

STUDENT

ENG 3303

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The Quidditch Culture

It's double overtime. The Osos De Muerte have come back from a 30-point deficit to tie the game. This match is the last chance they have in this tournament to pull an underdog victory for their team. The ball is thrown into the air, and immediately, three or four offenders from each side jump on it, scrambling for possession. In double overtime, the first point wins, and the team to get the ball first almost always secures the victory.

The players are scrabbling for the ball, and then all of a sudden, a whistle: the game is over. Neither team ever got possession, but the Osos have won.

The Osos' seeker stands tall at the edge of the field, proudly holding the Golden Snitch aloft in his hand. The team erupts in cheers, applause and victory cries.

This is Quidditch.

With the exception of the broomsticks, the three tall hoops, and of course, the Snitch, the game could have been any muggle sport, a form of rugby, perhaps, or even lacrosse. But it proudly includes all of the aspects of the Harry Potter game it is based off of.

Like the sport described in the books, muggle Quidditch is played intensely, taken seriously, and is not to be written off. The students who chose to play are far from the nerds they are often stereotyped to be. Although most players share a serious passion for the Harry Potter series, they are athletes first and fans second. The players dedicate hours of their time each week to practices, scrimmages, and games. For the Baylor team, all of the time spent practicing,

driving to tournaments, and playing has made them into something more than a team. They have become a family.

Although the first book in the Harry Potter series made its debut in 1997, muggles – which is wizarding slang for non-magical people – did not create their own version of Quidditch until 2005, eight years later. The first-ever game of muggle Quidditch was played at Middlebury College in Vermont. Now, more than a decade later, there are over 160 collegiate teams in the United States, with hundreds more in various other countries. The sport grew so quickly that in 2010, the nonprofit group US Quidditch was founded. The organization hosts nine major tournaments, supervises competitions, trains and certifies official Quidditch referees, snitches, and tournament directors, and runs the bi-annual ‘QuidCon’ leadership conference. The group is also working to make the sport available to kids at the elementary, middle and high school levels.

Baylor’s Quidditch team, which is an official university-sanctioned club, was founded in 2011 by a group of students who were interested in trying to play the sport. The team got off to a rocky start, facing a fair amount of losses in their early days, but soon learned the ropes of the game and began winning matches and even tournaments. The group became so popular it expanded from a single team into an A team, known as Baylor Quidditch, for which players have to try out, and a B team, known as Osos De Muerte, or The Bears of Death, for which anyone can play. The teams are co-ed and have a fairly even split of male and female players.

Baylor’s team practices at Minglewood Bowl, tucked away in a small, rarely-used corner of the grassy field between Brooks College and Brooks Flats. For two hours every Tuesday and Thursday, the players are there, scrimmaging so intensely that two wide swaths of dirt are scored into the ground in front of each side’s goals. There are three goals posts to each side, hula hoops that have been taped to varying lengths of PVC pipe. The hoops, which rise 1 meter, 1.4 meters

and 2 meters into the air, are fastidiously placed two broomsticks apart (a distance of precisely 2.34 meters).

Practice starts at the rock wall, where Quidditch players meet before each session. They could be preparing to play any sport. Everyone is dressed in workout clothes – old t-shirts, gym shorts, knee socks and cleats – but their ‘broomsticks’ (lengths of white PVC pipe) set them apart as Quidditch players. The broomsticks are a nod to the original game created in the Harry Potter books, but are also the most obvious failing of the muggle version of the game, as the players are limited to running around on the ground rather than flying. Indeed, unlike in the world of Harry Potter, where individual broomsticks are unique and treasured, these muggle broomsticks are interchangeable, brought to practice in a big bundle along with all the other equipment, nothing special.

Students occasionally stop to watch the practices, curious as to what’s happening. Anyone who has seen the Harry Potter movies or read the books recognizes the game instantly: the hoops are a dead giveaway, even if you somehow miss the broomsticks. Even if they are unfamiliar with the series, students who live in Brooks Flats or Brooks College, who routinely walk past the practices, get a sense of what’s happening, have read the players’ shirts with the Quidditch logos or maybe even asked what they were doing. It’s not limited to students on foot, either. The parking garage next to the field allows a bird’s-eye view onto the pitch, and sometimes the players will get shouted at: “You’re a wizard, Harry!”

