



Teaching Spirit of the Game™

By Elisabeth Bowman

One of the most unusual elements of Ultimate is the concept of Spirit of the Game™ (SOTG™). SOTG™ makes Ultimate unique because it allows for self-officiation rather than the use of referees, as in most other sports. While SOTG™ and self-officiation are often the most challenging aspects of Ultimate, they are often the most rewarding. Indeed, they are the reason that many players choose Ultimate over other team sports.

What is Spirit of the Game™?

While SOTG™ is fundamental to Ultimate, the founders did not see the need to include it in the rules when the game was first formalized back in Maplewood, New Jersey, in 1968. It was only as the sport began spreading across the country that it was formally articulated in the rules.

SOTG™ can be divided into three areas:

1. Mutual respect between players
2. Adherence to the agreed-upon rules
3. Basic joy of playing

Simply put, SOTG™ is how most people played games and sports with their childhood friends. Everyone agreed to certain rules and those who didn't abide by them were teased, heckled or even excluded by the group. Think of it as schoolyard etiquette. SOTG™ permeates every rule in USA Ultimate's *Official Rules of Ultimate 10th Edition*. It encourages and enables competitive play, while respecting the rules of the game and safety of other players. Unlike other sports, individual players are wholly responsible for their behavior on the field. As a non-contact sport, SOTG™ helps keep players safe, especially in a coed situation and league play, where players of all skill levels and sizes come together to compete.

To quote the USA Ultimate website: "Protection of these vital elements serves to eliminate adverse conduct from the Ultimate field. Such actions as taunting of opposing players, dangerous aggression, intentional fouling, or other 'win-at-all-costs' behavior are contrary to the SOTG™ and must be avoided by all players."

Another aspect of SOTG™ is the recognition that one team gives another after a game. Whether it is a team cheer or a game played as a group, this acknowledgement is a confirmation of the respect players have for their opponents and helps to diffuse any tension from the heat of competition. It is especially valuable in a draft system as players will often be playing with the very players they competed against at some point in time.

Challenges of Explaining SOTG™

There are several factors that make explaining SOTG™ to new players challenging. The primary one is the idea of personal responsibility. Players coming from other sports are accustomed to relying on external forces (referees) to ensure that the rules are followed. In addition, many sports encourage "good" fouling and view it as simply part of the game. However, in Ultimate, "...an intentional foul is considered cheating and a gross offense against the spirit of

sportsmanship.” Translation: if an opponent is going to score against your team, intentionally fouling him or her to prevent that score is against the SOTG™, and therefore, the rules.

Gray Areas

Another challenging factor is the gray area. In reading the official rules, so much can be debated depending on an individual’s perspective. Those are situations in which discussion and, sometimes, heated debates occur. As frustrating as that can be during a game, it is far better and the outcome is at least as accurate as a game relying on referees, who can only view from one perspective and may or may not be in the right place. It is important (especially as tempers heat up) to initiate these discussions with SOTG™ in mind.

New Players to Ultimate or Your League

In a setting with diverse player skills, it is incumbent upon the more experienced player to make the right call. To quote USA Ultimate’s *Official Rules of Ultimate 10th Edition*, “If a foul is committed and not called, the player who committed the foul should inform the infractioned player of the foul.” Though it may be difficult in the heat of the moment, the player who made the foul is expected to inform the opponent about the foul.

Promoting & Teaching Spirit of the Game™

In a league setting, the best method for explaining SOTG™ is by repetition and example. Many leagues have developed Ultimate primers that outline SOTG™ and the rules, since reading the official rules can be overwhelming and confusing for new players. Below is an example used by Grass Roots Ultimate (GRU) in Boulder, Colorado. In addition to distributing the primer to all captains and new players, GRU also hosts a beginners’ clinic at the beginning of each season. The clinic is comprised of stations and one of the stations focuses on rules and SOTG™.

In addition to a copy of the *10 Simple Rules of Ultimate* (in PART 4: Teaching Ultimate of this Resource Guide), a sample of a primer provided to captains could include additional clarifying information:

Disc space Defensive players must leave a disc’s diameter between themselves and the throwers they are marking.

Legitimate position First person in a space has “legitimate position.” Extended arms and legs are not part of a player’s legitimate position. You cannot block an opponent’s path (or vision) with your arms or legs.

Bad excuse Going for the disc is never an excuse for clocking/running over/into another player.

The USA Ultimate also recently developed a list entitled *Ten Things You Should Know about SOTG™*. Below are the headings on the list (for the full explanation of each, please visit www.usultimate.org).

