Quidditch: From Fans to Athletes

by Christian Schran

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Harry Potter is the best-selling book series in history, so it is not surprising to see that it has garnered one of the largest fan bases in history. Many young children, and some older ones as well, enjoyed reading about the magical adventures of a young wizard’s coming of age. Many found themselves pretending to use sticks as magic wands, dressing up in black robes to wait for a letter from Hogwarts, and begging their parents to buy a pet owl or cat (or at the very least a toad). Now these children have grown up and graduated from college; they’re ready to set out into the admittedly less exciting “muggle,” or non-magical, world. However, that generation left behind at least one rather peculiar habit that originated from its favorite bedtime story: Quidditch.

Quidditch is to the Harry Potter universe what American football is to the United States. That is to say, it is the most popular sport in the wizarding world. In the books, the game is played both recreationally and professionally on flying broomsticks and essentially consists of six players throwing a ball through hoops while dodging other balls, and one other player trying to find another smaller ball called a “snitch.”

In the real world, this game began as exactly that: a game. One can imagine small children enchanted by the series playing Quidditch in its humble form, running around outside on fake broomsticks and pretending to catch imaginary snitches. However, as the children grew older, they also grew more dedicated, until their devotion culminated in the first-ever Quidditch match, played at Middlebury College in 2005 (Benepe “Alex”). From there, students began playing more competitively, incorporating more physical gameplay such as tackling. Now, more than eighty intercollegiate teams exist, and universities sanction their own tournaments. Practices with elements such as lower-body workouts and agility drills became integral to the success of Quidditch teams. As the students who gave rise to the game left the pitch, it was no longer just a game for the most diehard Harry Potter fans. Now its participants are looking to redefine it from what it has been to what it has become: a sport just as real as any other in the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) or professional sports universe.

This shift turns the currently common notion of Quidditch as a game played by nerds and fanatics completely on its head. In the span of less than a decade, the Quidditch community has changed to one that more closely resembles the players, fans, coaches, referees, and other officials who make up any other popular sport. Although we would not imagine the pale-faced Potterheads
whose childhoods were shaped by J. K. Rowling’s novels as NCAA-caliber competitors, this community has successfully gained enough athletes and popularity to merit the sport’s inclusion in collegiate and international athletics. However, this remodeling of the Quidditch community puts at stake the identity of Quidditch itself. In some ways, Quidditch has been a refuge for those who wish to avoid the numerous regulations imposed by most popular sports. By attempting to secure legitimacy in the world of college athletics, Quidditch may lose the support of those who initially contributed to its popularity.

Obviously, you will not find college students hovering in the air on broomsticks as they play Quidditch, nor will you find flying balls or any other sort of magic equipment. Nonetheless, Quidditch is just as complex as any other sport you can find on a college campus, if not more so. According to the *The US Quidditch Rulebook*, 8th edition, by Clay Dockery, et al., the game takes place on a field known as a Quidditch pitch, which has three goals resembling hula-hoops atop flanking PVC pipes. On each team, three players, called chasers, pass around a quaffle, or a slightly deflated volleyball, attempt to put it through one of the hoops while one player from the opposing team, called the keeper, attempts to stop the quaffle from passing through the hoops. Every time the chasers successfully throw the quaffle through the opposing team’s hoops, their team is awarded ten points. In addition, there are two beaters on each team who throw dodgeballs, referred to as bludgers, at other players. If players are hit by a bludger, they must dismount their broom, drop any balls they were carrying, and touch their team’s hoops before they can resume play. Finally, the last player on each team is the seeker, whose job is to catch the snitch, a tennis ball in a long sock that hangs from the shorts of the snitch runner, who runs around the field and elsewhere, intentionally causing chaos and avoiding the grasps of the seekers. Whoever catches the snitch wins 30 points for their team (as opposed to 150 in the book series); the match ends with the snitch’s capture.

These are only the basic rules of gameplay, but there are many more governing aspects of play such as where a player is allowed to tackle another, what happens when a game is tied at the end of play, and exactly what the dimensions of the pitch are supposed to be. They are all outlined in the 170-page official *United States Quidditch Rulebook*. By contrast, the National Football League’s rulebook, which details the gameplay of arguably the most complicated of today’s most popular sports, has only 120 pages. With rules such as “5.2.1. Incurring the knockout effect—If a player is struck with a live bludger, that player is ‘knocked out’ and must follow the knockout effect procedure as outlined in 5.3. Knockout effect procedure,” Quidditch is no longer the avid fan’s backyard game (Dockery 64). In many ways, the game now belongs to athletes, coaches, referees, and the other members of the community that are pushing for its recognition as a legitimate sport, a far cry from its initial status as a niche sport for those who shy away from orthodox extracurriculars.

