Terwilliger, Jack: The Geneseo Ultimate Community

Video Link:

Proposal

As a member of Ultimate Frisbee, I view the activity as more than just a fun, recreational game that's been stereotyped as a college pastime. I am not the only one, for there is a whole community that sees this as true, athletic sport. The Ultimate community has gradually attempted to make the public aware that the game with the disk isn't just a university club sport. Bauerle states that the community went as far as making attempts to gain acceptance in the International Olympics (Bauerle, 1974: 301).

I will be spending my time filming the SUNY Geneseo Ultimate team, Snail, and I intend to display how these players identify as on an athletic scale—possibly compared to other sports. As an addition, I will also explore how they see themselves through a collective identity, thus exploring the significance behind one's membership toward the team (Jones, 2017: 304). I hope in my ethnographic film that I will portray the team in a holistic manner—in which Karl Heider states that the events/subjects must be understood in their own cultural and social contexts (Heider, 1976: 7). A lot of my ethnographic knowledge of film will be based off chapters from Jay Ruby and Heider. Heider, specifically will not only draw importance from holism, but also cinematic honesty, in which I aim to be aware of the distortions that may be drawn through filming, thus using proper filming techniques, as a result, to limit the amount of "reality-distortions" produced (Heider, 1976: 7).

I will be conducting interviews of players and coaches in front of and behind the lens in order to gather the most information as well as to provide a comfortable interview environment, where the interviewees can truly express themselves. These interviews will then be complemented with footage of practices and tournaments, where I intend to fill with a narrative, but nothing like Robert Gardner's "Voice of God" technique. My goal is not to make art, because it is not easy to justify an ethnographic film if art exceeds ethnographicness (Ruby, 2000: 112).

Background

After the Wham-O company created a modified version of a plastic disc, naming it the Frisbee, in the early 1950s (Bauerle, 1974: 300-301), the toy would ultimately lead to the creation of a variety of sports and games that produced major followings of their own. Ultimate Frisbee was among these established sports. However, unlike other major sports, Ultimate contains two distinct characteristics: the spirit of the game and self-officiating (Robbins, 2004: 315). These features were very crucial to what drew me to do research for the sport, especially the spirit of the game. As an Ultimate player myself, I wanted to find a way to express the feelings of legitimate Ultimate players and how they relate to the athletic world and identify as a unit, for the Ultimate community, through my eyes, almost felt a little stigmatized compared to other sports.

To start things off, I wanted to focus on how the community identified themselves on a scale of athleticism. A source that listed the physical demands of Ultimate made a remark that no previous studies had experimented on Ultimate before, despite other sports, like hand ball, had handfuls of many? a few? be precise studies done on them (Krustrup and Mohr, 2015: 3386). As it turns out, Ultimate's high running intensity and aerobic nature make the sport equivalent to other major sports, such as hockey and football, and that scientific research indicates that same amount of fatigue and physical demands as any other sport (Krustrup and Mohr, 2015: 3389-3390). The athletic component can be backed up the increasing community and recognition the sport has gradually been receiving in the past recent years. Ultimate became a medal sport at the World Games in 2001 and also over 100,000 players at a collegiate or professional level played ultimate based on a 1996 report, and that is obviously increasing (Robbins, 2004: 314).

As I interviewed my subjects, I wanted them to focus on what the the concept of spirit of the game meant to them as an individual and how it applies to the collective identity of the team. Sports, in general, are communities that embody a notion of mutual ideas and interests within a group (Leach, 2006: 50). This collective identity is very well present in the Ultimate community and according to some of the interviewees there seems to be group affirmation occurring, thus aiding to build positivity towards one's group identity (Jones, 2017: 307). The "spirit of the game" is a concept that represents a pervasive ethos, in which players can mediate plays through their various perspectives and still gain a pleasure out of playing the game (Griggs, 2011: 105). A study on a UK Ultimate team pointed out that Ultimate, "reinforced the moments that possess expressive and evocative elements, intellectual beauty and drama," (Griggs, 2009: 1322) because of the competitive nature that rises from whole process. Therefore, not only does Ultimate help's give a person an identity in relation to his teammates, but also an increase of sentimentality and emotion when playing the sport.

