

The Toughest Day In Sport

Pool Play At The 2001 UPA College Championships

May 25th 2001

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The Format

Over 300 college teams have worked the last seven months to be one of the 16 men's and women's teams to qualify for these championships. Seven months of practices, weekend tournaments and ever downward sliding GPAs and by today's end each division will have had four teams eliminated, eight facing a do or die elimination round ("lingering death") and four teams sitting on the top of the world.

Sport reporters talk about how "such and such college basketball team has a difficult schedule" because they have to play two games in three days -- well how about three games in one day!

Pressure. Fatigue. Exhaustion. That's why this is the toughest day in sport.

Round One (8:30-10:30)

Every single round this year has at least one 5 star, can't miss game, so load up on Red Bull and plan on making a day of it.

This round has two interesting (call them 3 star games ★★★) in the women's division that will be of special interest to local fans: Tufts (the 8th seed) vs. Illinois (#13) and Brown vs. MIT. Tufts features last year's Callahan Award winner and current member of the US World Games team, Johanna Neumann. Johanna (senior, #13 -- 5'11), recovering from late season shin splints, is probably college ultimate's most dominating female player and the Tuft's offense revolves around her and co-captain, senior Neva Cherniavsky (#3 -- 5'4).

Two other teams local to the Boston area square off on field 10, Brown (#6) and MIT (#14). Brown lost its top player, Addie Egan to an ACL injury early in the season, but has enough seasoned talent to still have a realistic shot at the Final Four. MIT has a young squad and their goal is to avoid being eliminated on the first day and make Saturday's pre-quarter round.

The three best men's games in Round One all have a common theme: jet lag. For many teams this game is really starting two (or three) hours earlier -- a big deal for college students that flew in the previous day.

Without a doubt, the five star (★★★★★) game of this round should be the men's game between UCSB (#1) and UNC-Chapel Hill (#12). This game is a rematch of their quarter-final game from the 2000 Championships that UCSB won by a point. Last year's game was an unbelievable defensive struggle filled with athletic blocks that left plenty of bad blood on both sides. Chapel Hill features two of the country's best players in (the frequently injured) Rhett Nichols and big man Ray Parrish. UCSB sports an equally athletic team captained by Nick Fiske and Dwight Hines and since the late 80's the Tide has won 6 national titles, including '96-'98! Ernie Aubin of the Tide is a monster of a player and UCSB enters the tournament as the #1 seed. But should a sleepy UCSB lose here they'll instantly be in huge trouble -- that's the cold beauty of this format.

Two other men's game should go to the wire and could (even likely?) feature upsets: (★★★) Colorado (#2) vs. Michigan (#11) and (★★★★) Oregon (#3) vs. Duke (#10). Michigan is a strong team featuring one of the leading Callahan Award candidates, Tim Murray, and gets the bonus of playing in its own time zone. Michigan is a very solid team (runner up at the Classic City Classic in Athens) that is stronger than its seeding. Colorado has been one of the favorites for each of the past 3 years and they're one of college ultimate's most entertaining teams to watch. Led by grad students Mark Driver and Steven Rouisse (who attended high school in Amherst, MA) Colorado has an experienced team filled with athletes.

Duke defeated Oregon earlier in the year and features two top players in their co-captains Caner Cooperrider (#55) and Paul Klenk (#4). None of the players on the Oregon or Duke teams have ever played at the championship tournament, but both teams played very demanding regular season schedules and qualified from tough regions. Ben Wiggins and Doug McKenzie (#12) are probably Oregon's top players and if either gets off to a slow start look for an "upset."

Finally, the other "homer" game of this round (★★) will be Brown (#8) vs. Harvard (#13). Ivy league teams actually win championships in ultimate (OK, it's rare, but Brown won the title last year) and these two teams split their regular season match-up. This should be an entertaining, hard fought, game.

Round Two (11:00 – 1:00)

The women's pool is very deep this year, with at least 9 teams having a legitimate shot to win the tournament! Picking the women's final four is especially difficult as two of the lower seeds, Brown (#6) and Tufts (#8) have the advantage (and crowd support) of being the "home" team.

The no-brainer game to watch this round (★★★★) features two final four women's teams from last year: Georgia (#4) and Carleton (#9). The Carleton women (Syzygy) won last year's championship for the first time after being perpetual final four contestants. Both of these teams are stacked with good players, with Georgia having two Callahan candidates in captain Katharine Kidd-Shippey (#3) and Angela Lin (#71). Carleton lost several key players from last year's championship team, but a super recruiting year has left them in excellent shape to make a run for a repeat. However, for both of these teams to make the final four one of them is going to have to win an early game Saturday morning ("the pre-quarters") – a tough row to hoe.

