

For immediate release

WFDF to Establish a Task Force to Consider its Position on the Spirit of the Game and On-Field Officiation Issues for Ultimate

Background

(30 September 2013) All games in WFDF-sanctioned Ultimate Championships are played on a purely self-officiated basis, without outside adjudicators in the form of Observers or referees. In the large majority of cases this system works remarkably well, with highly respectful play and few or no incidents, even while maintaining a high level of competition. However, in just the last year there have been three highly visible games where significant issues arose that were widely commented upon: the Japan vs. Canada 2012 WUGC open pool play game, the Italy vs. Colombia 2013 WU23 open pool play game, and the Canada vs. Colombia 2013 World Games bronze medal match. These incidents were disruptive for both the spectators (live and on streaming video) as well as to the players. Concerns over overly aggressive play, cheap calls, and protracted discussions have prompted calls for WFDF to adopt Observers or even referees.

The issue of whether some form of referee (*vs.* self-officiation on-field) should be introduced into Ultimate has been debated since the inception of the game in the late 1960s. It was the cover story on the first UPA Newsletter in April 1980. The first “spirit of the game” clause was only introduced in the 7th Edition of the Rules of Ultimate in 1978. In North America, the concept of Observers, a third party who could be called in to provide an opinion on a foul or violation or even overturn a call, has been used since the late 1970s and was formalized in the early 1990s. Although the official Ultimate Rules used by WFDF had a provision for Observers through 2004 (when it was eliminated), in practice WFDF has always adhered to the principle of self-governance on-field in its Championship events. Nonetheless, the issue has been brought into even sharper focus with the introduction of full referees into the “professional” game as presented by the AUDL and MLU in North America.

There are a number of arguments that are made for why some form of Observer or even referee is needed. These include: long stoppages and discussions, lack of rules knowledge or differing interpretations, language barriers, lack of communication to spectators, difficulty maintaining impartiality in match-deciding situations, and teams or players who cheat. Many of these are primarily issues for spectators or for those who wish to grow the spectator base, but several also affect the players’ experiences as well. Proponents of Observers also will make the point that observers allow the best aspects of spirit of the game and self-governance and provide the protections so as to avoid having to adopt full refereeing. However, the counter-arguments that self-officiation works for nearly all games at all levels of competition, that it makes Ultimate unique, and that better education and emphasis can ensure that it works for all levels of play are also very strong.

WFDF already has several mechanisms in which third parties are involved in the governance of play and conduct. There is a Tournament Rules Group at every sanctioned event with significant power, formal WFDF timekeeper and line assistant roles, and the potential for a Conduct Committee review for egregious cases. And we must acknowledge that it appears that many players and administrators globally are at least thinking about alternatives to 100% self-officiating. In the most recent annual Opinion Survey of Member associations, while most strongly agreed that “Ultimate is not Ultimate without Spirit of the Game” (69.1%, or 38 of 55 respondents) and strongly agreed that self-officiating is a great branding opportunity for disc sports (63.6%, or 35 of 55), 58.2% (32 of 55 respondents) strongly or mildly agreed that “the use of observers to make line calls and settle disputes quickly preserves the best aspects of spirit of the game.” Moreover, players represented by the USA and Canada, where Observers are often used at the highest levels of play, represent 65.6% of all competitive players globally today.

Task Force Objective

Spirit of the Game is not the same thing as self-officiating. However, it is sometimes difficult to have a discussion about it because (a) there are many interpretations of spirit of the game (every player seems to have their own) and (b) many players still equate spirit of the game with self-officiation and view it as an all-or-none issue.

We highlight an underlying assumption that WFDF has two priorities in reviewing this issue. First, we are interested in preserving the best aspects of Ultimate being a player-centric game with control on the field. Second, we are interested in developing the sport so as to be interesting to spectators, sponsors, media, educators, and the Olympic Movement. These dual priorities are designed to make sure that athletes continue to want to play the game, as well as to promote growth through greater visibility.

For these reasons, the Task Force will have two objectives:

1. Reaffirm WFDF’s definition of Spirit of the Game and review, develop and strengthen existing programs in order to promote a clearer and more consistent understanding of how it should be applied; and
2. Answer the question on how does WFDF ensure that Ultimate athletes play a fair game that is also viewable (interesting for spectators in person and on TV/internet to watch).

