

IN

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North Allegheny

Flying High

with
Pittsburgh
Thunderbirds
Ultimate
Frisbee Team



Fall Festival Fever

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THUNDERBIRDS SOAR

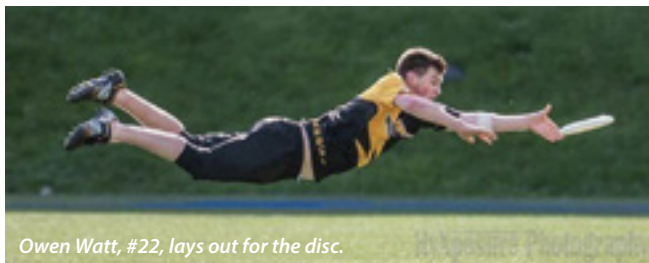
**Pittsburgh
Thunderbirds
aim for
“Ultimate”
success.**

BY JENNIFER BROZAK

Top-flight catch by Jimmy Towle, #48.

A new professional sport is thriving in the city of Pittsburgh—and it's not played with a ball or puck, but rather with a flying disc.

Over the past few years, Pittsburgh has been making itself known as one of the latest hotbed cities for ultimate Frisbee, or simply “ultimate” as it's known to fans of the sport. The city's professional team, the Pittsburgh Thunderbirds, is a part of the Midwest Division of the American Ultimate Disc League, a collection of more than 20 teams located throughout the country that launched in 2012.



Owen Watt, #22, lays out for the disc.

Founded in 2015, this marks the Thunderbirds' fifth year competing as a professional organization. Andrew Gardner, the team's general manager, says that Pittsburgh's tight-knit community of players, coaches, teams and stakeholders across all levels is driving its recognition and success.

“The decision to base the team in Pittsburgh was largely based on the solid ultimate infrastructure that Pittsburgh had built in years past,” says Gardner, who played ultimate for Miami University. “The University of Pittsburgh was consistently a national title contender, youth camps and ultimate tournaments were frequent and well-run, many high schools and middle schools had functioning teams, and the leadership within the community were passionate for the sport. It made the decision to start the team in Pittsburgh an easy one.”

The team's first home game took place against the Cincinnati Revolution at George K. Cupples Stadium in the South Side. According to Gardner, more than 650 fans showed up for that game, with the line extending from the box office out onto East Carson Street. The team is currently playing its home games at Lt. J.C. Stone Field in North Park.

The ultimate season runs from early April until mid-July, followed by the final-four championship weekend in August. The team will play a game—and sometimes two—nearly every weekend, aside from a few bye weekends and an All-Star break. They were traveling to Detroit, Chicago and Indianapolis for their final games of the regular season this year.

Head Coach Pat Hammonds feels that the team's biggest strength this season is the culture they have worked to create. “We identified three team values that shape how we prepare and how we hold each other accountable. The guys are committed to being their best and are always bringing their best selves to everything we do,” says Hammonds, who played for the Thunderbirds for three seasons before becoming head coach. “I'm inspired by the hard work, dedication, leadership and vulnerability that each and every one of our players has embraced.”

One of those players is Maximilian Sheppard, the team's captain. At just 23 years old, this is his fifth year playing for the Thunderbirds. To Sheppard, representing Pittsburgh on a national scale is a “fantastic” feeling.

“We are growing every year and ultimate is expanding more as a sport each year,” he says. “The Thunderbirds will continue to win and make the city of Pittsburgh proud.”

Sheppard notes that his favorite part about the game is the community, fans, players and competitiveness. His position as an O-Line cutter, which is one of the sport's main offensive positions, requires a great deal of running, timing and communication with the other cutters.

“Most people are surprised to know that there is a serious professional league out there,” adds Sheppard. “The atmosphere is unlike any other sport and the players are very talented.”

Hammonds says that this season's team has “depth and versatility,” thanks to standout players like throwers Sheppard and Sam VanDusen; field generals Thomas Edmonds and Alex Thomas; and defenders Pat McMullen and Anson Reppermund.

“More importantly, we have a group of 30-plus guys who are committed to playing whatever role the team needs them to fill,” he adds. “We have consistently found the end zone on offense, we consistently apply pressure and force turnovers on defense, and we have focused on executing every opportunity for four full quarters.”

Since its launch in 2015, the team has certainly had numerous achievements; even though they've fallen to the Madison Radicals each time, they have made it to the Midwest championship game three years in a row. In 2016, the team hosted its first-ever playoff game at Highmark Stadium in Station Square, defeating the Minnesota Wind Chill by two goals.

“We are committed to making Pittsburgh an ultimate destination for players, coaches, teams, fans and stakeholders,” says Gardner. “Our future is in the youth of Pittsburgh, and our goal is to become a staple in academic, recreational and competitive environments for youth and adolescents. The Thunderbirds aim to add to Pittsburgh's success stories and we are constantly working to improve each component of the city's ultimate community.” ■



Mark Fedorenko, #7, looks to catch the disc off an in-cut.

» For more information about the Pittsburgh Thunderbirds, visit theaudl.com/thunderbirds.