Inquiring Minds - Aggies on Broomsticks

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There's Hogwarts magic that happens when literature spills over into real life

Students from English were wishing for Harry’s Nimbus 2000 in this 2013 Quidditch game on the Quad. Broomsticks are harder to ride than one would think! The first “official” Quidditch game came out of a 5000-level medieval literature class.

By Professor Doris McGonagill

It wasn’t field hockey or Aikido or Pilates. I had watched from my office window in Old Main as students on the Quad carried a mysterious piece of equipment, a staff of some kind. Now they were back for some kind of game. The following week, the family dog served as pretext to observe the procedures from closer up. The game also involved various balls of different sizes. The dog and his person were equally intrigued.

Every so often there was a chaotic eruption of movement, the rules of which I could not make out. Students were running at high speed — chasing, catching, throwing and dodging balls. It was only when I saw three hoop goals erected at the end of the field that I finally understood: These students were playing Quidditch.

If you have been initiated into the world of Harry Potter, you know that Quidditch is a popular — and dangerous — sport played by wizards and witches flying high in the air on broomsticks. The imperturbable and resourceful Aggies down here on the Quad had replaced the magical sport’s most iconic piece of equipment, the broomsticks, with PVC pipes, which they held with one hand while they ran tirelessly up and down the grassy green.

After practice, I approached then team captain Cameron VomBaur and shared what little I could bring to the table. Besides my enthusiasm, there was my name. I am Professor McGonagall, much like Minerva McGonagall, the strict but fair head of Gryffindor house. It was McGonagall, Transfiguration teacher and Quidditch aficionado, who recruited Harry for the Gryffindor Quidditch team and gave him his first broom.

Back at my desk in Old Main, I did my homework. I learned that students at Middlebury College in Vermont were credited with inventing a real-life version of the sport. Quidditch played by Muggles (non-magical folk) resembles a combination of hockey, basketball, and dodgeball, with a refreshing dose of rugby and self-depreciating quixotism mixed in. An athletic close-contact sport, to be sure, but with a strict code and high ethics.

From the Page to the Pitch

Quidditch teams have sprung up all over the world. In the United States, during the summer months, there is Major League Quidditch, as well as a world championship. During the school year, university and community teams compete for national titles.

Like the fictional game, real-life Quidditch is played with seven players and five balls. Three chasers, wearing white headbands, try to score points by throwing the Quaffle (a repurposed volleyball) through the hoops. A Keeper, position signaled by a green headband, guards the three hoops to prevent that. Two Beaters (black headbands) are trying to “knock out” opponents with Bludgers, for which dodgeballs are used. And the Seeker, with a gold headband, tries to catch the enchanted Golden Snitch, an elusive walnut-sized ball with silver wings.

In Muggle Quidditch, the Snitch is a tennis ball, tucked into a yellow sock attached to the back of an impartial player’s waistband — another inventive way of overcoming the obstacles our muggle world presents.

Mythical beginnings involving a USU English professor

As with many great movements, the exact beginnings of Quidditch at Utah State are shrouded in mystery. But there are a few names that figure prominently in the team’s Myth of Origin. Notably there was George Williams, a
veteran Quidditch Keeper and head of a clan much like
the Wizarding Weasleys. Also, Dakota Briggs, a famed
Seeker, and Tya Johnson, History student and Beater of
the first hour, laid the foundation for great things to come.

The other name that ought to be mentioned is that of
Christine Cooper-Rompato, associate professor of English
with an expertise in medieval literature and all things
Hogwartsian.

By some “midwifery magic” of her own, Cooper-Rompato
assisted the birth of Quidditch at Utah State in hitherto
unsung ways and became the first and longest serving
adviser and faculty contact for the team.

In fall 2014, the official Year One of Quidditch at USU,
Utah State Quidditch became a registered university club.
In 2015, I joined Cooper-Rompato as club adviser. In
the five years since its inception, Utah State Quidditch
has thrived. In fact, the team deserves a grade of “O” for
“outstanding,” the highest grade in wizarding academia—
followed by “E” (exceeds expectations), A (acceptable),
P (poor), D (dreadful), and T (troll). The USU Quidditch
Team is currently ranked first in the West, and recently
won the Regional Championship.

On a cold Monday in February, three Quidditch players
— Amber Zehner, Dru Smith, and Blake Rodman — meet
me at the HUB and help me brush up on the latest. Last
year, competitive USU Quidditch made the transition
from University Club to Sports Club. The changeover
offered obvious perks such as better access to athlete
resources, allocation funds from Campus Recreation, and
a professional trainer.

Sadly, as USU Quidditch moved from the Quad to Legacy
Field, I lost the VIP view from my office window. And,
just as I thought I was finally getting down my Professor
McGonagall act, the team had no need any more of their
old CHaSS mentors.

A sport for CHaSS to embrace

My children have always maintained that Old Main looks a
lot like Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. (They
also preferred the basement office I had at the beginning,
(Old-)Mainly because they got a kick out of telling friends
that their mother dwelled in “The Dungeons”— more
adventurous that way, albeit more befitting to a Slytherin
than a Gryffindor.)

I have come to think of Quidditch as an ideal sport for
CHaSS. The brainchild of a literary author, it entered
the “real word” via the side door of fictional writing and
now plays an important role in many lives, emotionally
and — as shown by the USU Quidditch Team — also
physically. For all its tough athleticism, Quidditch is deeply
humane and inclusive. It hones the social skills and, most
importantly, it is about building community, bonding over
something one loves, and the power of the imagination.

Professor Cooper-Rompato taught me that “Dumbledore”
is an old word for “bumblebee,” another example of the
many lovably whimsical details in Rowling’s book. Maybe
we should take a leaf out of it and, in honor of Harry
Potter’s 40th birthday next year, have a CHaSS Quidditch
tournament on the Quad, complete with VIP seating in the
stands and campus-wide broadcasting.

We also need a Trophy Room in Old Main. Here, we
could display the numerous Quidditch awards, cups, and
medals the USU Team has won. Maybe, we should have
a speaking, moving (and laughing!) portrait of Christine
Cooper-Rompato.

Suggestions for passwords to the Trophy Room should be
sent to Natalie A. Smoot, Executive Assistant to the Dean,
or anybody familiar with the spells that grant access to the
Dean’s Office.

Quidditch at USU officially began in a 2013 5000-level
English class on medieval literature taught by Christine
Cooper-Rompato, associate professor of English. She
brought brooms, balls and hula hoops for the class activity
that grew and grew, like Dudley’s tongue after eating
toffee.
In muggle Quidditch the snitch is a neutral position, identified by the tennis ball and sock stuffed in a back pocket as played here by Jordan Thompsen.

Once a registered university club, Quidditch was “promoted” to be a new Club Sports team in 2017 and is now part of the university’s Campus Recreation Program. The team, seen above in spring 2019 practice, has moved from the Quad to Legacy Field and competes nationally. (Photo courtesy Doris McGonagill)

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About the Author

In addition to being a specialist in the world of Harry Potter, Dr. McGonagill is an associate professor of German. A native of Germany, she earned her master’s degree at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, and her Ph.D. at Harvard University. She is the author of the book Crisis and Collection: German Visual Memory Archives of the Twentieth Century (Königshausen & Neumann, 2015). She’s taught at USU since 2009.
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