



TURNING UNUSED GREEN SPACE INTO THE 'ULTIMATE' FIELD

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The Waterloo Organization of Disc Sports (WODS) is an organization in its sixth year of promoting disc sports in Waterloo Region (Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and surrounding areas). The primary activity enjoyed by its members is the game of Ultimate, sometimes called Ultimate Disc or Ultimate Frisbee, a fast-paced cross between soccer, basketball and rugby played with a flying disc on grass or turf fields.

Having been invented in the late 1960s, and only enjoying widespread recognition since the 1990s, Ultimate has faced an uphill battle in competing for field space against long-established sports like soccer and football. Worse, a regulation Ultimate field is slightly longer than a regulation soccer field, making it difficult to find appropriate, established and well-maintained playing locations. Goal posts and running tracks are further obstacles to a good game of Ultimate when played on most existing fields. While soccer players tend to want grass cut to a maximum height of two inches, Ultimate players prefer longer grass for greater padding on dives and slides. Indeed, these are dilemmas faced by Ultimate players and organizations across Canada and North America.

In Waterloo Region, WODS historically has operated its summer recreational Ultimate leagues on soccer and football fields scattered throughout the City of Kitchener. The ongoing quest for quality field space sparked an intensive search in 2007 with WODS members looking beyond traditional sports fields to consider alternative green spaces. An inquiry to the City of Kitchener regarding Kiwanis Park arrived at an opportune time, with the City looking to fulfil a new mandate to increase uses at that park. Several meetings and proposal discussions later, WODS and the City established the beginning of a new relationship, with both parties committing to rehabilitate a large area of open and relatively flat green space in the park for use as dedicated, full-sized, lined Ultimate fields for WODS league activities.

The problem? This green space had spent the past 30-plus years as unused and un-maintained land. The grass (for lack of a better word) consisted of a variety of grass species – Kentucky bluegrass, annual bluegrass, fine fescue and other grasses and weeds – and had been allowed typically to grow to 12” or more before being cut with a thresher. Though generally flat, the turf had divots, ruts and moderate swales throughout. A large-scale, invasive landscaping effort was out of the question, with budget constraints and the City’s desire to maintain the natural appearance of the park as much as possible.

The solution was readily accepted by both parties: a multi-year effort of gradual improvement through natural restorative techniques and cultural practices.

The grass is now cut weekly to semi-



monthly to a minimum length of 3-4". This serves the dual purpose of providing the cushion that Ultimate players prefer, and allowing a healthier turf with better drought resistance.

An initial heavy topdressing will be followed by several more applications throughout the year to improve the ruts and divots. Initial spring aeration and overseeding will be followed by multiple subsequent applications. This topdressing and aeration schedule is more intensive than might otherwise be necessary for established sports fields, and is done to speed up the process of levelling and thickening the turf.

The field will be overseeded with perennial ryegrass, a strong grass with good root growth that tolerates drought and cleat wear well. The goal is to obtain a comfortable mix of perennial rye and the existing Kentucky blue. These grasses blend well together and are expected to provide suitable footing for the intense back-and-forth running and "cutting" motions typical to Ultimate.

There is currently no irrigation system in place, which presents some challenges for rehabilitation. But both the type of grasses used and the ability to keep the grass at longer lengths than traditional sports fields are expected to reduce the negative effects of this factor.

Weed control efforts will be moderate and will use cultural practices as opposed to spraying for weed eradication, owing to the location of the park near the Grand River and residential areas. In any event, Ultimate players tend to be environmen-

tally conscious and have little aversion to weeds.

All of this work is overseen by Dan Dychuck, City of Kitchener's Supervisor of Sports Fields and the man who responded first to WODS' inquiries about open park spaces. Dan recognized the mutual benefits that such an arrangement would offer, and has remained involved throughout.

For their part, WODS members contribute as much as they can to the process of improving the field space, clearing rocks, branches and other debris, and generally leaving the fields in a better condition than when they arrive each week. WODS Ultimate players are content to tolerate short-term imperfections in turf quality for the benefit of securing a single, large-scale facility where multiple games can be played simultaneously. Both WODS and the City of Kitchener expect that turf conditions will improve significantly over the course of the 2008 summer season and subsequent years, with the expectation of reaching the quality of most other city-run non-irrigated fields within three to four years.

The additional benefits for WODS members are many. The single location provides a much more social atmosphere, with up to 10 teams gathering together for their weekly matches. Having a single, central location eases scheduling difficulties for league coordinators and reduces travel requirements for players. It is expected that many more players will be able to bike and carpool than in prior years. And players are able to make use of the other park amenities such as washroom

and change room facilities, swimming pool and volleyball courts.

At the other end, the City of Kitchener sees benefits as well. The Ultimate fields expand the uses at the park and are expected to increase overall park attendance in 2008. These new uses and attendance remain compatible with the natural appearance and family atmosphere of the park setting. Indeed, the sport of Ultimate is unique in this regard. Ultimate players don't require professionally-graded, carefully-manicured sports fields. All they really need is relatively flat, open space. An Ultimate field doesn't need goalposts, foul poles, fences, or any of the other visual obstacles that typically announce loudly the presence of a sports field. A casual glance by the couple walking their dog or the family enjoying a picnic likely will reveal little or no evidence of the Ultimate activities played there several nights per week.

In addition, the City will benefit from the release of many soccer and football fields, formerly used for Ultimate games, back into the rental pool for those other sports groups.

This new endeavour remains a work in progress, but WODS and the City of Kitchener have high hopes for this marriage of a unique sport with a unique park location. At this time, WODS is one of only a handful of organizations in Canada with access to dedicated, full-sized Ultimate fields. Perhaps other cities and Ultimate organizations might be inspired by this relationship to seek out alternative, previously unconsidered sites to receive "the Ultimate treatment." ♦