The (★★★) Stanford (#7) vs. Bucknell (#10) will be a bell-weather game for the '97-'99 champions from Stanford – if Stanford can defeat Wisconsin in the first round and then deal with a skilled Bucknell team, they could be back in the hunt for another crown. The huge game for Stanford will be in the 4th round against UCSD, and Jennifer Donnelly, the Stanford coach, will try and get her team grooved using these two early round opponents. But Bucknell, led by Callahan Candidate, Kelly Reiners, is no pushover; the team has a core of skilled throwers and sticky handed receivers and during the regular season they defeated both Carleton and Brown and had close one-point losses to Georgia and UNC-W.

The men's division doesn't have anything that quite compares to the Georgia / Carleton women's game, but for a couple of teams, their season will already be on the line. The pool A game (★★★) between Brown and UNC-Chapel Hill should rock and if UNC enters this game after a tough first round loss, they'll have to dig very, very deep or they'll be looking at a pre-quarters game – or worse. Brown won the championship last year, but lost a good portion of its starting team to graduation. Moses Rifkin, is trying to become the third consecutive Brown player (behind '99 Fortunat Mueller and '00 Justin Safdie) to win the Callahan Award, but he'll have his work cut out for him trying to cover UNC's Ray Parrish.

In Pool B (★★★) Michigan could find itself in a similar position to UNC, facing a strong Tufts team after having played a brutal first round game. On paper these teams look very similar and this game is likely to end 15-13 one way or the other.

Finally, pool D features ultimate's white hat, black hat game (★★★) with Carleton College taking on UNC-W. Carleton College (located somewhere in Minnesota), is everyone's favorite college ultimate team, while UNC-W (rightly or wrongly) is its most vilified. Both teams have had great success, with Carleton qualifying for the championship tournament virtually every year since man created flying plastic, and UNC-W dominating the sport in the early 90's. Carleton features a horde of good players, none gooder than Alex Nord (#5 – 6'5), this year's overwhelming favorite to win the Callahan Award. Alex is simply one of the best players to ever to play college ultimate and Carleton's fans (of which there are plenty) are counting on him to help CUT to its first championship title.

To many, UNC-W is personified by its coach, the incendiary Mike Gerics. But UNC-W features two outstanding offensive players in Rhett Russ (#17) and Trey Snow (#3), and Tim Wiegand (#13) is one of

the county's best defenders. UNC-W is riding an 11 game win streak, so they shouldn't be lacking in confidence.

Round Three (1:30 –3:30)

This is the first year the women's division is being played under the fast paced X-Rules and if nothing else it means goodbye to coaches filibustering out on the line between each point – something every ultimate fan can be grateful for.

Round three is the beginning of crunch time and for each division one team will be off to the consolation rounds, while two others will find themselves trying to dig out of the deep trench of being in tomorrow morning's pre-quarter round.

Maybe no true five star games this round, but (★★★) UBC vs. Tufts could be good – if Johanna is healthy and Tufts is able to quickly win its first two games. Ultimate may be unique in having teams play three championship caliber games right in a row (8:30am, 11:00am and 1:30pm) and by the beginning of the third game fatigue becomes the major factor. UBC (#1) is a clear favorite to be the first Canadian team to ever win a UPA Championship, and they sport a talented team. Senior captains Lara Mussell (#77) and Wiljo Captein (#10), lead UBC and Lara is a genuine super-star. Her play, combined with UBC's larger rotation (12 or more women play regularly) should wear Tufts down. Both teams have excellent coaches in Jonathan Wooldridge (UBC) and Paul Sackley (Tufts) and it'll be Paul's job to figure out a way to utilize Johanna and offset UBC's superior depth.

The Colorado (#5) women's team joins Georgia and Carleton in Pool D ("D" as in "death") and it's not impossible that all three teams could end up in the Final Four. In round three (★★★★) Colorado takes on Carleton and Colorado brings an experienced squad featuring senior Chelsea Boyle, (#27 -- 5'3") on offence and Lori Moore (#24) on defense. Colorado made the semi-finals of College Easterns and played a tough regular season schedule. It's very possible that three teams in Pool D could finish 2-1 with the pool winner being determined by a tie-breaker of point differentials – so every point counts.

The men's game between (★★) UCSB and Brown is likely to determine the winner of Pool A. Both teams have squads of around 18 players, but UCSB should be coming off the easier game (Harvard) so give the advantage to UCSB.

