

Caitlin Ghegan, “In Defense of Quidditch: Will the Game Ever Be Taken Seriously as a Sport?”

The seventeenth of November was a cold one in Newport, Rhode Island. At Fort Adams State Park, centuries-old stone walls could not keep the harbor wind from biting at visitors’ noses. Tents clustered near the fort’s wide entrance rippled visibly from across the courtyard. Several gathered teams had bedecked their flimsy shelters with signs and team colors; it was easy to recognize Vassar’s hot pink regalia and the swarm of purple shirts from NYU, among many others.

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NARRATIVE
introduction
tells about
a particular
match

Spectators huddled on plastic fold-up chairs, each perched on the edge of his or her seat, watching the referee drift back and forth between the two sides of the field, conversing with both teams: Stony Brook University and Middlebury College. Across the courtyard, twenty other northeast teams drifted between the five marked fields, clutching brooms and Styrofoam cups of hot butterbeer (a steaming butterscotch drink), waiting anxiously for the tournament to start.

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Identifies the
subject to be
analyzed

Yes, a Quidditch tournament.

The 2012 Northeast Regionals tournament in Newport was one of a series of meets, all hosted by the International Quidditch Association, to occur across the globe. As most people understand, the game was taken from J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, but this event wasn’t just a “play date” for fantasy lovers. Though each served as a sectional championship, there was much more at stake: a spot in the World Cup bracket, among teams from Australia, France, and Canada. Regardless of the brooms, the capes, and the obscure fantasy references, this was a competition.

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Uses process
analysis to
ARGUE a CLAIM
about the status
of Quidditch

You might laugh or raise an eyebrow, but Quidditch fans are a force to be reckoned with. At last count in November 2012, there were 833 collegiate and community Quidditch teams registered in the United States alone. Sixty-one come from Canada. There are groups everywhere from Britain to Brazil, South Africa to Russia.

This isn't just a fad for the wizard-minded. In fact, this wide-ranged community can agree that the sport is just getting started.

Quidditch, as the character Oliver Wood so astutely claimed in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, "is easy enough to understand." Apart from the obvious fact that players cannot fly in the non-magical world, not too much has been changed from Rowling's text. The sport's structure has often been compared to that of ice hockey. On each side, three "chasers" act as center and wings; they pass a Quaffle ball up and down the field to score on one of three upright hoops. Two "beaters" act as defensemen, tossing a slightly deflated kickball, known as a Bludger, at opposing players. These beaters colloquially state their job is to "annoy people"; every hit from a Bludger means an opposing player must drop whatever ball he or she may be holding and run back to touch the hoops on his or her team's respective side. A "keeper" is a goaltender. A "seeker" effectively ends a match when he catches the golden snitch . . . a runner.

The snitch runner adds a distinct element of silliness to the game of Quidditch. He or she wears all-yellow clothing and a "tail" known as the snitchball at the back of a pair of shorts. A snitch runner dances, cartwheels, and flips people over to avoid capture. He comes and goes, not always staying near the field. At last year's World Cup in New York City, the final match's snitch dressed in street clothes and hid in the stadium at Randall's Island, watching as the seekers confusedly tried to find him.

Though J. K. Rowling conceived of the sport, twenty-six-year-old Xander Manshel crafted it for the "muggle," or non-magical, world. As a student at Middlebury College in Vermont (graduating in 2009), Manshel pitched the idea to his group of friends. Among the group was current International Quidditch Association Commissioner Alex Benepe.

Benepe, also a 2009 graduate of Middlebury College, is a fixture at most tournaments held throughout the Northeast. Players can always find the chairman of the IQA board strolling across the

Explanatory
analysis of
players' roles
and special
equipment

pitches with his trademark black cane, top hat, and maroon-and-gold Gryffindor scarf. He enthusiastically asserts that Quidditch has “something for everyone.”

“I think people come to the sport for many different reasons,” Benepe says. “Some people come and take it very, very seriously as a sport and don’t want to do any of the wacky, fun stuff—and then you get the people that are here pure for the Harry Potter stuff. So you get all different people from different walks of life.”

Its unique characteristics, he believes, give strength to the game. There are aspects of Quidditch that neither spectators nor players will find in other sports. All teams, regardless of level (elementary-school-age to adult community teams), are co-ed; a rule asserts that all official matches must have at least two people of the opposite gender. Quidditch is also one of the very few competitively played games with more than one ball, an element that adds an intense and exciting sense of chaos. Most of all, the community believes that players of any level of athletic ability, shape, or size can excel.

And yet in spite of its appeal, most of the public considers Quidditch something of a joke.

