



ULTIMATE YEAR

PINE-RICHLAND BOYS
ULTIMATE FRISBEE TEAM
CAPTURES 2017 CITY TITLE.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

Last year, Pine-Richland's Boys Ultimate Frisbee team earned an ultimate recognition: they were named 2017 City Champions in the Pittsburgh High School Ultimate League. During the 2016-2017 season, they also were named both the Pittsburgh/Western PA Winter League champs and the Pittsburgh/Western PA Spring League Champs. Now, as they look forward to the 2018 season, the team hopes to build upon their success of the past few years and capture a second consecutive PHUL win and perhaps even the state title, after coming in second at the state championship in 2017.

The team was founded as a club sport with just 10 to 15 players during the 2005-2006 school year at Pine-Richland, and has competed in the PHUL since its inception, says head coach Marcus Ranii-Dropcho, 25. Today, the team has a roster of approximately 25 players, and hopes to grow. "The team has continued to grow and improve since I began coaching them in the fall of 2014," says Ranii-Dropcho. "In PHUL, we have improved our city finish each year: tied for third in 2015, runner up in 2016 and city champion in 2017." The team also attends the Neuqua Knockout tournament in Illinois during the spring season, where they compete against teams from different states. Last year, they finished 9th out of 42 teams at the tournament.

For those not familiar with Ultimate Frisbee, the game is often characterized as a "non-serious" casual sport. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth, says Ranii-Dropcho. "The stigma about ultimate is slowly changing from its counter-culture roots to a game of peak fitness, grueling endurance and spectacular spectator-worthy plays," he explains. "Players must have the long-distance speed of wide receivers or cornerbacks, and they must have the small-space agility possessed by point guards in basketball or strikers in soccer. They must possess the stamina and endurance of midfielders to have the ability to expend energy on defense and offense in a single point, and they must be able to leap high and dive to save possession from errant throws."



The Pine Richland Boys Ultimate Frisbee team after they took 2nd at the PA State Championships last May.

The game is typically played seven-on-seven on a football-sized field with 20-yard end zones. To play, the defending team throws, or pulls, the disc from their defending end zone line to the offense awaiting the disc on their own end zone line on the opposite side of the field. What's unusual about the sport is that it's self-officiated, meaning there are no referees.

"One of the central components of the game, and why it is revered as a sport, is the integral quality of sportsmanship in its 'Spirit of the Game,'" notes Ranii-Dropcho. "Knowing and understanding interpretations of the rules is important, and resolutions of conflict become a common occurrence."

According to USA Ultimate, the club's umbrella organization, the Spirit of the Game encourages highly competitive play but "never at the expense of mutual respect among competitors." The organization forbids "taunting opposing players, dangerous aggression, belligerent intimidation, intentional infractions or other 'win-at-all-costs' behavior."

That high level of respect is what the team thrives on, says team co-captain Aiden Landis, 18.

"My favorite aspect of ultimate is how competitive the games can become, but still maintain a high level of sportsmanship," says Aiden, a senior who captains the team with Lucas Saunders, 17.

One of the most challenging aspects of the game isn't on the field, but rather involves building the team, he adds. "The most difficult aspect of the sport is finding committed athletes for the team. Since it is such a small sport, we don't have the pull that much more popular sports have, and don't get as many kids signing up to play. In recent years, we've had a great influx of new talent, so it has not been too much of an issue, but it's definitely something that's always on our minds."

Ranii-Dropcho says that teams need a minimum roster of 17 "well-conditioned" players to compete in games and tournaments. Exposing middle school students to the game has bolstered interest; the team currently has approximately seven middle school players who practice with the team.

"For our club, we encourage our middle school players to practice with us all fall and learn the game at the same rate that we would expect new high school recruits to learn it," he explains. "Many of the contributors for this year's team come from a deep sophomore class who started around the time I began coaching in 2014."



All high school students, boys and girls, are eligible to play for the team. Middle school players must have special paperwork approved by the PHUL and league commissioner to participate. The season runs from March through May, and the team practices at the Treesdale Commons in Gibsonsia. Students whose schools don't have Ultimate Frisbee teams can play for a nearby school, with exceptions.

Looking forward, the team hopes to repeat its recent successes.

"First and foremost is always striving for excellence at the city level and winning our second consecutive PHUL championship in May. There is always a heavy focus on individual improvement for each player as well. I ask the players what kind of contribution they want to be able to make in the spring, outline ways they can achieve that, and then help them develop in that area as much as I can throughout the season," Ranii-Dropcho says.

The coach, who graduated from Pine-Richland in 2010 and captained the Pine-Richland team in 2009 and 2010, is happy to see the sport gaining more respect as time goes on.

"I personally wanted nothing more than to play football when I was heading into high school," he recalls. "When my parents decided for me that I would not be participating, I took up ultimate in 2007. It's shaped my life in so many positive ways and continues to be a sport that I invest time and energy into. The people you meet, the community you engage with and the lifetime lessons you gain from playing a team sport like ultimate are well worth the time invested into learning the game." ■

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