

## Retiring on top of the world

Pending a Guinness Book of World Records review, Drewbie and a trekking group might have played the highest game of Ultimate Frisbee ever. Elevation: 16,808 feet in Nepal.

When you play a sport for many years, it can be difficult to say goodbye. Many athletes bid farewell before their skills deteriorate. Others hang on for every last second, even when they remain a shell of their dominant self. Still others are forced to stop because of injury or other reasons. And it usually sucks, as most of us do not go out with gold medals and records like Michael Phelps.

### FOR THE REST OF US ...

Any form of sports retirement, both professional and recreational, can represent a major shift in life. For many athletes, this can be difficult to accept.

As I wrote in a column last year, athletes can experience depression and other mental-health problems when injured. Similar problems can occur in response to retiring from a sport. These can be temporary, and people adjust accordingly, or they can be more difficult and have lasting mental consequences. (See: Uncle Rico from "Napoleon Dynamite," still hung up on high school football games 25 years later.)

### ULTIMATE INJURY

I was a collegiate and high-level club Ultimate Frisbee player from age 20 to 35. In my 20s, it was my life: hours of practice and training every day, every weekend spent traveling the country to play the game that I loved with the teammates I loved. Ultimate was my life — it was very good to me, and I gave back as much as I could as well.

At the 2015 Master's Club Nationals, I sustained a



Saying good-bye to a sport you love can be tough.

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head injury that, to this day, haunts and impacts my life. A few weeks after the injury, while talking with people around me, it was apparent that my Ultimate career was over. Now I was left to reflect back on the career that I had and the uncomfortable assessment of my career — and how it came to an end.



Drew Mikita  
Dear Drewbie

At first I thought, "That is how I wanted to go out: literally being carried off the field by teammates after playing as hard as I could." I felt a sense of nobility, toughness and an empty tank. I felt OK, except for one thing: I don't remember a second of leaving the field. Everything is a blank after the collision for about a week.

I had a feeling going into the game that I might be retiring after Nationals, but that was because life was changing, and I just didn't seem to have the same passion I once did. After processing, an injury was not how I wanted to go out. It wasn't the way to say goodbye: confused, vomiting and injured. I needed to go out on my terms, whatever they were.

After accepting the fact that my career was over some months later, I still had



SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

Team Sherpa and Team Yeti in the unofficial World's Highest Game of Ultimate Frisbee (pending a Guinness review). Drewbie talks about saying goodbye to his passion high at the foot of Mount Everest, and then shares tips on how to cope with retiring from a sport.

to say goodbye in my way. But what was that? When Molly and I went to Nepal, it came to me: I wanted to go out in grand fashion — world record-setting fashion even!

### FRISBEE AT 16,808 FEET

Our trekking group in Nepal had become very close. We all had dreams, and we all understood the value of goals and how difficult it can be to say goodbye to a sport you love. So we decided we were going to play the World's Highest Game of Ultimate Frisbee (still pending Guinness review).

Of 14 people, I was the only Ultimate player. Most had never seen or heard of the game, but they were willing to jump in and help me play the last "game" of my career. At 16,808 feet, we used yak dung piles to mark the end zones, and the teams were divided based on the color of our parkas (darks vs. lights). Team Sherpa took on Team Yeti in a riveting game to one point at the foot of the Mother, Mt. Everest.

As I threw the pull (kick-off), I felt a single tear run down my face. It just felt right. This is what Ultimate

is: A group of people joining together to chase a piece of plastic and have some fun. Five continents were represented in the game, and there were plenty of turnovers, drops and confusion but so much fun. (For those of you scoring at home, I caught the game winner to give Team Yeti a triumphant 1-0 win over Team Sherpa. I smiled, laughed and cried).

At the end of the game, I was able to say goodbye on my terms, with a smile on my face, tears of joy and closure — a successful career over. I can say goodbye to Ultimate

and feel OK with it. I'm taking with me many aches and pains from five surgeries after my penultimate game, along with great memories and stories (that I can remember), pride and some of the best friends in the world, whom I will love long beyond the lacing of my cleats.

Thank you, Ultimate. Thank you. You gave me so much and I am forever grateful.

**Coping with retirement**  
**Retirement does not have to be an end** — it can be an evolution: You can retire from competition and still participate in the sport, like retiring from ski racing but still skiing for fun. That's evolution.

**Find another sport or activity:** You might find you have a lot more time now. Find time to relax and recover but also fill some of that time with another activity. It could be a different sport or make it a hobby, like painting, music, writing, cooking — just to fill the time.

**Go out on your terms (when possible):** Sometimes injury doesn't allow this, but that doesn't mean there's no way to say your goodbye. Mine was with a bunch of non-Ultimate players on a field covered with yaks (and their dung). It wasn't the prettiest game of ultimate, but it was exactly what I wanted and needed for closure.

**Talk with people about your retirement:** Your coaches, teammates, family and friends all know how much your sport means to you. Talking with them can help you process the decision, handle it and know if retirement is the best decision.

**Stay involved when possible:** Some people switch to coaching, volunteering, mentoring or take some other adapted role in your sport. This can help you stay connected to the next generation of athletes. I am not ready to do that with Ultimate, but maybe someday. And always be a fan and an advocate for your sport.

Honestly, it sucks to say goodbye to a sport. It is not fun to accept that you are aging or your skills are debilitating. But, this is a part of the game, so be proud of your career and your accomplishments, and remember that change does not have to be bad — it can be awesome.