The practice continues.

The balls are thrown around the pitch, in a pattern indiscernible to an outsider. The Chasers, Beaters and Seeker all move independently of each other, but the units comprise a team that is fluid and dynamic. After each play, the game is stopped and the captain goes over what

was done wrong, what was done right, and what can be improved. The players are focused, nodding intently, and execute each new plan of attack or defense with energy.

The team practices for games and tournaments they sometimes travel hundreds of miles to go to. For games, each player dons a green jersey with the BU logo prominent on a white slash across the shoulders of the shirt, forming a group of individual athletes into one intimidating team. Like most teams, at the tournaments, they take their Quidditch seriously. Baylor Quidditch has even gotten good enough to host its own annual tournament, Brooms on the Brazos, held in January. The tournament takes place on the fields behind the Baylor Sciences Building, which have a different feel than Minglewood Bowl. Bigger, more open, and unsheltered by buildings and trees, those fields lack the coziness of the regular practice fields. The BSB fields are also surrounded by the Cub Trail and a few sets of bleachers, so there is always an audience, unlike the quiet, occasional foot traffic of Minglewood. The BSB fields make the game seem more serious. Being there means being focused, competitive, and ready. The practices held at Minglewood are more relaxed, the closed space allowing for more room to joke around.

As the practice goes on, the sunlight fades and the field is lit by the streetlights around it. The bugs come out, gnats and mosquitos attracted to the sweat and carbon dioxide exhaled by the players. Moths fly around the streetlights, casting flickering shadows.

After practice ends, the athletes collect their equipment and go home, many of them to the same houses. They are not just teammates: they are friends, roommates, boyfriends and girlfriends who spend most of their waking hours together. It takes a certain kind of person to play Quidditch – fun, athletic, passionate, and more than a little crazy – and when they find each other, they tend to fall quickly into friendship.

That friendship is obvious when you walk through the front door of the house where half a dozen of the Quidditch boys live, but the first word you think is ‘crowded.’ Four couches take up most of the space in the small living room, in addition to a few random folding chairs, all vaguely centered around a coffee table with so many water stains on it that they appear to be part of the design. The room has clearly been decorated by college boys. Flags hang on the walls, and various street signs are propped around the room. In the corner is a defunct arcade machine. The TV rests precariously on a cheap wooden stand that appears more structurally supported by the DVDs and video games around it than it is by its own shelves.

The residents appear happy and comfortable, most often found lumped together on the couches, eating pizza, joking around and playing video games. They’re quick to assure visitors that the parallel house inhabited by the girls is just as haphazard, although that remains to be seen.

When the conversation turns to Quidditch, the team gets serious. Their postures change: the relaxed college boys are replaced by athletes, sitting forward, backs straightened. They can talk for hours about the sport, discussing strategy, past victories and losses, and why they love playing. Everyone agrees that the worst part about Quidditch is telling people unfamiliar with the sport that they play, and being written off as unathletic nerds. Muggle Quidditch takes a lot of work to be good at. There are seemingly endless rules and tactics to be learned, and the full-contact sport is not for everybody. The players wear no helmets, and on the Quidditch pitch, things can get violent.

At first glance, the game seems simple, with no room for excessive chances of injury. All players have a length of white PVC pipe serving as a broomstick tucked between their legs at all times. Three chasers (offenders, in colloquial terms) throw, kick or run with a quaffle (semi-

deflated volleyball) and try to get the ball through one of the opponent's three hoops, a feat which is worth ten points. Each team has a keeper (goalie) defending the goal hoops. Meanwhile, two beaters (defenders of sorts) each use a bludger (semi-deflated dodgeballs) to knock out other players. This is not where the violence comes in, however: the bludgers cannot be thrown at a player's head.

