

# No Guts No Glory

Yoopers invented Guts Frisbee way back in 1958. Today folks are whipping the saucers at one another all over the world, but the game's U.P. DNA still guides the action.

By Lynda Twardowski



Barb Thornton

**O**n a steamy night in late June, inside Michigan Technological University's Wadsworth Hall, a banquet is underway. White tablecloths cover tables. Bright orange napkins, folded to resemble flowers, perch beside plates. Platters of cheese, crudité's and various speckled dips sweat atop trays packed with ice. Banquet guests--attended to by waiters in starched white shirts--sip wine and beer, clink glasses, mingle.

A few women wear dresses; some men, sport coats. Others wear T-shirts--many stained with grass, dirt or rusty splatters of blood. A man near the crackers lifts his shirt to reveal a raspberry-colored scrape on his belly. The guy next to him has a fat, bloodied lip. A third man limps up. The trio laughs, shakes hands, pats shoulders. Most of their fingertips and knuckles hide under thick white bandages.

The occasion? The 50th annual Guts International Frisbee Tournament (IFT). The players here tonight have survived day one of the competition. Guts, a kind of hybrid between red rover and murder ball, is played like this: two five-man teams line up, facing each other about 15 yards apart. A member of one team whips a Frisbee, at speeds averaging between 50 and 75 miles per hour, at the opposing team members, who must catch it--using only one hand--before it touches the ground. If they fail, the throwing team gets a point. If they succeed, they get to throw. Whichever team scores 21 points first, wins.

At tonight's banquet, decades of players from around the United States, Canada and Japan will honor and induct into the Guts Hall of Fame some of the game's most storied competitors. Tomorrow, the teams will resume the weekend's objective: to win, and in so doing, to fight to the death. Or, judging from the walking wounded hobbling around the banquet hall tonight, something darn close to it.



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**A**t its inception, Guts wasn't a bloodthirsty sport. It was a drinking game, invented by the Healy brothers at a 1958 Fourth of July family picnic in the Upper Peninsula's Eagle Harbor. The boys--Bob, Jake, Tim and Pete--had gotten their hands on a Pluto Platter, the 1955 precursor to the Frisbee, and began tossing it around.

Then, as now, there were no official uniforms. There were few official rules, with one exception: the oft-cited addendum 69B, wherein players were required to have a beer in one hand at all times. (Hence, the evolution of one-handed play.)

As the Healys' game drew bigger crowds and more players each year, word of Guts spread beyond the U.P., across the nation and eventually overseas. Among the converts was a slew of young professionals--doctors, lawyers, pilots, labor negotiators, etc.--who feared the repercussions of being associated with the beer-soaked sport yet couldn't resist playing. They took on nicknames to conceal their true identities: Dr. Kildare, Thor, Charlie Brown, Steel Hands and Sky King, for instance. The aforementioned members of the Foul Five, the team famous for unseating the nine-year reigning champion, the Healy Brothers' North Central team, in 1967. After that fateful game, Steel Hands and Charlie Brown were never seen again; to this day no one knows their real names.

**D**espite a history of undercover operatives, showmanship is a natural manifestation of Guts. The disc demands it. By design, a Frisbee's trajectory is never wholly dependable: the thrower's arm speed, the direction of release, the forward or backward spin applied to the disc, the speed and direction of the wind, all conspire to make catching the frenetically spiraling Frisbee an athletic and acrobatic feat. Dramatic dives, face-plants and cartoon-like blurs of knees, elbows, tennis shoes and dirt--these things you can count on.

Credit "Steady Ed" Headrick for making what aerodynamics there are possible. Head of research and development at Wham-O Manufacturing in California in 1964, Headrick needed to do something with the warehouse of plastic left over from the rapidly receding Hula-Hoop craze. He decided to modify the Pluto Platter, patenting in 1967 a series of rings on the disc top to enhance its stability in flight, then refining its shape so it could slice the air like a switchblade. One year later, prompted by Bob "Boots" Healy's taunt that U.P. Guts players were the best, Headrick assembled a team, the California Masters. He brought his gang and his new disc to the U.P., won, then did it again in '69.

Headrick died in 2002 at age 78. Before he passed away, he made a final request: that his ashes be molded into memorial discs and distributed to friends and family. As he told a *New York Times* reporter the October before he passed, "When we die, we don't go to purgatory. We just land up on the roof and lay there."

