

RANDOM SAMPLES

FICTION COMES TO LIFE ON CAMPUS

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Kids go away to college to learn all kinds of things. Some learn a vocation. Others learn to be independent. Leah Nagel learned to play Quidditch.

Never mind that the airborne game invented in the *Harry Potter* books is supposed to be played on flying broomsticks or that the object is to chase down an enchanted golden ball with wings. None of that — not the laws of physics, not reality, not anything — has dissuaded the Sylvania Township teen or her teammates at Middlebury College in Vermont.

Middlebury, it turns out, is the center of the Quidditch universe for Muggles (that's regular, nonmagical folk like you and me). Students started playing the game there in 2005 and things have spread faster than a wizard can cast a jelly-legs jinx.

The Facebook group for the Intercollegiate Quidditch Association boasts more than 3,600 members, and the World Cup held this fall featured teams from 12 colleges across the continent. More than 170 schools have or are forming teams, including Oberlin, Ohio State, the University of Michigan and Michigan State.

Leah, a longtime fan of the *Harry Potter* novels, didn't know much about this when she was a senior at Maumee Valley Country Day School and applied to Middlebury, a small liberal arts college. She sure was interested when she found out, though. This fall she was on the school's Quidditch Committee and played most weekends.

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"I thought that it was really cool that they'd taken something that was pretty fantastical and made it real," she says.

I guess this shouldn't be surprising, especially in a world where people dress up as Hobbits and fight with foam swords, where people build their own fully functional R2-D2s and translate Shakespeare into Klingon. Unsatisfied with

simply enjoying fiction, we feel the need to see it made real.

In this case, the end result appears to be part-dodgeball, part-tag, and part-Japanese game show. Oh, and there's some basketball thrown in, too. I'm told it's quite athletic.

If you haven't read the books, good luck figuring out this earthbound version of Quidditch. All I can tell you is there's a guy dressed in yellow — they call him the Golden Snitch — who runs around with a tennis ball tucked in a sock that's hanging from his shorts, and members of both teams chase after him in pursuit of the ball.

The rest of the players run around an oval field with broomsticks between their legs and capes billowing in the wind. Some try to score points by tossing a volleyball through what look like raised hula hoops while the others try and peg them with rubber dodgeballs.

Do not be deceived, though. This is not the typical meaningless stuff that college kids do to avoid learning things that might actually help them get a job one day. (At least, that's what I'd tell Leah's parents, Mike Nagel and Shelly Orenstein.)

It's more than that because Leah's generation grew up with Harry Potter. They share a passion for it, and



Quidditch is a very real way of tapping into that.

It's also pretty goofy, as Leah readily admits.

"There's always that slight air of ridiculousness," she says.

In a way, that's the most important aspect of all. The game's wackiness provides a break from the stress of exams and the pressure of mounting expectations. College students are training to succeed as adults, and hopefully they're training hard, but they also should embrace their final years in Neverland with a childlike fervor.

This may not be what parents sending their kids off to school — often at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars — expect out of higher education. But if playing Quidditch helps young people learn the importance of whimsy they should consider it a welcome bonus.

At the very least, when Leah comes home this month on winter break to swap stories of college life with her friends, she'll be armed with more than the typical drama of dorm life or dining halls. It will be to say that she's learned the art of the ridiculous, and that's not such a bad lesson.

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