However, not everyone is adamant that Quidditch rightly deserves to be called a sport. Some believe that Quidditch should only exist in the realm of *Harry Potter*, believing those who play the real-life equivalent are ridiculous. I have personally heard people watching the University of Oklahoma’s Quidditch practices complain that the sport is a “waste of money and materials.” One remark that captures this sentiment particularly well comes from *The Gawker*, an online Weblog known for its satire of celebrity and media news: “Sorry, but until you can fly and cast spells, you’re just a bunch of dorks with broom wedgies” (Moylan). One may be inclined to think that such comments are coming from disgruntled spectators who scoff at the idea of running around for forty minutes with a broom between their legs. To the contrary, even some players, although they enjoy playing the game immensely,
find it ludicrous to think that this game could be seen as a legitimate sport. “It’s based off something that’s not real. How could it be a sport?” asks Thomas Walsh, who is not just a Quidditch player, but the Quidditch Club President of the University of Massachusetts (Breshanan). In fact, it is not uncommon for Quidditch players—although a majority argue that it is indeed a sport—to be unsure of its athletic status, placing it somewhere in the middle of the game-to-sport spectrum. While many athletes and even fans of traditional sports such as American football and baseball have a tendency to treat games as “more serious than life itself” (O’Brien), the players running around the Quidditch pitch often seem to feel less anxiety than their more conventional counterparts, and although winning is obviously preferable to losing, a “winning is everything” attitude is not necessarily prevalent. Many spectators of the sport enjoy Quidditch’s more relaxed atmosphere, well aware that they are just “watching kids with brooms between their legs.”

But such sentiments are now either outdated or only expressed by a minority. As the International Quidditch Association (IQA), the worldwide authority and governing body of all official Quidditch, humorously quipped on its Twitter page, “Tell seekers and chasers that Quidditch is not a sport and they will tell you exactly where to put your broomstick” (“Tell”). Emily Patterson, a player for the World Cup qualifying team at Central Michigan University, sums up her views this way: “I challenge anyone who doesn’t think Quidditch is a sport to try it out. You need a brain, you need legs, and you need to be tough” (qtd. in DeBona). And tough is the correct word indeed; she goes on to say that two ambulances were needed during matches played by her team alone (DeBona). With such physicality involved, it is difficult to argue that Quidditch is not a sport, and a majority of its players are now pushing for its inclusion in professional and collegiate, if not necessarily mainstream, athletics. Perhaps the biggest testament to their efforts is not the Quidditch World Cup, held every year since 2007, but the fact that an exhibition Quidditch tournament was played at the 2012 Summer Olympics, featuring teams from the USA, UK, Canada, France, and Australia (Black). Even though Quidditch is less than a decade old, the campaign to make it a sport has been so successful that it has warranted Olympic consideration.

At the forefront of the athletic movement is Alex Benepe, the founder, commissioner, and CEO of the IQA. Benepe himself played seeker in the first-ever college Quidditch match, which took place at Middlebury College in Vermont in 2005. It drew approximately thirty people, the majority from Benepe’s freshman community. From there, the sport spread to other colleges through friends and colleagues of Benepe, eventually culminating in the first-ever Quidditch World Cup in 2007 (Benepe “Alex”). More than 1,000 people came to watch the match between Middlebury and Vassar College, and the sport’s popularity has only increased since then. Benepe and his team went on tour, bringing Quidditch to other colleges and demonstrating the activity’s athletic value, and at the next World Cup, twelve more colleges brought teams to the pitch. The tournament was turning into a festival, with music, food, sports teams, and even owls (Benepe “Emergence”). From that point onward, Quidditch has become one of the fastest growing sports on the planet, now racking up over 100 teams and thousands of players from more than twenty countries at larger tournaments such as the European Regional Tournament and QUAFL, the Australian regional tournament (“Regional”).

Throughout this new sport’s unprecedented growth, Benepe was at the center of it all. He orchestrated the growth of a sport from a few fearless college students’ alternative to a Sunday afternoon’s game of bocce ball to as sport with a multinational governing body that recruits new players. Benepe’s push to make Quidditch more widely acknowledged in the sports realm has changed the essence of the community that plays
it. In the first games of Quidditch, students would borrow old brooms from the college’s broomball team or supply their own; now teams can go to places such as Alivan’s Brooms to order professionally-made brooms specifically designed for playing Quidditch (Benepe “Emergence”; Benepe “Alex”). In the first games of Quidditch, students duct-taped towels as capes around their necks and pretended to fly around on their broomsticks; now students wear headbands to signify their positions on the field and chase after each other, tackling each other to the ground rugby-style. The first games of Quidditch were an almost non-competitive way to enjoy an afternoon; now athletes tear down the pitch in relentless pursuit of the snitch or the quaffle, dodging bludgers and running down or over anyone in their path.