Pool C could very well be decided by the outcome of the (★★★) Cornell (#6) vs. Duke game while the (★★★) Wisconsin vs. UNC-W game will set the stage for pool D. Wisconsin has a huge squad and by the middle of the second half several of the key UNC-W players are going to start checking the old fuel tank.

Round Four (4:00 – 6:30)

Round Four at the College Championships is the year's best 2:30 hours of ultimate. Twelve evenly matched games take place almost simultaneously (six of the games are staggered and start 30 minutes after the first six) allowing a spectator to wander from one exciting finish after another. And the outcome of every game is crucial for the teams involved: for some it means the end of the hunt, for others its lingering death (the team's probably dead – the players just don't know it), and for the lucky pool winners, it means a trip directly to the quarter-finals and an extra two hours of sleep.

All the women's games (except, probably, Carleton vs. Washington) should be good, but the money games should be (★★★★) UCSD (#2) vs. Stanford (#7) and (★★★★) UNC-Wilmington (#3) vs. Brown (#6).

Virtually everyone has UCSD making the final four of this year's women's division, and although Martyna Bryn is their Callahan candidate, they don't really have any one star. The UCSD offense features Corinne Ginsberg, Jen Sanderson and a handful of other experienced players. UCSD's played an ultra competitive schedule and done extremely well: they won the Santa Barbara tournament and

President's Day, and finished second at both the Stanford Invite and College Easterns. But Stanford has a team filled with veterans of previous Championship tournaments and features one of college ultimate's best players in Camille Yu (#10).

UNC-Wilmington returns most of the squad that got them to the 2000 finals last year against Carleton, but that may not be good enough. Virtually all of the top women's teams are significantly improved over last year and a return trip to the finals this year is hardly guaranteed. UNC-W features what would charitably be referred to as a no-holds-barred attitude fueled by their star player Leah Rehill. Coupled with UNC-W Callahan candidate, Nikki Miani, UNC-W can quickly knock a team off balance and then bury them before they have a chance to recover.

The Brown women have traveled extensively this season and have played many of the top teams – including two games against UNC-W. But they lost both of these games, along with most of the other games they've played against teams that qualified for the Championships. It'll be up to the Brown coach, Lori Parham and what's likely to be a large, partisan crowd of supporters, to keep Brown from getting off to a fatally slow start. The UNC-W coaches, the excitable Andrew Zeldin and level-headed Pete Schuhmann, will try and get Seaweed primed for the kill – if UNC-W can take four of the first five points, this one's going to be over.

Picking which men's games to watch is going to be equally tough and many of the most exciting games will feature lower seeded teams valiantly trying to avoid elimination. Best bets are likely to be (☆☆☆) Oregon (#3) vs. Cornell (#6) and (☆☆) Carleton (#4) vs. Wisconsin (#5).

The Oregon vs. Cornell game will be decided by less than three points – you can bet your last dollar on it. Cornell's best player, without a doubt, is senior (and Callahan candidate) Nate "Sideshow" Eisinger and he's a non-stop highlight film of layout defensive bids. Oregon features defensive star, Joseph Kleffner, so expect to see plenty of intense defense from both sides. Oregon and Cornell have already played twice this season (the world of top-flight college ultimate teams is pretty small) with each game being decided by a couple of points. Oregon is bringing 23 players to the tournament and Cornell should have around 17, so give Oregon a slight edge. But Cornell's a perennial qualifier, so they've got the experience. Overall, it's probably a toss-up. Neither of these teams are exactly shoe-ins to make the final four, but this game's going to be non-stop fun.

Carleton vs. Wisconsin is a rematch of their Regional Championship game won in convincing fashion by Carleton 15-6. This game isn't likely to be so one sided, but with Wisconsin having just finished what should be a close game against UNC-W, Carleton is going to have a significant edge. Wisconsin is led by Callahan candidate and captain, Jonathan "Opie" O'Connell (#8 -- 5'10"), who's not only a great player, but who's leadership has brought Wisconsin back into the ranks of ultimate powers. If nothing else, check out this game to marvel at Alex Nord's ability to cover players on short offensive cuts (his foot work and quickness is outstanding) and the number of quality athlete assembled on one ultimate field.

Finally, don't forget games like UNC-W and U Penn (#13). These games featuring lower seeded teams will be every bit as intense, as two cornered teams fight for their lives.

Conclusion

But perhaps the best part of the day will be after the last round as players and teams get back together to eat, drink and compare injuries. Although the competition on the field will have been intense, think back about how smoothly the day went, about how few foul calls you saw, and how few of those calls were contested. Here at the College Championships, with North America's best teams playing under intense pressure for a championship title, sportsmanship still thrives.