of Flying Disc requires education of new players, which takes time and resources. Growth of flying disc sports will be slower than if it was built on successfully emulating the more established sports. Such growth would slowly but surely change flying disc sports into a conventional group of sports, still much smaller than the sports we would be competing with for players, leaders and sponsors.

Some suggestions for how the Spirit of Flying Disc could be used:

- The key to recruitment is to make existing players want more people start playing. Make players enjoy the game, appreciate the tournaments and competitions.

- Use your website to market your work with Spirit, in language that is accessible to new players.
- Make it easy to start new teams, for example for people that move.
- Make it easy to know how to build golf courses. Temporary courses are fine for starters.
- Develop education programs for other sports in Spirit issues. Support contacts with other sports.

## Conclusion

It is commercially interesting for sponsors to find a niche, not to follow suit. The only other alternative for attracting sponsors is visibility. As a mainstream sport (i.e. a sport without the Spirit of Flying Disc) we are too small to attract attention. Building on our unique blend of approaches to life, we do have something to offer. I argue that my assumptions were right: the Spirit of Flying Disc makes us unique and does separate us from the established sports.

When it comes to competing with other sports for sponsors and partners, our character as a maverick makes us less of a threat to other sports but rather a positive sponsoring alternative that sticks out. Sponsors can be found through offering the only thing that is unique to our sport, and the only thing other sports cannot offer: our spirit. Being a responsible employer and corporation is good for business. Making employees focus on their positive contribution to the work is also good for business. It is possible for us to make good use of this.

The logical conclusion is that the aim of utilizing influences from other sports must be a better game for flying disc athletes; *Development for Clarity*. This development builds on the essence of our family of sports, and refuses to compromise these values. *That* is the game that is interesting for sponsors to be visible in. Adapting to attract media attention is not the answer for Flying Disc sports.