

# The Ultimate Oversight

UMass' men's Ultimate Frisbee team is one of the most successful and competitive to ever grace the school. Why doesn't anybody know?

By Matthew Catalano

On an overcast Saturday afternoon in October, a modest crowd gathered at one of the University of Massachusetts Amherst's many anonymous athletic fields to witness the school's men's Ultimate Frisbee team do what they do best: put on a clinic.

The team, whose name "Zoodisc," hearkens back to UMass' partying glory days, provided the 30 or so onlookers (a significant number of which were comprised of members of Zoodisc's developmental and women's teams) with exactly what they wanted. With every leaping catch, cross-field pass, and diving interception, the audience responded with a level of fervor that belied their number.

The scene was reminiscent of the way spectators might observe a tennis match, except instead of the audience following the game with dutiful turns of the head, they hustled their entire bodies alongside the action on the field, doggedly running up and down the sidelines, following along with the players to ensure every chant and jeer would be heard at maximum volume.

The crowd had plenty of reason to be excited: by the end of the tournament and five-plus hours of nonstop playing, several other highly regarded teams had been thoroughly dismantled by Zoodisc, including the nationally fifth-ranked University of Vermont.

Within its last season alone, Zoodisc made it to national finals, finished second in the country with a 32-5 record, winning Ultiworld.com's prestigious "Men's Coaches of the Year" and "Breakout Player of the Year" awards, with runner-up spots and appearances in the "All American First Team," "All American Second Team," and "Rookie of the Year" awards. Most importantly though, Zoodisc proved itself to be one of the most elite threats in the entirety of the sport.

But for all their exploits and achievement, Zoodisc's triumphant season was barely a footnote for media outside the sport's bubble. The *Daily Collegian* and *Daily Hampshire Gazette* published only one article apiece about the team for the whole season. Both UMass Athletics and administration neither sent nor posted a single email or notice to inform students about the team's success, and UMass Athletics did nothing to acknowledge the team.

Comparatively, the UMass football team, whose 2022-2023 season ended with a record of 1-11, had each game dutifully covered by the *Collegian* (the sole win of the season was written about three times) and had home games heralded with emails reading "IT'S GAME WEEK | WEAR MAROON!"

Of course, Ultimate Frisbee (known as simply “ultimate” to players and fans) does not carry the cultural cache or public interest to garner the same attention as a football team, regardless of how unsuccessful that football team may be. Additionally, UMass recognizes ultimate as a “club sport,” meaning that Zoodisc is treated the same as any other student organization, from the Quidditch Club to the Actuary Club, rather than an official sport sponsored by the school. No scholarships are given, no players are recruited, and they’re only *occasionally* on TV.

“We wish it was a little more mainstream, and that people knew what it was and had a little more respect,” said Luca Harwood, a Zoodisc captain UMass senior. “It is strange to be really successful and not to have that translate into any additional support or acknowledgement from like, club sports as an administration. It’s weird to make it there, and to not feel visible at all.”

And when Harwood says, “make it there,” he means it. For ultimate, the collegiate level is considered by many to be the highest level of play possible in the sport, making Zoodisc one of the best worldwide teams in the game, full stop.

Getting to this level required the perseverance of a world-class team, too: tryouts last four rounds and are notorious for their cutthroat nature, with members of Zoodisc’s (also nationally competitive) developmental team vying for a spot against talented freshman players. Scheduled practices occur three days a week and typically last four hours. Practices are compounded with mandatory gym days and daily “throwing,” as captains call it, or general unscheduled time spent with teammates practicing.

Johnny Depin, the *Collegian’s* head sports editor noted that “Not too many people know that they compete at a high level. I certainly didn’t. And I try to keep an ear to the ground with everything that’s going on with UMass athletics,” Sitting in the halls of UMass’ Campus Center building, Depin motioned towards a nearby bulletin board. “Every RSO, every team, everything has at least one flyer up there. My third year here, I have never seen anything about--like nothing promoting them.”

To make matters worse, Zoodisc is lacking in more than just exposure. Budgetary concerns plague the team, with members paying for most of their expenses out-of-pocket. Isaac Kaplan, also a Zoodisc captain and UMass senior, estimated that each team member ponies up \$1000 to \$2000 dollars per season for expenses like lodging and gas money when the team travels to major tournaments across the country.

Arguing for a greater budget, Harwood noted that Zoodisc’s success, both past and present, has attracted plenty of glory-seeking ultimate players to commit to UMass.

“A lot of those people came here to do this, and it was a draw for them to come to UMass,” said Harwood of Zoodisc. “It does feel like we’re bringing in a lot of people, and we’re directly contributing to the money that UMass is earning from tuitions.”

Besides saving players from having to empty their wallets whenever tournament weekend rolls around, an increased budget for Zoodisc (and more money in ultimate at large) would bring more equity to the sport.

“People know that it costs money, people know that there's zero economic advantage to playing Frisbee,” said Harwood. “I think that if that were less the case, Frisbee could be bigger in more places, gotten more successful in more places, especially like, lower income places, it would be huge.”

Making ultimate more accessible for all was one of the two main strategies that Kaplan, Harwood, and junior captain Caelan McSweeney envisioned to help expand the sport and bring exposure to their team and the game they love. The other strategy involves a long-fought battle to get ultimate into the Olympics, a battle which had recently failed due to the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics eliminating the sport from contention.

“I think to actually grow the sport is gonna take both approaches,” said McSweeney. “Which is obviously easier said than done.”

But there's another, more intangible fact holding back ultimate and Zoodisc from becoming what the players want it to be: its reputation. “I think a secret, kind of annoying part about playing Frisbee is like, ‘oh, it's kind of like a hippie, loser sport,’” admitted McSweeney. “That's the prevailing mindset people have towards it. It can definitely get frustrating at times.”

Harwood believes that if more people could just watch the game in action, attitudes would be different. “The perception around it changes pretty quickly when people actually know what the sport entails, and when they see people who are good at it playing it. And it does become less of like, ‘oh, that's lame as fuck’ and more of like, ‘oh, that's sick.’”

But it was Depin who plainly summed up perhaps the most powerful argument in favor of giving Zoodisc the exposure and coverage they argue is rightly deserved:

“People like reading about winning teams more than they like reading about losing teams.”