

# Kind of a Big Diehl

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Jim Diehl '76 was not exactly under the impression that he was part of a sporting revolution when he began playing competitive Ultimate Frisbee as a high schooler in New Jersey during the early 1970s — and his portrayal of the game's early days paints that picture rather clearly.

"It was just a bunch of hippie-ish people running around playing Frisbee," Diehl says. "Everyone played barefoot. It was great."

For the sport itself, though, it was much more than that. Diehl and a small group of contemporaries are largely considered responsible for paving a path to Ultimate's growth and emergence nationwide, having championed the sport when it was barely getting off the ground.

For that, the game's governing body in the United States, USA Ultimate, has inducted Diehl — along with 28 fellow pioneers — into the Ultimate Hall of Fame, going so far as to draw a parallel between the group and an American folklore hero in the process.

Diehl and his cohorts were inducted not as individuals but rather as a group under the “Special Merit” designation, collectively dubbed the Johnny Appleseeds. Diehl, who was a member of the UNH team throughout his time in college and captained the squad as a senior in 1975–76, was moved by the recognition, especially because he doesn't think of himself a trailblazer.

“I was honored and humbled by it,” Diehl says of the induction. “At first it was sort of embarrassing, because I really didn't feel like I did anything — all I did was play the game. But it's great to get recognized for doing something you love to do. It was almost surreal. I think I happened to be in the right place at the right time and just loved playing.”

That right place was New Jersey, and that time was the early '70s — according to USA Ultimate's website, Ultimate Frisbee was developed at the state's Columbia High School in 1968 and spread to neighboring schools by 1970, including Diehl's alma mater, Passaic Valley Regional High School.

That's where Diehl was first exposed to the game, and he quickly fell in love with it — much to the chagrin of his track and field coach. A shot put and discus thrower, Diehl ditched his senior track season in order to play intramural Ultimate, and after graduating and heading to UNH, he joined the newly formed team there.

Many of Diehl's New Jersey counterparts did the same at other colleges, and that grassroots approach to expanding the game's reach throughout the country is ultimately what earned the Johnny Appleseeds their place in history, as their induction noted the honorees' success in the “germination” of the sport, as well as their role in aiding its “self-sustaining growth and penetration,” without which Ultimate “likely would have disappeared.”



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What never disappeared was Ultimate's steadfast commitment to sustaining its laid-back style, represented humorously in the nicknames of some of Diehl's fellow Appleseed inductees, including handles such as Yogi, Igor, Buddha, Stork, Zoop — and the notably on-the-nose Bruce "Frisbee" Johnson.

While the style was often casual, the action on the field was always intense, Diehl says. But the camaraderie between teams always shined brightest, and that's what created his most lasting memories.

"It was very competitive, but it was all in the spirit of sportsmanship," says Diehl, who fondly recalls the UNH team borrowing a university van to cruise to away games together. "You sat with your opponents on the sideline. We didn't have 'their bench' and 'our bench' — we didn't have any benches. Everyone just kind of hung out together. We were all just there to play a sport, and anyone who made a great play, you appreciated it, whether they were on your team or not."

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