

Ultimate Ultimate

Coachless South Eugene Ultimate Frisbee takes fourth in the nation.

All year long Eugene high school teams hope to compete in the state championships. When a Eugene team wins a state title (once in a blue moon), a malay ensues. Parents hold parties, the team secures a better reputation (and maybe funding) for the next year, and the underage liquor is broken out. Naw, your kids don't drink.

But nationals, who from Eugene? Which high school has competed at the national level and come away with more than an afternoon of hay fever? And if they did, did they do it without adults? Without a coach?

Begin in 2002, when a group of lanky (and lumbering) friends tossed Frisbee on a sunny, South Eugene lawn. Discs bounced away from untrained hands, rolling across grass as often as they flew. The friends laughed, made plans for the weekend, talked about who'd just gotten a car, and what stereo they'd put in it.

Fast-forward to May 2004, the National High School Ultimate Frisbee Championships in — how auspicious — Corvallis. Eleven teams flew from New York, Chicago and points east. Five more

drove up and down the coast. Among them, a goliath: (Amherst, Mass.), 15 players moving as one, six-footers dressed in black, running circles 'round the rest of the country as if waiting for their flights home. Giving up only a few points per game, Amherst's thunderous footsteps sounded in South Eugene ears several fields away.

South, now older, more assured, ultimately more experienced than their bobbling summer of 2002, waited as well. But there was no time to wait, being tested every round, yet ever harvesting the fruits of their long labor; they ascended from game to game, a blazing torch with limited fuel, trying to last until Amherst darkness fell.

Back to 2003. Still more friends than athletes. Breeze Strout, quiet team leader, home-schooled and hanging drywall while the rest studied geography, had attracted Max Tepfer, Danny Kalman and Tim Schneider. Next, Strout's snowboarding buddies Dusty Becker and Richard and Ramsey Fuller added their momentum.

"I found people to come out," said Strout. "and some of them just wanted to fuck around. But I told them what I was interested in, and we started practicing for real."

They were a diverse crew: a tower of a thick kid, Richard Fuller, whose smile widened as quickly as he thinned out; a handful of unproved youth somewhere in the middle; and the mouth, Marcel Schaeffer, the kid whose impetuous humor tests everyone's patience, and who goes everywhere the team goes, because, god-damn it, he's one of you.

Practices run by Strout, Tepfer and Becker progressed, until when in April 2003, still coachless, they piled into Fuller's huge van and drove to Estacada. On the ride home, nestled amid duffels and sleeping bags, the shining state trophy glowed, more golden than the headlights.

Two months before nationals.

Axemen psyching up at the National High School Ultimate Frisbee Championships in Corvallis.



PATRICK HENNESSEY

Self-disciplined practices became brutal. Players, in top shape, signed a contract written by Tepfer, agreeing that for each practice they missed they'd run four miles. Signing the contract promised that for those next two months, ultimate would be each player's top priority.

Late May 2004, Corvallis. On Saturday South Eugene won two games, then lost a third. They needed to win their fourth and last game to reach the main draw on Sunday, where it was clear that if they continued advancing, they'd meet Amherst in the finals. All day they'd played their finest, and now before the first point they gathered in a circle, puts hands to their mouths and cheered themselves on until voices grew hoarse. Just over an hour later, they were victorious, having locked in at least eighth place in the country.

Sunday was beyond intense. The quarterfinals set South against the New York Beacon Devils. At half, Beacon held an 8-4 lead in a game to 15. At 9-7 a horn blew, capping the game, first one to 11. Continuing their onslaught with high-energy defense, South finished an unbelievable 7-1 point run, advancing with an 11-9 victory.

The semifinals against Northwest (Seattle) was the game of the tournament. Once again, the South Eugene cheer rumbled deep, heard across the fields. At 14-14

in a game to 15, Strout and teammate Eli Friedman were near the endzone, with the game in their palms. It was one of those plays that should work, but can go either way. How it progressed is unimportant. Despite the iron foundation laid by each member of South throughout those two years, something went uncrystallized. Northwest took possession, advancing down the field into the finals. South Eugene, smiling ear-to-ear nevertheless, shook hands with Beacon. For some it was crushing, but for only a moment. Strength that enabled the journey illuminated perspective on their great accomplishment.

Northwest scored only five points against Amherst, making the finals a definitive anti-climax. Few who trod grass that day felt that South wouldn't have given Amherst a much better game for their cross-country airfare; so it goes.

And so memories of the accomplishment were forever burned into their personalities: Breeze Strout, Dusty Becker, Max Tepfer, Ramsey Fuller, Richard Fuller, Danny Kalman, Will Davidson, Paul Trenler, Tim Schneider, Eli Friedman, Marcel Schaeffer, Sam Barber, Jon Bloch, Braden Larson, Corey Driscoll and Patrick Hennessey.

This lot was born from leaders, and from it were leaders born. **EW**



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South Eugene's Dusty Becker defends with a foot block.

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