

The ultimate evolution: Laid-back sport joins Sharon's varsity roster

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SHARON — Carl Groppe's experience with ultimate consisted of a few games in gym class before his freshman year at Sharon Academy. Then he got to high school. It didn't take him long to get hooked.

The senior doesn't play other sports; schoolwork, he said, gets in the way. But ultimate is different: a easy-to-learn entrance into athletics with a laid-back feel, a built-in sportsmanship code and a balanced mix of intensity and fun, without the years of training and practice required to compete at some of high school's highest levels.

Ultimate — formerly known as Ultimate Frisbee, the self-officiated game of passing a flying disc on a field with end zones — has been offered at Sharon since 2011 and has grown into its most participated athletic activity, thanks in large part to a limited number of spring sport offerings and a sustainable interest by the student body. For years, ultimate teams across the state competed as a club sport under Vermont Principals Association. In 2017, the VPA decided to sanction the sport as full varsity starting in this spring, becoming the first state in the country to do so.

On Friday, Sharon hosted its first season opener as a varsity team, falling to Lyndon, 9-5.

"I think for a lot of these students, ultimate is the only thing they play," said Blake Fabrikant, Sharon's athletic director. "It's a very different atmosphere. Even though it's varsity and JV, you don't have that traditional stigma behind it. Parents always say, 'I played baseball; I played softball.' Here, none of them played this sport. I think that's refreshing to kids."

The varsity tag has given the sport some legitimacy. But ultimate, Groppe said, still maintains its relaxed feel, a part of the game he hopes remains through its growth.

"I think now that it's sanctioned by the state, there are going to be people who are going to be playing more competitively," Groppe said. "I just really hope that spirit-of-the-game idea doesn't go away just because it's varsity."

Added Sharon senior Annabel Lapp, who also plays girls soccer at the school: "It's interesting. People who play other sports, when they got on the field for the first time, you can tell. ... It's really different, the general feeling of the game. It's much more laid-back. But it definitely gets intense. This year, being varsity has made a big difference in commitment level and competitiveness."

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Friday's weather, cold and wet even for late April, caused both Lyndon and Sharon some problems in the opener. Heavy winds forced both teams to focus on short passes and made for an unpredictable flight path for the flying disc in play. Fisher Kelley had two points — scored when the flying disc is caught in the end zone — for Sharon and Scott Elder added another in the loss.

Ross Gortner coached Sharon ultimate for two previous seasons before taking last season off. The varsity tag, he said, has brought a higher level of commitment from his team. But the sport remains an accessible option for student-athletes looking for an alternative to the intensity of traditional spring sports such as baseball or lacrosse. It's why, he said, it has succeeded so far.

"I've been coming at this year the same way I have in previous years," said Gortner, a Hanover native who played ultimate at Hanover High in 1997-98, in college at Skidmore and Dartmouth and who works at Dartmouth's Thayer School of Engineering. "The only thing I think is different recognizing it externally to the ultimate community for people to say, 'Oh, this is a serious sport. We should come out and watch.'

"It's just the evolution of the game and people taking it seriously, getting athletes who want to play," he added. "It's always been the fringe athletes who want to play. Getting those three-sport athletes to take it seriously brings the level of play up."

Lyndon head coach Dolan Patrick was part of the committee that helped push for ultimate's varsity status, and he said the upgrade was the logical next step in the sport's growth in Vermont over the last decade.

"For us, it's not much different. Lyndon has treated ultimate as a varsity sport for eight years now," Patrick said.

"But I'm excited to see that schools have to dedicate resources to it and make it not pay-to-play and not a club sport. I think that's a really good development.

Ultimate opened its inaugural varsity season with 19 boys teams — including some of the state's larger schools like Burlington, South Burlington, Colchester, Champlain Valley and Middlebury — and seven girls teams, each in their own single division.

Some teams, like Sharon, compete as a coed squad in the boys division; the Phoenix have eight girls and eight boys on the varsity roster and another 20 student-athletes signed up for its junior varsity team.

"I think culturally, it fits in with the people of Vermont," Patrick said. "I wouldn't say (it feels more intense) this year versus last year. But I think it's progressed that way over the past eight years. It's growing in the colleges; we have professional leagues that are stable now. The sport is still growing and becoming more exposed."

Fabrikant, who was only a coach when ultimate was first introduced at Sharon, said it'll be up to coaches and players whether ultimate maintains its appeal to less-experienced athletes.

But Groppe is looking forward to a full ultimate season with the varsity tag, giving his sport the spotlight it's been waiting for.

"Making it varsity just means that I get to play against better people and I really get to test my mettle," he said.

"I don't think varsity is going to be much of a skill difference, but as much as the people who are going to be willing to put in the work."

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