

One year ago in the Spring 2006 edition of the UPA magazine, I started my letter with the words “It is a truly exciting time for Ultimate.” And it was – growth in membership had reached an all-time high, the sport was more visible in the public eye than ever before, and UPA members enjoyed access to the highest-quality competitive events and educational services available anywhere in the world. The rest of 2006 was no different – Ultimate is at a great place!

However, moving into 2007 it’s time to sing a different tune – “it is a truly exciting time to invest in the future of Ultimate.” Why have I had a change in tune? Because the UPA and Ultimate itself is experiencing a confluence of conditions that make the future both exciting and necessary to focus on. These conditions include (but are not limited to):

- Coming acceleration in the growth the number of people playing Ultimate: Creation and nascent growth of the UPA’s youth division in the past few years suggests that a new spurt of growth in Ultimate in general is likely to occur, whether it be at the recreational or more competitive levels.
- Maturity in the UPA’s current member services: At the risk of tooting our own horn, the UPA has gotten pretty good at providing its core set of services (e.g., Championship Series, educational programs, league outreach) – surveys done with members recently as part of the ‘Ultimate Revolution’ project attest to this. While its easy to rest on our laurels, our own members are also pushing the UPA to identify ‘what comes next’ in helping the sport grow.
- Availability of people and money to make change happen: In the past few years the UPA staff has grown from a few people to 7 full-time staff, and our networks of volunteers has grown as well. Additionally, in the past 5 years we have built up a meaningful cash reserve above and beyond that which is necessary to fund regular operations in the event of a ‘disaster’ (e.g., weather canceling the Fall Series). This combination of people and money has finally made significant investment in Ultimate a reality.

I’d like to spend the rest of this letter telling you about two ways the UPA is ‘investing in the future’ in truly significant ways.

Developing the Ultimate Revolution

As outlined on the magazine’s cover and in the article on page 6 of this edition, the UPA’s effort to develop a long-term strategic plan – a living document that will be titled “Ultimate Revolution” – is well underway and is benefiting from the input of thousands of members and non-members alike. At this time we have entered the second of 3 phases in the process that will result in Ultimate Revolution. In the next ~6 months I encourage you to attend one or more of the forums being staged across the country by scores of volunteers, and give your input on how the UPA should use its resources to shape the sport of Ultimate into the next decade.

What type of investment is the UPA making in this process, and in the ‘Ultimate Revolution?’ The Board has committed to a budget of well over \$70K for this process during 2007, to pay for time with professionals with deep experience in non-profit strategic planning, fund the forums mentioned above, and more. Additionally, each member of the Board and staff, and scores of other volunteers have anywhere from a few hours to weeks of their time to gather and synthesize input, facilitate forums, do independent research, draft suggested language for the Revolution, and make decisions about the final document. I hope you’ll join the momentum here – this is one of the best chances you’ll ever have to directly invest in the future of Ultimate at a truly broad level.

Improving technology to improve your Ultimate experience

Most of us are quite familiar by now with the host of services the UPA provides with the help of information technology – for example, the UPA’s basic website, online tournament listings and score reporter, and online membership renewal and status checking. What most members don’t recognize is that these systems have been assembled over the years (largely) by a succession of truly heroic members of the Ultimate community. By developing interactive, online member services these individuals have made the UPA run much more smoothly, and in the end have kept dues lower by replacing human tasks with information technology.

Largely because you’ve asked for it, the UPA is committed to continuing to use technology to improve our services to members. For instance, we rolled out a long-awaited online rostering system in 2006. Unfortunately, the past couple of years have brought a tough realization to the fore – since our information systems were developed gradually over the course of over 10 years in a piece-by-piece fashion, we have reached a point where further investment in the current systems may in fact be a bad investment – the cost of dealing with bugs due associated with each incremental piece of the system outweighs the benefit of the new service.

At the January 2007 meeting of the UPA Board of Directors, the Board approved a significant sum – upwards of \$150K – to be spent during 2007-2008 as necessary to build a new IT system from the ground up. This new system will both replicate our current online services, and make it possible to add new functions like online waivers, all while significantly reducing the time and money UPA staff have to spend dealing with IT – freeing up their time to play an even more important role in the ‘Ultimate Revolution.’ While we don’t anticipate that you’ll notice much publicly as this project is going on, we do know that in the future you’ll come to appreciate the improved service.

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Again, it is a great time to ‘invest in the future Ultimate’ – the two examples mentioned above are just a couple of the ways the UPA is ensuring that as the sport grows, our members continue to have a great experience and can continue to play a direct part in that growth.

Finally, on behalf of the membership, Board, and headquarters staff, I want to extend deepest gratitude to our outgoing Board members, Kate Bergeron, Tommy Proulx, and Christian Schwoerke. In particular want to thank Kate for her leadership of the Board and the UPA in a transitive period where the UPA went from an organization with fledgling business practices to one that manages a large budget and delivers great services to tens of thousands of members in an extremely professional way. Tommy’s consistent focus on local and youth Ultimate has helped the organization keep appropriate focus on this very important membership segment, and his leadership as long-time Treasurer has helped ensure the financial stability (and thriving!) of the organization as it has grown from ~\$500K to over \$1.2M in annual revenues. Finally, thanks to Christian for his contributions to disc standards, Board development, and his focus on leagues and league organizers. Additionally, I would like to thank the membership for electing our new Board members for 2007, Dave Lionetti, Colby Gilman, and Kyle Weisbrod.

Looking forward to great Ultimate in 2007!

Mike Payne
President, UPA Board of Directors