

## “A Universal Language”

by Eliza Pugh

I sense nothing else but the Frisbee flying high coming at me from my left. I hear nothing but the pounding of cleats hitting the grass, belonging to me and the girl who is chasing me, and our breathing, fast and out of sync. *Faster*, I think, lengthening my stride. *Engage*, I think as I feel my quads strain. I know that in just seconds, I will need to take off to reach the disc. *Three, two, one...* I launch off my right foot, right arm extending as far as it can. I feel my palm connect with the 175 grams of cool, hard, white plastic, the object that all fourteen of us on the field at the moment would sacrifice our bodies for to keep from touching the ground.

And in that one glorious second of airborne flight and baited breath, the Frisbee and I suspended in midair, I could have been back in time playing ultimate anywhere in the world. Ultimate was, and still is, my way of breaking through any language or cultural barriers and immersing myself in other worlds. The same way others may use art, dance, or food to form cross-cultural friendships, I use a Frisbee.

I was fifteen and I was in rural Yunan province catching the disc tossed to me by my farmer host dad, who, despite my embarrassingly minimal Mandarin skills, allowed me to persuade him to play catch through excited miming gestures. There was straw beneath our feet and livestock milling around the yard as we threw in compatible silence.

I was seventeen and I was on a side street in Trujillo with my Peruvian host siblings, scrambling to catch an overly enthusiastic throw by my giggling eight-year-old host sister. I had practiced in my bedroom beforehand how I would ask them in careful Spanish to let me teach them how to throw a Frisbee. But I think that my wide smile and exuberant hand motions overshadowed any poor conjugations and omitted articles because I had barely finished talking when Cristina and Juan were pulling me outside.

They allowed me to coach them in throwing backhands and forehands until we eventually stopped needing to talk as we threw in a triangle, at ease in the cool evening.

I was twenty and I was in Rhode Island at the last ultimate tournament of my sophomore year, proudly wearing my crimson Harvard jersey, playing with some of the best teammates I've ever had. We played on fresh cut, grassy green, paint-lined fields. Throwing and receiving errors were few and far between, defense was fast and calculated, and long hucks were chased down in exciting one-on-one footraces that concluded in spectacular overhead grabs and layouts as teams peaked in the New England regional tournament.

Then, suddenly, I am back in the present and my ears open and noises crash over me. I land, sliding on my stomach, the Frisbee gripped in my right hand. I hear the people that had been yelling the whole time. Shouts of “Vamos” and “¡Qué lindo Eliza!” fill the air. The girls on the sideline clap and yell excitedly, most of them shorter in stature, more tan in skin color, and darker in hair color than I. The snow-capped Andes Mountains that line the Eastern side of Bogotá tower over us.

This time, as a twenty year old in Colombia, I had at last, increased my Spanish vocabulary and didn't need quite so many hand movements to find a way to play Frisbee. I had shown up in August with a hostel address and the names of a few ultimate teams written on a scrap piece of paper and managed to worm my way onto a team and into a national tournament.

Like so many other creative outlets of sport, energy, expression, and art, the cross-cultural reaches of ultimate make it a natural platform for forming ties to other worlds. What makes the language of sports universal are the values it inherently teaches: teamwork, leadership, competition, strategy, the sheer thrill of the chase, and the sting of a loss. When I play ultimate, the landscape around me, the people surrounding me, and the languages swimming around me may vary, but the sport itself is a constant – the players running and striving for the same goal of scoring a point. Ultimate Frisbee is the

show in which everyone's undivided attention stays focused on the main attraction that speaks silently to us all – the disc.