

Credit Where Credit Is Due
by Tom Donnelly--May 2009

What started me into writing these articles about the popular sport of Ultimate was a long-time friendship with the man who is probably most responsible for making Versailles, Ohio, one of the capitals of the Frisbee world. Dale Wilker (VHS Class of 1980) was a distance runner under the legendary Clancy Plessinger while a student at VHS. Like most distance runners, Dale was an extremely hard worker dedicated to his sport. The fact that he was not necessarily hugely successful in competition did not deter him from being an excellent team member and, eventually, a well-respected registered official in the sport of track and field.

So just what does all that have to do with Ultimate, a renegade sport long before the X-Games were ever even on the drawing board? Well, in high school Dale hung out with a bunch of other guys who loved sports but were not necessarily drawn to activities with strict rules, over-zealous officials, and domineering coaches. Together, these local young men, who certainly should not be called misfits but rather, free spirits, found their niche in a newly-formed sport that involved the running and jumping they had loved in their other sports (basketball, football, track, etc.) combined with the throwing of a Frisbee. Plus, Ultimate was supposed to be a non-contact sport, and most of these guys were not exactly built like LeBron James.

Anyway, they soon formed the Blue Meanies and began to play games against other Ultimate teams that were beginning to spring up around the area. Dale was just one of the guys. He fit right in. Ever an ambitious group of young men, the Meanies even convinced the powers-that-be of Poultry Days to allow them to stage an Ultimate tournament as part of our town's annual Festival of the Fowl. That first event was sparsely attended (two teams) but the players directly involved found an atmosphere just right for their preferences. All one needs in order to play a game of Ultimate is seven players on each team, a field, and a flying disc. The participants can run around, jump in the air, and fling that Frisbee hither and yon to their hearts' content. Afterwards, there is ample opportunity for camaraderie with teammates and opponents alike. Perfect!

Not long after those humble beginnings, fellow Blue Meanie Jeff Warrick succumbed to leukemia, and a worthy cause was found for their growing tournament. Now, nearly thirty years later, the original group of guys, plus a few more, is still pretty much involved in the annual Jeff Warrick Poultry Days Ultimate Classic. The only problem is that almost none of those founders still live in V-town. In fact, they are scattered all around the country. This writer is hoping to meet up with the remaining Meanies during Poultry Days this year in hopes of obtaining enough information for a story about their lives as Meanies and afterwards. Most of them also happen to be former students of his. Should be fun!

However, because I do not have sufficient information to write that story, the focus must be centered around Dale Wilker, for he is certainly the single biggest reason for the longevity and scope of this event. Since my retirement from teaching seven years ago, I have had both the time and the opportunities to

become involved in just a few of the many worthy causes in our town. The most obvious of these is certainly the Friends of Hole Field. However, there have been several others for which there has been a little publicity, but not much. The main reason that so few names are ever mentioned in these articles is that the movers and shakers nearly always say, "Go ahead and write your stories; just keep my name out of it. I want NO recognition!" or something to that effect. As an example, the guy who is probably most responsible for keeping the Friends of Hole Field going for the past five years is rarely mentioned in print. He will not let me do so. Stubborn man!

Now, Dale Wilker is just about like that guy is. He just does the work--he wants no credit for it. Well, this one time he is going to have to accept it. Dale no longer lives here, so he will have more trouble getting back at me than others might. If it were just that Dale was just responsible for keeping his rag-tag band of Meanies together all these years and somehow contacting top teams from all over the country (THIS Year: THE WORLD), I could probably let him get away with it. But Dale has done oh-so-much more.

Wilker is the somewhat proud owner of Pheasant Ridge Driving Range, located just south of Versailles along SR 185. His property encompasses approximately twenty-eight acres of turf good enough to be found on just about any golf course. Does he get some business there? Sure. Is he making enough money to warrant all the time involved in caring for that large a piece of property? Probably not. So why, Dale? This answer is simple: he uses that land a few times per year for his one true passion--Ultimate Frisbee. His father, Jerry, may do the lion's share of the mowing and maintenance, but the elder Wilker is still local and can make the time if he wants to. Dale lives near Cincinnati and cannot do so. Instead, he maintains close relationships with the top dogs in the Ultimate world. With some help from his family and, of course, his fellow Meanies, he organizes several events per year, most notably the "Warrick" during Poultry Days.

There are fifteen separate Ultimate playing fields staked out on Dale's property. That is a whole lot larger than is needed for any driving range. One would have to hit a 550-yard drive and then make the ball slice around a woods for an additional 300 yards to reach the edge of his grounds from the tee. Highly unlikely even if you are Tiger Woods. The Wilkers mow and treat the entire property so that it is just right for Frisbee. Could more money be made by farming the land? Certainly. But then where would there be enough room for fifty teams to play at the same time? The event already makes extensive use of Heritage Park and the area inside the high school track. Like the popular slogan seen on t-shirts for various athletic teams--"If it is to be, it's up to me." Every year, Dale seriously considers giving up his beloved tournament, but somehow he just cannot seem to do so. We are all the better for that.