Any player that is hit by a bludger is out of the gameplay until they run back to their side of the field and tap one of their goal hoops. Each team also has a seeker (an ultimate offender, if you will) who tries to catch the Snitch, which ends the game. The capture of the Snitch is worth 30 points (a deviation from the books, where the Snitch is worth an almost-always game-winning 150 points). The Snitch, like the broomsticks, is less glamorous than its fictional Harry Potter counterpart: it is a ball in a yellow sock tucked into the waistband of the player known as the Snitch runner.

The logistics are simple. The gameplay is messy.

Chasers can use any means necessary to get the ball from the other team, including, but not limited to, jumping into another player for a pass interception, cornering and diving on an opponent who has the ball, and full-body tackling of another athlete. Every player on the field is constantly in motion, running, diving, jumping, passing, catching, and dodging in an attempt to help their team score. The small field and the four balls combine to create a situation in which players routinely crash into one another, both accidentally and on purpose.

The guys on their couches describe the different injuries they've seen: broken femurs, sprained ankles, shattered wrists, too many bloody noses to count. The fact that the teams are co-ed means that small girls can sometimes be up against guys weighing a couple hundred pounds more than them and standing more than a foot taller. Even the Baylor players agree that there

should probably be more rules concerning safety. Often, the athletes take it upon themselves to ensure that chasers and beaters are paired up with opponents roughly their size. Being matched against a person twice as big as you is simply unlucky, because nobody is going to take it easy on you. When a team does feel there has been unnecessary roughness, they get mad and fight back, taking care of their own.

This potential for roughness contributes to the reason Quidditch a real sport. It goes beyond being a hobby that happens to require cardiovascular fitness and hand-eye coordination. There is real danger in the game, and so anyone who plays has to be wholly and utterly committed. This is what makes the teams so strong and cohesive, and what helps them create bonds as tight as any family. Every single player is an important part of the team, and everyone is all in. Win or lose, the group leaves every game knowing that each athlete did their best, and that everyone is willing to work even harder to ensure the next match is a victory.

This sense of unity goes beyond individual teams and extends across entire tournaments. The bond created by Quidditch means players often create friendships with students from other schools. In big tournaments, whole teams from out of state will crash on the hosting team's couches, temporarily setting aside the competitiveness and getting down to the core values of respect, friendship, and ultimately fun and a game well played.

Beyond its validity as an athletic sport and the closeness it brings to its teams, Quidditch also considers social issues as it is being played. The US Quidditch site details the game's version of Title IX, appropriately called Title 9¾, which promotes gender equality and inclusivity, allowing for any athlete to play as the gender they identify with, regardless of their sex. Although this is a less concerning matter for fairness in a co-ed sport, the policy still stands

as a testament to the game's forward thinking in issues like gender identity that have the potential to prevent a player from participating in a sport they love.

The US Quidditch organization also recognizes that the sport serves as an opportunity for kids who might otherwise not play a sport to go outside, make friends and get moving. Bookish children, especially, have the chance to make an imaginary world real and enjoy that opportunity, while still creating healthy habits and a love for exercise. US Quidditch has done 'kidditch' workshops with summer camps, after school programs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and the Boys and Girls Club. This commitment to the physical health of children nationwide prove that muggle Quidditch is definitely a sport, but also so much more. It has reached a level where the commitment of its players has left a positive impact on communities around the country, which is truly the goal of any sport: for people of all ages to have fun watching and playing it.

Although it has not been around for very long, muggle Quidditch has already established itself as a real, competitive sport, which requires athleticism and skill beyond what the average person may think is necessary to play what was once an imaginary game. The amount of work that goes into preparing for each game and the violence of the full-contact sport make muggle Quidditch more than a hobby. As the sport continues to establish itself, it maintains a sense of what is truly important, keeping the game open to individuals of any gender identity and encouraging kids to get active. Quidditch, while definitely highly competitive, creates a sense of camaraderie in its teams, and even in teams across the nation, that adds to its value as a sport.

These virtues are clearly exemplified in the Baylor Quidditch teams. The athletes are completely willing to engage in a crazy random sport despite what their peers may think of them, and they have become very good at the game because of that commitment. They found a sport that they can excel at and enjoy, and they gained a family along the way.

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