*Ten Things You Should Know About Spirit of the Game™

- 1. The Golden Rule: Treat Others as You Would Want to be Treated** Spirited games result from mutual respect among opponents. Assume the best of your opponent. Give him/her the benefit of the doubt. You would want the same for yourself. But if you are thick-skinned, do not assume that your opponent is. Maybe you should think of this rule as, “treat others as you would have them treat your mother.”
- 2. Control: SOTG™ Takes Real Effort** SOTG™ is not just some abstract principle that everyone adopts and then games run smoothly without effort. Close calls are made in tight games. Hard fouls are committed. SOTG™ is about how you handle yourself under pressure: how you contain your emotionality, tame your temper, and modulate your voice. If you initiate or contribute to the unraveling of spirit, the concept falls apart quickly. If you act to mend things (or at least not exacerbate the situation) by following (1) above, the game heals itself.
- 3. Heckling and Taunting are Different** Ultimate has a long tradition of good-natured heckling. Heckles are friendly barbs, typically from non-playing spectators. Heckling can be fun, but taunting is not spirited and wrong. Harassing remarks after an opponent’s foul call or close play are NOT heckling: they are abusive taunts which create unpleasant playing conditions and often escalate to acrimonious disputes.

4. SOTG™ is Compatible with Championship Play

It is a fallacy to argue that the stakes are so important that some aspect of SOTG™ can be cast aside. Time and again, great teams and star players have shown that you can bring all your competitive and athletic zeal to a game without sacrificing fair play or respect for your opponent.

5. Don't "Give as You Got" There is no "eye for an eye." If you are wronged, you have no right to wrong someone in return. In the extreme case where you were severely mistreated, you may bring the issue up with a captain, tournament director, or even lodge a complaint with the governing body. If you retaliate in kind, however, a complaint may be filed against you. We recall point (1): treat others as you would have them treat you, not as they have treated you. In the end, you are responsible for you.

6. Breathe After a hard foul, close call, or disputed play, take a step back, pause, and take a deep breath. In the heat of competition, emotions run high. By giving yourself just a bit of time and space, you will gain enough perspective to compose yourself and concentrate on the facts involved in the dispute (was she in or out; did you hit his hand or the disc; did that pick affect the play). Your restraint will induce a more restrained response from your opponent. Conflagration averted, you may resume business as usual.

7. When You Do the Right Thing, People Notice When you turn the other cheek, you know you've done the right thing. You may not hear praise, there may be no standing ovation, but people do notice. Eventually, their respect for you and their appreciation of the game will grow.

8. Be Generous With Praise Compliment an opponent on their good catch. Remark to a teammate that you admire his/her honesty in calling themselves out of bounds. Look players in the eye and congratulate them when you shake their hands after a game. These small acts boost spirit greatly, a large payoff for little time and effort.

9. Impressions Linger Not only does the realization that your actions will be remembered for a long time serve to curb poor behavior, it can also inspire better conduct. Many old-timers enjoy the experience of meeting an elite player who remembers their first rendezvous on the field and recalls the event in detail. A good first encounter with an

impressible young player can have considerable long-term positive impact.

10. Have Fun

**Developed by the 2005 USA Ultimate Conduct Committee (Jeff Dunbar, Kate Bergeron, Eric Zaslow, Will Deaver) and adopted by the USA Ultimate Executive Committee (3/05).*

Roles of Captains

In order to maintain SOTG™ in the league, the league leadership, especially the captains, must be proactive about its importance. The captains must be the flag bearers of SOTG™ and have a thorough understanding of the rules, since the bulk of SOTG™ instruction and modeling falls upon them. Supplying the most recent edition of USA Ultimate Rules to each captain helps in this regard.

Finally, leagues should host a captains' forum or workshop where new and experienced captains can learn about existing league policies and discuss ideas for improvement. Such an event is a great opportunity for the league to present its philosophy regarding SOTG™ and the important role that captains play in the sport. In addition, it is highly recommended that the league create a conduct policy that explains the ramifications of violating SOTG™. This policy may never need to be used, but having a set of formal guidelines surrounding acceptable behavior and expectations is vital to the league running smoothly.

Roles of Coaches

The coach's goal in terms of SOTG™ is to create an environment where players are responsible for upholding the rules and ensuring that the outcomes of plays and games are fair.

***USA Ultimate Spirit of Coaching**

Background

The role of the coach at all levels of Ultimate is unique in a sport that places on-field player authority above non-player influence. As non-players the coach's authority must not extend to the on-field officiating process. Coaches may be faced with situations where they are able to correct the self-officiating process and ensure the correct outcome to a given play. In this

situation, coaches must not interfere in the officiating process, in order to ensure that players learn and take responsibility for officiating. Coach interference in the decision making process, even in the most egregious violations, will indicate to players that the coach and not the players have the Ultimate responsibility for ensuring the inherent fairness of the game. Teaching players the rules and how to implement them should be done at practices or off of the field. It is the coach's responsibility to ensure that the players understand their own responsibilities as players and teach players how to handle those responsibilities.

Guidelines:

- Coaches should introduce themselves to the other coaches prior to a game and discuss concerns. This could potentially include the level of play, the level of intensity (e.g. spiking and rushing the field), and possible modifications to the captain's clause (e.g. prohibiting zone for new teams or foot blocking).
- Because the potential for misperception is high, spiking is prohibited at the youth level unless otherwise agreed upon by the coaches or captains. Spiking in a disrespectful manner is never okay at any level.
- Coaches will not make calls from the sideline nor offer their opinion on a play. Coaches should encourage players to come to a resolution on their own, and if asked during a dispute coaches may offer rules clarifications. After a dispute a coach may talk to his or her own player about the dispute and offer opinions.
- Youth coaches will make an effort to educate parents about SOTG™ and work to create a sideline atmosphere that respects SOTG™.
- Coaches will teach and give players opportunities to practice knowledge of the rules of Ultimate.
- Coaches will always exhibit respect for opposing players.
- Coaches will always exhibit respect for other coaches.
- Coaches will always exhibit respect for observers.
- Coaches will model SOTG™ at all times.