**H**ancock Driving Park, a mangy mid-summer turf of thirsty grass and dirt, is corralled behind a chain link fence next to Hancock Bottling Co., the Livestock Showing Swine Barn and a baseball diamond. Just after noon on the final day of the 50th IFT, crowds are stacked six deep around the park's three Guts playing fields. The smell of sizzling brats wafts through the air. A loudspeaker crackles: "The beer tent is now open. 69B must be enforced. Come and get your beer." A handful of spectators amble over, but no players. They're on the fields, smacking gloves against their thighs. Tossing blades of grass to check the wind. Guzzling jugs of water between plays and shouting as the Frisbee fires at their faces: "Hands! Hands! Catch, catch, catch! Bag it!" And, when they dump a disc: "@\*%\$!"

Has Guts gotten serious? Evolved in its intensity? For some, definitely. In the 60's and early 70's, Guts was a great reason to party. The game was at the height of its popularity, and crowds of 5,000 plus came for the show. Giant tent cities sprang up around the IFT field, and players tossed Frisbee all day, partied and shouted their team's name into a bonfire-peppered darkness all night.

But quietly, casually, athleticism became the name of the Guts game. The catalyst? Swollen fingers point to the IFT's 1973 Duel at Dawn, held that year in Copper Harbor. It was the championship match between the two-year-titleholder Highland Avenue Aces, and the Bosch Beer HuntHers. Falling darkness had aborted the finals game the night before. So at dawn, under the shadow of Brockway Mountain and the landing lights at Copper Harbor Airport, the game resumed--fierce, brutal and bloody. At one point, a Bosch guy, gushing buckets from his nose, was offered a time out. Legend has it he grabbed a discarded wad of paper from the ground, shoved it up his nostril and simply growled, "Throw it." That game was, recalls Mel Visser, IFT's resident bagpipe player, "one of the finest athletic contests I have ever witnessed." After Highland Avenue won, Visser climbed to Brockway Mountain's lookout and, as the morning mist lifted, began bleating the first somber notes to "The Battle's Over."



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**F**ollowing the fervor of the 70's and 80's and a brief fizzle in the 90's, Guts is on fire again. And while the old guard tends the flame, it's the new guard who's lighting it up. On field one: Japanese teams Selfish and Katon (the undefeated Guts world champion team) are geared up with soccer shorts, compression shirts, wrist bands, leather gloves, cleats and their own portable scoreboard.

On field three: the winningest team in IFT history, the Cupola Bandits, facing off against last year's IFT champs, Lansing's Boomtown Saints, a crew of mostly neighbors and brothers assembled by dad Mark Banghart, 1976 IFT winner.

As a Bob Dylan tune whines from the cab of a 4x4 somebody has backed up to the fence, the Bandits stalk the field in torn sweats. One wears a knee brace; another, a beard. On the other side of the field, Boomtown's 24-year-old Mike Banghart--long, lean and with a notoriously lethal backhand--shouts to his teammates, "We have one game, one!" The boys nod, faces stoic. He raises his arm to signal the coming throw to the Bandits, then takes two steps back from the line, drops his glove, storms forward, spins and unleashes. The disc screams across the

field, chopping air like playing cards in bicycle spokes. The Cupola guys contend it was a bad throw--vertical at the line. Debate ensues. The verdict: Good throw.

"That's why we finish the shot," barks Mike's dad, Mark. The boys grimace. When Boomtown's 24-year-old Ryan Scott readies to throw a few minutes later, Mark asks, "What's he throwing?" Backhand. Mark nods: "Good. Too much wind for his forehand. Backhand is a good choice." The disc wobbles--an easy catch. He asks what's Ryan's next throw. Backhand again. "No," Mark yells. "That is a mistake. He will flutter it."

Ryan launches the disc. It is backhand, and it is good. It sails through Cupola's wall. Boomtown takes the game, advances to battle the Florida-based Silverbacks, then falls apart. A bad throw. A missed catch. Another. Boomtown calls Mark to the line. The old pro swipes Silverback's next disc from the air like a trout does a passing fly, but by game's end, it isn't enough: the young guns are out.

Hours later, the sky has turned from blue to slate, the temperature plummets, and only two teams remain: the two Japanese teams, Selfish and Katon. It is unexpected, this turn of events. The final round of the 50th annual IFT, the U.P.-born Guts tourney at its mid-century, is empty of Yoopers. Of old guard. Of homegrown new.

The crowd, which only minutes ago chanted, "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" in the semi-final round between the Silverbacks and Selfish, huddles tight beneath picnic blankets, some grim, some stunned. The young men of Katon set down their jugs of green tea, flip their scoreboard to zero, then take the field. Their faces are focused, stony. Then, seconds before play begins, one player turns to the crowd, smiles and shouts the single American phrase that has proven most useful on this trip: "You betcha!"

The crowd goes wild. Everyone cheers, jumping up from their camp chairs to raise sloshing cups of beer to their newly adopted Japanese sons. Dusk is coming, but the people go on for minutes, hooting, hollering and howling at the darkening sky.

A new day for Guts is, once again, dawning.