

SOCKEYE

The team was founded in 1990 and five years later they appeared in the finals of UPA nationals for the first time. Since then they played seven times in the finals winning three of them and becoming the champions of the North America. We have talked about one of the world's best teams with its captain Ben Wiggins. The instructor of molecular biology at the University of Washington has been playing seven years for Sockeye and he has the team's logo, a furious fish grabbing a disc, tattooed on his body. We expect to see Sockeye in Prague this July at the club world championship.

Sockeye started as almost purely Seattle team. And if you ever planned to start a team in the ideal conditions for ultimate you would probably consider Seattle area as one of the places to go. Thanks to a mild weather you can play outside the year round, the leagues and tournaments of the NW region are played by more than eight thousand players so you can play a tournament every month without ever leaving the Seattle system. Among the popular every year's events is one of the biggest mixed tournaments Potlach and a junior tournament Spring Reign attended by more than hundred high school teams from the area. The junior scene is great and it is mostly related to the team Moho which became a brooder of the most of the junior players. The project MiniMoho is focused on even younger middle school players.

The North-west region is one of the toughest in UPA. Teams like Sockeye, Jam, Rhino, Revolver and Furious George fight to qualify to the Nationals. One of these teams must miss the finals every year while each one of them would belong among the favorites for the overall winners. Is playing in such a strong region more an advantage or disadvantage? "Sometimes I daydream about playing in a region where qualification is virtually assured...but how fun would that be? I'd rather play hard games all of the time. I think I can speak for the team when I say that we don't like huge victories nearly as much as tight games with great teams." And there is certainly enough tight games for everybody in the qualification.

Innovate or die

One of the main reasons of the Sockeye's success is according to Ben Wiggins, the innovation. The group of players that found the team and led it all the way to the finals of the UPA nationals three times in a row was formed of extremely talented players. But that on its own is not enough, the important part says Wiggins, is that they brought such strategies into the game which nobody had used before. Most of these players keep playing just in the masters and they don't miss opportunity to remind the "youngsters" how much better they used to be.

Although or therefore Sockeye keep up the credo of a constant change: "Two keys to our success in this decade have been a commitment to defense and a conscious decision not to use the same strategy just because it worked in the past." says Wiggins . According to him, team sometimes tries crazy things which prove silly in the end. But at the same time they manage to come up with new approaches to the game that are really working.

The players and teams are forced to constantly change their plays by the reality in the North American competition. The top teams do not change very often and the best players know each other very well. As Wiggins notes, some of the Sockeye players even focus on particular match-ups while training. "There is always some new technology that another team has designed to beat us or slow down our best players. It is never boring." concludes the team captain.

Before an important international game the team prepares accordingly. They try to get a video or an advice from friends if possible. Before the games against Aussies or Japanese at the 2008 World Championships they knew every opponent's player and they knew, as well as possible, what each of them wanted to do. "They still did it well, though!" says Wiggins and adds that it is not always possible to get the relevant information. "In that case or even if we can, we try to focus on our own play and our own effort. That is a good recipe for any game."

Not for the trophy but for the team

The turn of Millennium was not easy for Sockeye; many players left and the line of success was disrupted.

The hard core of players kept the team going and they decided to add some new talented players. Thanks to this they could play the semifinals of UPA nationals already in 2002 and start another row of finals appearances. Despite Sockeye was stopped in the semifinals in last two years Wiggins looks back at the decade as at a satisfying one: "We have to keep reminding ourselves that the trophy at the end of the year didn't make us happy in '04, '06 or '07...it was the feeling of TEAM that was worth all of the work and all of the sacrifice."

Coming back to top after a generation exchange shows us how important are the tryouts for the life of the team. Sockeye have developed a complex, pretty strict and demanding system of tryouts. The team opens up to new players once a year, the tryout season takes place from the beginning of March to the end of April. At this time only 5-6 players have their position in the team secure; they form a so-called Personnel Committee and decide about accepting the new adepts. Other returning players can attend the trainings, the new adepts must first get through The Combine – a one day open tryout tournament. According to the players performance on the tournament they can either get an offer to come to Sockeye trainings or they can be picked-up by other Seattle teams as Voodoo, Downpur or some of the mixed teams. Many players come to Sockeye from Voodoo so it could be considered as kind of a Sockeye B-team except it works mostly independently. Next main feeders are University of Washington, Western Washington University and University of Oregon, all universities within a reach from Seattle.