As with any major event, the devil is in the details. It is not enough to just get everyone in the same place at the same time. Someone has to dot the i's and cross the t's. Dale is often the guy for that task. For example, this past weekend, he hosted the Division III College National Championship Tournament here in Versailles. Most of these visitors, who literally come from all over the

United States, are just regular college students. No full-ride scholarships involved here. They pay their own way. They cram into their cars and vans and travel hundred and even thousands of miles to play Frisbee in the middle of corn and bean country. They sleep in tents and go to the grocery store for just enough food to get by for a weekend of serious exercise.

In a tradition that is not found at just any Ultimate event, Wilker customarily drives over to Greenville to buy about thirty loaves of cheap bread at Aunt Millie's and supplements these with jars of peanut butter and jelly. Then he just sets the ingredients out on a table near his playing fields and lets the players stop by whenever they want and make a P B & J. To witness the college kids' reactions to such a bounty, one would think Dale were serving filet mignon and lobster. The college kids really appreciate the nice touches they receive here. One poor kid began to complain that his particular playing field was not perfectly level, A couple more knowledgeable players from another team (just happened to be from New York) admonished him ever so quickly. "Just where do you think you are? If you want a flat field, go play soccer. This is Poultry Days country. Eat your peanut butter and be thankful for where you are."

Of course, Poultry Days will involve much more than P B & J. In addition to being regulars in the Music Boosters' concession tent, these hungry folk yearly purchase literally hundreds of chicken dinners and more than just a few cups of "social" from the big tent in the middle of South Center Street. Later on, they can often be found at such local haunts as McBo's, where their exploits on the karaoke machine have become the stuff around which legends are built. These fun-loving athletes may only be in town for two or three days, but their presence is surely felt. Real Ultimate players ALL know about Versailles and its Poultry Days. The second weekend in June is circled on all their calendars.

This year, V-town is going to be even more famous. This year, the world is coming to town! Currently, national teams from several countries are touring the country playing exhibition matches in preparation for the Ultimate World Games, to be played July 19-21 in Kaohsiung, Chinese Taipei. Team USA, Team Canada, Team Great Britain, and Team Taiwan have chosen Versailles, Ohio, as the only location that all four teams will visit at the same time before the World Games. Take that, LA and NY!

Now, these guys (and girls--national teams are co-ed) cannot simply load up their tents into a van and drive along SR 185 to Versailles. Air travel is involved here. Wilker and his buddies needed to go the extra mile to make this one happen. The local Lions and Rotary clubs, as usual, jumped on board to help out financially. Wilker, who rarely solicits financial help but usually pays for everything himself, accepted that assistance and then purchased twelve tents for the national teams' use. (Tents will probably be donated to a worthy cause after Poultry days.) Earlier plans called for the foreign visitors to be housed in hotels around the area. However, once the Ultimate teams from all around America heard of this idea, they immediately protested--vehemently. If these bigtime teams expected to play in THEIR tournament, they were going to sleep in Heritage Park, just as all the others will. The Fellowship of the Frisbee is such a big part of the sport of Ultimate that social contact among ALL participants is

required. "The Spirit of the Game." Of course, those top dogs will get to ride in the annual Saturday morning parade and toss souvenir miniature Frisbees to the crowd. But they will be just like anybody else when they sleep in the park, shower at the school or pool, and gobble chicken. Some things are just sacred, after all.

The four national teams will play practice games against each other inside the high school track all day (except for parade time) on Saturday before heading over to Heritage Park at 5:30 on Saturday evening for their showcase matchups in front of their biggest fans, the other forty-eight teams that make up the various pools entered in the 2009 Jeff Warrick Ultimate Poultry Days Classic. Then on Sunday, the national teams will become part of the regular pools, as the other teams get a chance to test their skills against the very best players in the world.

Of course, the sport of Ultimate, by its very nature, is not something with which the average person is familiar. Poultry Days is the perfect opportunity to learn how it is played. Games will be going on during most daylight hours at both Pheasant Ridge and Heritage Park. Beforehand, potential fans can go to the sport's chief website upa.org. There they will find explanations of the sport's rules and its eccentricities. Dale also gave me a youtube indicator that shows an absolutely incredible athletic feat, regardless of the sport. In this short film clip, Beau Kittredge, a current member of Team USA, leaps completely over the head of an opponent in order to snag a flying disc. Kobi Bryant himself could not have done better. Check it out by going to this website

[http://digg.com/other_sports/Ultimate Beau jumps over a guy Sick display of athleticism](http://digg.com/other_sports/Ultimate_Beau_jumps_over_a_guy_Sick_display_of_athleticism) or just google Beau Kittredge. You will not be disappointed.