Even our own University of Oklahoma Quidditch team reflects this shift in the community from fan-based to athlete-based, bringing the notion of Quidditch players as athletes to our own front doorstep. Our team has evolved from a few loosely-organized groups of people who share an intense love of Harry Potter to one consolidated group of athlete-fans who travel to tournaments to compete against other schools, hold regular practices and workout sessions, and use sports equipment such as football cleats, receiver gloves, and occasionally pads to help cushion the intense blows that are often delivered in a typical Quidditch match. “We all do have the one love in common for Harry Potter,” acknowledged Katie Simpson, a current senior at OU, but for these people, it is no longer just about the fandom. “[I]t’s a contact sport; for me, that makes it more fun,” Simpson explained. “Not going to lie, I kind of enjoy throwing people around… It’s a ton of fun” (“OU”). These are not the words of a Harry Potter geek dressed in black robes and thick-rimmed glasses who stands outside the midnight premiere of every new Harry Potter film, but those of someone who plays Quidditch, not just for its fantastical appeal, but for its requisite tangible skill and physical prowess, its competitive aspects, and its demand for aggression on the pitch—features almost exclusively found in sports. In other words, Simpson’s are the words of an athlete.

The OU Quidditch team is by no means the only team to take Quidditch so seriously. In fact, there is a plethora of Quidditch teams that take this sport to a level far beyond that of the occasional match against a rival school. One prime example is the Middlebury College Quidditch team that began this sport, and which won all of the first five Quidditch World Cups (Nadeau). Others are any of the fifty or more teams that gather annually in Washington D.C. for the IQA’s convention, QuidCon. Micah Haji-Sheikh, who attended in 2013, perhaps said it best: “I started because it had to do with Harry Potter and I was obsessed, and that kind of has all gone to the wayside and now I’m just focused on being a better athlete and a better player” (qtd. in Schneier).

Haji-Sheikh sentiment almost perfectly mirrors the journey that the Quidditch community has taken over the past decade. It began as a simple children’s game, played by the little kids who wished to be witches and wizards, began its take-off into the realm of athletics with the first-ever Quidditch match in 2005 at Middlebury, and is now arguably the fastest growing sport in the entire world. So where does Quidditch go from here? At this rate, Quidditch could theoretically be sanctioned by the NCAA as a legitimate college sport like football or hockey. A professional league is already beginning to form with the institution of the United States Quidditch organization. In addition, with so many international teams forming, it is entirely possible that someday, and someday soon, Quidditch could be included in the Olympic Games.

Nonetheless, the road that Quidditch would need to take to become an officially-sanctioned NCAA sport is a rocky one, even though it satisfies perhaps the most-difficult-yet basic criterion set forth by the NCAA to become a sport. Accord-
ing to the NCAA, any sport hoping to gain its sponsorship must have at least twenty-eight varsity teams (Eisenhood). Quidditch easily surpasses that number, with eighty having attended the last World Cup (DeBona). This indicates that there is significant interest to create a championship (like the World Cup, but NCAA-sanctioned). However, the largest problem in Quidditch’s quest for the title of sport is not whether or not it satisfies the NCAA’s requirements, but rather how it acquires the funding to sustain itself. Many current teams generate most of their money through club fundraisers, as universities are hesitant to donate to them. With various medical expenses due to its rugby-like nature, equipment expenses for brooms, uniforms, pitches, different-sized balls, and strangely-shaped goals, and traveling expenses related to transporting players and equipment from one tournament to the next, Quidditch can be very expensive. The second hurdle Quidditch would need to overcome is that the proposal to become a sport needs to come from a group, such as the Big Ten Conference, within the NCAA itself, meaning that all of the universities within that group would need to sponsor their own Quidditch teams and then go through the paperwork needed to submit a proposal to the NCAA, which is difficult not only because of the aforementioned financial issues, but because of the non-athletic stigma that still plagues Quidditch teams across the nation (Eisenhood).

As of now, there are still far too many people who ascribe to the notion that Quidditch players are not serious athletes for the game to be publicly recognized as a sport. However, Quidditch is becoming too popular to continue to ignore. Of course, there will always be people who think that Quidditch is an irresponsible waste of time, just as there are people who think following soccer and baseball are. Nonetheless, if Quidditch continues on this path, there will be drastic changes not only in how spectators view Quidditch and its players, but also in how the sport itself fits into student-athlete society. Who knows? Perhaps before we know it colleges will be offering prestigious scholarships to those Quidditch players who were made fun of not too long ago.

Works Cited
“Tell seekers and chasers that Quidditch is not a sport and they will tell you exactly where to put your broomstick.” International Quidditch Association (IQA). Twitter. 26 Dec. 2013, 12:42 p.m. Tweet.

Quidditch Tackle. Personal photograph by Remi. 2014.