The rules lay out the definition of spirit of the game, but it appears what may be missing is a clear understanding of how that definition is interpreted and applied. Some very concrete actions would likely always be considered “spirited”, while others may be dependent on the playing environment (e.g. competitive, recreational, or educational). For example, tennis -- which is mostly self-officiated -- has not only a rule book, but also a very detailed companion to the rule book called The Code, which is largely the practical application of the self-officiating philosophy. We believe what we need is more clarification of how to specifically interpret and apply that definition. However, we also don’t want to get bogged down in this first stage of the project; we are looking to agree on a perspective and set out an action plan for subsequent work if necessary.

We note that this second question is not the same as “should WFDF adopt Observers.” Rather, we want our games to highlight the positive qualities of player control (fair play, personal responsibility, communication) while not allowing the negative potential of player control (misconduct, disorganization, miscommunication) to overshadow or diminish the positives.

Task Force Logistics

We sought to construct a task force group with no more than a dozen members so that it would not become unwieldy. We felt it should be comprised of the WFDF Ultimate Committee chair, Rules Subcommittee chair, Championships Subcommittee chair, SOTG Subcommittee chair, a representative from the largest Member associations, an Athletes’ Commission representative, and a WFDF executive for the WFDF business perspective. We also wanted to add representatives from the Women in Sport and Youth and Sports Commissions, and representatives from a couple smaller countries for their regional perspective. Accepting that several of these positions overlap, the task force will be comprised of:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Background Roles</u>
Rueben Berg	Rules Subcommittee chair, Australia representative
Tiina Booth	Youth and Sports Commission
Will Deaver	Deputy Ultimate chair, US representative
Brian Gisel	Championships Subcommittee chair, Canada representative
Anna Haynes	Athletes’ Commission representative
Si Hill	Ultimate Chair, UK representative
Jarna Kalpala	Women in Sport Commission, Finland representative
Makoto Ohi	Japan representative
Nob Rauch	WFDF executive representative
Luis Rodriguez	Youth and Sports Commission, Colombia representative
Valeska Schacht	Women in Sport Commission, Germany representative
Patrick van de Valk	SOTG Subcommittee chair, Portugal representative

Volker Bernardi will also participate as a non-voting ex-officio participant in the discussion.

Robert “Nob” Rauch, WFDF President stated “This is going to be a difficult process. We’ve tried to pull together a “blue ribbon panel” that includes the full spectrum of opinions regarding on-field officiation – from pure self-officiation to observers to referees -- which may make it even more difficult. Nonetheless, given that these topics have been discussed for over four decades already, we are hoping that the task force will come up with an initial written report to the board discussing their definition of the scope of the review and expected target date for a final report by no later than January 31, 2014 with a final recommendation by mid-2014, in time for presentation to the 2014 Congress in Lecco.”

Rueben Berg will serve as chair of this task force. The first steps will be to evaluate the issues, further define the scope, and break down any research or lines of inquiry into manageable bits, through a series of e-mails and conference calls. On the first objective, we need to discuss ways to promote a more consistent understanding of what spirit of the game is and how it would be applied. On the second objective, given the way we have framed the question, the first issue to address will be whether there is actually a problem that requires some changes in our on-field governance policies, or whether we just require more and better education and peer review. If, indeed, it is agreed that certain changes may be necessary, then the task force will evaluate alternatives and determine how to introduce them. All along the way, we will expect that task force members will draw upon the input and expertise of their respective Committee and Commission members or of their national associations (as applicable) so that we take into account all perspectives. We also intend to do a global survey of players. While we would hope to achieve consensus, we would expect the final recommendations to be supported by no fewer than 80% of the task force members.

About WFDF

The World Flying Disc Federation is the international sports federation responsible for world governance of flying disc (Frisbee™) sports, including Ultimate, Beach Ultimate, Guts, and Individual Events. WFDF is a federation of member associations which represent flying disc sports and their athletes in more than 56 countries. WFDF is an international federation recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a member of ARISF, SportAccord and the International World Games Association, and it is a registered not-for-profit 501(c)(3) corporation in the state of Colorado, USA.

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