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Not your father's Frisbee

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John MacDonald
Sports writer

VERO BEACH -

Despite having played various sports since he was a child, Troy Greenawalt didn't happen upon the Ultimate experience until about 10 years ago.



A friend introduced the Vero resident to Ultimate and it not only changed his perspective on Frisbee, but on sports as well.

"I started playing in 1996 and I've been playing ever since," Greenawalt said. "It requires a lot more athleticism than what people commonly think.

"Some people equate Frisbee with going in the backyard with the dog. It (Ultimate) requires a lot of speed, agility and hand-eye coordination. There's also a work ethic that goes along with it.

"I played basketball, baseball and football as a kid. I ran track. For me, my favorite sport to play is Ultimate."

While the sport is often referred to as Ultimate Frisbee, the game is more accurately called Ultimate because Frisbee is a trademarked brand name for discs made by Wham-O.

Ultimate is played with a 175-gram disc, which is sturdier and heavier than recreational discs that most people are accustomed to.

Ultimate does trace its roots to Ultimate Frisbee, which is believed to have been started by students from Columbia High School in Maplewood, N.J., in the fall of 1968. The sport has stayed essentially the same since its origin, including the rules governing movement and scoring of the disc.

Greenawalt originally began playing in Vero Beach close to the high school. He became part of the Treasure Coast Erosion Ultimate team and is still currently a member.

"A couple of guys started it before us," Greenawalt said. "They moved out of the area and moved on to other things. Joe Lopez and I are probably the oldest members of the group. We picked it up after them and kept it going."

However, interest in Ultimate waned in Vero Beach and Greenawalt was forced to search out new locations to play.

"There isn't a big enough population of Ultimate players in Vero," Greenawalt said. "It leaves me having to drive if I want to play. Since then, I have been going to Port St. Lucie, Fort Pierce or up to Melbourne to play."

Recently, Greenawalt competed with a coed team from Melbourne in the Club Florida Sectional Tournament, which is part of the Ultimate Players Association Club Championships.

The tournament took place in Vero Beach at Pointe West, and Greenawalt's team finished fourth. It was a drop from last year where his team finished second, but this year's squad still received an invitation to play at the regionals in Little Rock, Ark., later this month.

Unfortunately, not enough team members could commit to the trip.

"We had to back out of the bid," Greenawalt said. "I would have loved to have gone myself. It takes 12 to 13 players to commit.

"We had eight or nine that said they could go. It just wasn't quite enough."

Despite his disappointment, Greenawalt is encouraged by the overall growth of the sport. In fact, the UPA, which serves as the governing body for Ultimate in the U.S., lists over 22,000 members. It is also estimated that about 100,000 people play the sport in the United States.

"It's actually growing with the high schools," Greenawalt said. "I've seen high school players out there. Whenever you're good enough to get on the field and help your team, you do it."

Even though he won't be able to participate, Greenawalt also plans to attend the National Club Championships, which take place in Sarasota in October.

Eighty to 100 teams will be competing, which is another testimony to the increasing popularity of the sport.

Another lure of Ultimate is that there is no age limit for players.

"I play with several guys who are in their 40's and 50's," Greenawalt said. "It's not unusual to see. If you're still able to do it at a higher age, you're welcome on the field."

That is exactly where the 43-year-old plans to be three times a week for the foreseeable future.

"It's a way to get a good workout," Greenawalt said. "It's a great stress reliever.

"I don't know of any other sport where I get so tired playing it, but I have so much fun."

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