Overall, I wanted to ask a set of questions for my interviewees that would not only encompass the athleticism behind Ultimate, the spirit of the game, and the collective identity of the players (the topics I spent most of my research on), but I also wanted to ask questions that related to the team itself. Particularly, I asked questions on the Snail's relation to the school ("Do we get enough recognition from the administration?") and the change in regiment over the past year. I, like other anthropologists who studied sports, wanted to become "part of the drama" and I made sure that my emotions went into this project without hindering the objective of the film (McGarry, 2010: 161).

Discussion

I came into this project wanting to do a format that relied heavily on interviews, and short narrative points in between each of the interview topics. I based this largely off Ruby's (2000) discussion of Robert Gardner's vision as an artist to "salvage authentic cultures", by not focusing on the community's economic and political conditions, even though I wouldn't necessarily say that I am "salvaging" anything (Ruby, 2000: 106). I wanted the audience to get a good look at the intensity of Ultimate, to see how fierce the game truly is. However, I did not wish to use Robert Gardner as a heavy influence. I used his "Voice of God" narrative as an example of what not to do when talking about a culture, for it imitated something that came out of Hollywood (Ruby, 2000: 105). Instead, I wanted to be more direct and lean more heavily on my interviews, which I gained a lot of influence from the interviews in Cannibal Tours (1987) and Guardians of the Flute (1994). These films reflected the "ethnographic understanding" and truth that Heider discussed in his writing. He also states that since there are obvious differences between written ethnography and film (1976, 9), therefore I tried to make my film as simplistic as possible, while still having an effective message.
Nicely written discussion with some good research.

References Cited

Bauerle, R.

Griggs, G.
2011 ‘This must be the only sport in the world where most of the players don’t know the rules’: Operationalizing Self-refereeing and the Spirit of the Game in UK Ultimate Frisbee. In Sports in Society, 14(1):97-110.

Griggs, G.
2009 ‘When a ball dreams, it dreams it’s a Frisbee’: the emergence of aesthetic appreciation within Ultimate Frisbee. In Social & Cultural Geography, 12(10):1317-1326.

Heider, K.

Jones, Ian

Krustrup, P. and Mohr, M.

Leach, J.

McGarry, K.

Robbins, B.

Ruby, J.

Written Reflection

Looking back on this project, I am amazed that I didn’t change too much from what I had proposed. Really, the only things that had truly changed were the additional topics and questions I gave to the interviewees. I thought I kept the “ethnographicness” (Ruby, 2000: 112). I promised in my proposal, I didn’t want to make the film look as though it was dishonest or artificial to the viewer. All of Heider’s (1976) views to what should be achieved in ethnographic film seemed to be fulfilled. For example, I thought I did a decent job creating a holistic atmosphere by developing an understanding of the subjects within their social/cultural contexts (Heider, 1976: 7). One of the things I wish I had done was that I should have interviewed even more people, including the coach on the men’s team and even members of the women’s team. The only reason why I decided not too was because of the limited amount of time that came with video. It would have been absorbing to get the women’s own self-identity and see if they had any different responses to my questions. The only reason why I did not handle the subject—in which the question was brought up after my presentation of the film—was due to the same rules that apply to both men’s and women’s ultimate and the my experience of viewing the same qualities in how the teams worked. However, I did get a little eager to learn about the Geneseo Escargot team (the women’s team) more after a fellow classmate brought up the hyper-masculine chants that arose from the sidelines in the tournament footage. When it came to making the film ethnographic, I stuck to the guidelines of what I wanted to do: I wished to make a simplistic, but effective film that got it’s message through its interviews. I guess the stylistic choices were what made my film more ethnographic, rather than the narrative. Even though the written component held more evident ethnographic material, the appearances of the filmed interviews were my true goal in this project and if I just had more time, i could have approached a variety of other topics that would have answered more questions. Yet, overall, I feel that my film was realistic and successful in reaching its goals and letting Snail’s and Ultimate’s identity be heard.