If a player does well at Combine he gets his "agent" (one of the PC) who communicates with him concerning the trainings and gives him a feedback on his performance.

The whole tryout process is topped by a tournament in California in the end of April. According to Wiggins average four new players come to the team every year but some of them are players who come back after missing a season or two. The main reason for current players to leave Sockeye is hardly ever that they do not catch up with the great youngsters. They mostly have to leave Seattle due to school, job or family reasons. "Imagine a team made up of Chase, Lou, CK, Sam O, Will, Giora, Phil, Stoney, the Monohans,, Pat, Brook, Barney, Jaeger, Dufort, Karlinsky etc...they would be amazing! And that is just the players gone in the last 5 years." recalls Wiggins. At the same time he stresses that thanks to their tryout system they came across some talents who would otherwise not have been on their radar. The tryout process also makes sure everybody on the team is willing to train and play hard and give up some other activities.

And what skills should you have to get through the tryout process successfully? The website information speaks clearly: “There is no set group of skills we are looking for. Do what you do best. We will change our team strategies to fit outstanding talents, not ignore talents that don’t fit into our strategies.”

The hardest working athletes

A typical training week of Sockeye consists of a Tuesday track workout, Thursday skills practice and one or two weekend practices of about 3 hours each. Many players practice individually but without any strictly given rules – the personal commitment depends very much on how much time can people spare besides their jobs, schools and families.

During the off-season players come to play basketball, football or other cross-training activities that are more fun than anything else.

The description of one of the world’s best team practice week does not sound particularly fascinating but as Wiggins concludes: “Some of the hardest working athletes I have ever been around are on Sockeye.”

A wild week

Teams like Sockeye don’t have many reasons to travel abroad. Unlike other UPA teams, however, they had a chance to make at least two important trips beyond the north America. The first one was a visit to a Dream Cup 2008 tournament in Fuji city, Japan, where they went together with a women team Fury.

Both teams were picked up by special buses at the airport, they were officially welcome in the hotel and the first day they had an audience with Fuji city mayor. But Sockeye did not come to Japan to play celebrities, even though the only real game they had was the final against Buzz Bullets (which they lost by the way). An important part of the trip was leading of some training camps for young Japanese players.

The second trip was to Colombia where ultimate is growing rocket-fast. They as well played a tournament and ran a training camp. They have a kind of a sister-city relationship between Medellin and Seattle.

The WUCC in Prague will another of few occasions for Sockeye to travel abroad as a team. It is an exciting event for them and they even adjust their training plan to it, even though they are not able to 100% confirm they are going. The reason is simple and maybe too familiar to us: “Being American, it is hard to convince anyone that we are poor...and in truth, we are lucky in that regard and we all know it. Compared to other American teams, though, we have many people that are either students or teachers, and those are not jobs that pay particularly well.” says Wiggins.

In Prague will be played without the observers unlike most of the UPA games. Is it going to be an issue for teams from America? Wiggins thinks that just partly: “Observers are really excellent, and they make Spirit better. Playing without observers means, that there might be a call that is a do-over because no player had a good view. At UPAs, we don’t have to worry about that. But, really, we play ULTIMATE. That means that you might lose an important game because the other team made bad

calls and you refused to go down to that level. If that happens, so be it. I'd rather lose with class than win by cheating, and I know my teammates agree."

The last WUCC so far was played in Perth, Australia, in 2006 and it was stigmatized by a small UPA team attendance. The winning team Buzz Bullets from Japan plays consistently on the very top level and it fully deserves the title. The presence of four best American teams will, according to Wiggins, increase the overall quality of the tournament and will make it a tougher week.

As it comes down to guessing the possible results of the week Wiggins takes his hands off. There are too many good teams coming either from the USA, Australia, Canada or Japan. European teams gain a respect too; to win against some of the European national teams in Vancouver was not easy let alone they will be on their home turf. Wiggins expects a top form from Clapham which took place in an elite ECC tournament and played very well in only 17 players.

There is one guess Wiggins gives away: "Some team will make the quarterfinals or semifinals that you would never have suspected before the tournament. Ultimate is like that, teams get on hot streaks and they play better than it seems like is possible. Make your predictions, and then expect to throw them in the garbage. It's going to be a wild week."

And how about Sockeye themselves – are they coming to win? "Always," smiles Wiggins and adds seriously: "If we do it right, we'll give everything we have in every game. If we truly do that, and at the end of the week someone gives me a ribbon for '23rd' place, I will be proud and honored to wear that ribbon as a symbol of all of our work and fun together."

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