**The Spirit of Coaching guidelines were developed by Kyle Weisbrod, USA Ultimate Director of Youth Development and adopted by USA Ultimate Board of Directors (12/05).*

Acknowledging and Rewarding Spirit of the Game™

How do you ensure that SOTG™ is recognized and rewarded? Many leagues in the United States and around the world use some sort of spirit-rating system that rewards good-spirited teams. This system can be very formal as in a scaled survey that captains complete on a website or a simple discussion among the team members after a game. Some experimentation may be necessary to determine the best way to reward the most spirited teams (often ranging from an impact on league standings to a spirit prize to the most spirited team). Regardless of the specifics, acknowledging or rewarding SOTG™ provides visibility of the importance of SOTG™ to the league participants and Ultimate community.

Spirit of the Game™ Rating System

Following is an example of a spirit rating system (SRS) borrowed and adapted from the Association de Ultimate de Montréal and now used by other organizations including Grass Roots Ultimate (GRU) in Boulder, Colorado.

The underlying philosophy in the sport of Ultimate is the notion of sportsmanship and fair play. Ultimate is a self-refereed, non-contact sport. Competitive play is encouraged but never at the expense of mutual respect between players, adherence to the rules and the basic joy of playing. Every player should clearly understand the rules of the game. **The integrity of Ultimate depends on each player's responsibility to uphold the SOTG™, and this responsibility should not be taken lightly.**

After a game that has been played hard, a cheer or fun inter-team game can serve to both celebrate the spirit that was exhibited and to deflate any high running emotions that might carry over to future games. Playing in non-traditional athletic clothing such as skirts, hats or costumes is a way of showing that winning the game is no more important than having fun. However, these things are not necessary elements of spirit and it would be unfair and unreasonable to judge the spirit of a team or player based on the clothes they wear or the songs they sing.

Spirit is a combination of respect, integrity and dignity. There is no dignity in choosing to break the

rules intentionally. Respect implies that no matter how sure you are of your call, someone else's reality may be different and the disagreement can be accepted without anger or arguments. SOTG™ involves understanding that your opponent is not your enemy. Without an opponent you couldn't play the game. SOTG™ does not compromise competitive play in any way but it also emphasizes fair, honest and respectful play between teams and players.

GRU uses a rating system based on AUM's rating system which is designed to render the scoring procedure less subjective and more objective. A table was created for the SRS that is intended to emphasize the really important points that make up the "SOTG™" and help remind players/captains of them every time a team's spirit score is entered. The new SRS offers more criteria for minus points rather than plus points so that each team can see what aspects of the game can be modified to better understand what constitutes good or bad spirit. Please remember that a score of 10 is absolutely limited to only that perfect, mythical game that was an absolute blast, where there was terrific flow and outstanding sportsmanship among ALL players throughout the entire game.

All teams start with a spirit rating of 5 and points can be added or subtracted according to the criteria listed in the SRS table.

Each team starts with a base spirit score of 5 points. Rate the following statements and then determine the final score. (Maximum score = 10; minimum score = 0).

- 1 = Strongly Agree (1 pt)
- 2 = Agree (.5)
- 3 = Neutral (0)
- 4 = Disagree (-.5)
- 5 = Strongly Disagree (-1 pt)

1. Our opponent understood the rules or was willing to learn them.
2. The team cheered us at the end of the game or engaged in some positive display of spirit.
3. No one on the opponent's team engaged in dangerous play, reckless endangerment or poor sportsmanship.
4. No disputes were made or were kept to a minimum when calls were made.
5. Calls made were justified and consistent with SOTG™.

Spirit of the Game™ and Competitive Play

"Highly competitive play is encouraged, but never at the expense of mutual respect among players, adherence to the agreed upon rules of the game, or the basic joy of play." (Introduction, *USA Ultimate 10th Edition Rules*)

Depending on one's competitive nature, the idea of SOTG™ and highly competitive play may not seem to go well together. In practice, however, the SOTG™ allows players to compete at a very high level, while maintaining respect for each other and for the game. It allows Ultimate to approach the ideal of competition for competition's sake. Of course, with the freedom that SOTG™ allows comes the responsibility of upholding it. While it is often a challenge on the field, it is one of the most important skills in any Ultimate player's arsenal.

Recommendations for Ensuring Spirit of the Game™

- Train and educate your captains and league representatives about SOTG™
- Model good SOTG™
- Create a primer of rules that incorporates and explains SOTG™
- Create a conduct policy outlining acceptable behavior and consequences
- Reward good SOTG™ throughout the season and on tournament day.