Common skepticism and mockery stem from stigma; spectators and sports enthusiasts cannot overlook that the game came from a children’s book. Players are mocked for carrying brooms, given their inability to fly. Chris Bucholz, blogger for Cracked.com, asks his readers, “Could one of these horribly, horribly mentally ill people have cottoned on to the fact that the published rules for the game make no sense?”

Some state that Quidditch players cannot even be considered as athletes. Blogger Kenneth Diaz, who writes for USA Today.com sports commentary site Bareknucks.com, asserts that Quidditch enthusiasts are nothing more than overly zealous role-players. “These quidditch enthusiasts (I will not refer to these people as quidditch ‘players.’ Ever.) grow ever more bold in their public displays of unfunny stupidity—the worst kind of stupidity,” he

Introduces unique elements of the game

Anticipates a major objection to Ghegan’s position



Fig. 1. “Some people come and take it very, very seriously as a sport,” says Alex Benepe, commissioner of the International Quidditch Association. Photograph courtesy of Erik Jaworski.

declared in an entry from November 2010. “They’ve even deluded themselves into taking it seriously.”

Aside from the sociocultural reaction that Quidditch garners from outsiders, sports professionals consider Quidditch far too dangerous. At World Cup V, where over eighty teams competed in several matches, the IQA reported 136 injuries ranging in severity from small scratches to some that required hospital transport.

And several colleges and universities refuse to support the game due to its “dangerous” nature. Administrators at Boston’s Emerson College, one of the oldest and best-ranked teams in the

..... Identifies a potential problem with replicating the process

country, barred its Quidditch group from becoming an official club. In November, the community team at Ithaca College, located in Ithaca, New York, was rejected for a second time on the grounds that the sport was not developed with safety in mind.

Dr. Craig Paiement, associate professor of sports management at Ithaca College, says that the main concern is the broom that players run around with in between their legs, which creates “unnecessary danger.” Though he doesn’t know much about the sport, he says its future progress at the college seems unlikely.

“I would say that it is unlikely that general public will ever give it a ‘real sport’ status because of its start in a fiction movie,” Paiement adds. “The issue with the broom leaves it steeped in ‘fantasy’ and that will hold it back.”

Benepe argues that the stigma itself is the real reason that sports authorities consider the sport dangerous.

“I don’t think that Quidditch is more dangerous than other sports; I just think that because it’s less socially engrained than other sports, people are more shocked by it,” Benepe says. “You know, people die playing football every year, but it’s okay because it’s football. It’s held up on a pillar in society. . . . I think Quidditch, in order to get to the point where people are okay that it’s a sport where people get hurt, [needs to become] professional—as in people can make a living playing it and get hurt doing it.”

Having been a head referee at more than eleven regional and national tournaments, Chris McCormick, a sophomore Quidditch player at Metropolitan State College of Denver, has closely regulated more than forty official matches. McCormick sees the “newness” of the sport as the cause of underdeveloped or “unsafe” regulations and rules.

“I would say our tackling levels and our rules level needs to be upped,” he says. “There’s very few ways to do a one-handed tackle with the brooms safely. On the other hand, there are ways to do it. But most people who come to Quidditch come from a non-sporting background. . . . [Injuries are] going to happen with any contact

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A key element
of play poses
another
problem

sport, but if people know how to tackle safely and take a tackle safely, injuries will be reduced.”

Regardless of whether or not the sport is dangerous, McCormick says that those arguing the game is more about role-playing than an athletic activity clearly have never seen it played.

“People who are the most defensive about Quidditch invading the sports world are those wannabe jocks,” he claims. “They’re the kind of people who would root for a team but never actually play the sport themselves because they know they’re incapable.”

Though it faces many barriers to its further development, the International Quidditch Association continues to spread its influences across the globe. This past summer, the IQA created an Olympic Summer Games series in Oxford, hosted by an official London 2012 affiliate at the Olympic torch festival in South Park. The event, where all-star representatives from the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Australia met to compete, lasted two full days. At the 2013 World Cup in Kissimmee, Florida, which will be held in April, thirty-three teams from the United States, Canada, France, and Australia will compete.

Critics will laugh, but the sport will thrive, supported by an intensely devoted player base.

At the end of tournament matches, opponents line up not to passively shake hands but to excitedly offer embraces and invites to upcoming meets.

“There’s no other sport where teams are as friendly as they are, hugging and being friends off the pitch,” McCormick says. “In most other sports I’ve seen, you are enemies. You are out for their blood. With Quidditch, that’s over as soon as the match ends. You’re respectful, you’re friends. That is what makes Quidditch special.”

••••• Restates author's claim as a conclusion

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