

Field Acquisition for Local Leagues

By Chris Burke

Like many organizations, yours may be involved with organizing one or multiple leagues each year, hosting tournaments, providing pick-up fields and/or providing your local traveling teams with practice fields. Despite the high demand for fields, organizations that have learned the system often have access to all of the fields they need and are continually looking to expand. This section will provide you with tips in acquiring fields within your own community.

How do they do it?

While purchasing fields has been done, many organizations are not quite ready to tackle that challenge. Often there is a scarcity of available land and the cost can be quite high. For these reasons and more, the choice to rent is and will remain the most logical solution for the majority of local organizations.

Organizations that have succeeded in finding as many fields as they can use have often chosen to work with parks departments, school districts, and other entities to rent fields. These fields may be located in the metropolitan area or within urban zones. The rest of the land in our county is zoned either rural residential or for agricultural production; athletic fields are currently not an allowed use of this land.

Advantages of renting existing fields include lower costs, a larger variety of fields from which to choose, and the opportunity to have fields closer to where the people are located. Disadvantages include competition with other users for field space, having to maintain a large internal infrastructure for field obtainment, and having fields spread over a large geographic area.

The four following strategies are recommended for use by any organization interested in finding additional fields in their community.

Take Part in the Public Process

Like most things, athletic fields are subject to politics. The construction of fields, or their improvement (better surfaces, lighting, etc.), usually has some local opposition. Ultimate players must attend city council meetings, neighborhood meetings, and parks department meetings. They must write letters, post signs, and generally be active, responsible citizens. A recent mayor of Seattle, who publicly supported more fields, cited an email written by an Ultimate player that was widely circulated among all sports groups as a major factor in his election victory. For example, over the last few years, Ultimate players have spearheaded an effort to increase the number and quality of fields at Magnuson Park in Seattle. The effort included testifying and letter writing, and has resulted in a plan, with funding, for a 10-field grass space and a 14-field lit field turf complex.

Field-Obtaining Team

Have a field-obtaining team, using the principle of one person, one suburb. The parks department or school district person you rent fields from will want to deal with only one person. They will appreciate your effort to accommodate them. This one person should handle all your organization's needs for her suburb,

including league fields, tournament fields, and team practice fields. If possible, have the person be a league organizer or a practicing team's field procurer, so she has a stake in the issue. Being this one person is so time-consuming that no one should have to deal with more than one city.

Know Where the Fields Are

This may seem self-evident, but knowledge is power. Organizers must make an enormous effort to identify fields suitable for Ultimate in their area. Consider stretching the boundaries of what constitutes "close enough." Players may have to drive further, but it may be worth it if they get to use better fields. A side benefit is that by playing Ultimate in a suburb, the sport can be introduced to a new area.

Partner Up

Partner with a field-owning entity to build or improve fields.

Partner with a church Churches own land, sometimes lots of it, and as a rule they are not against having sports fields on their land. A church in Mountlake Terrace, north of Seattle, partnered with a local men's soccer group to turn a vacant lot next to the church building into a high-quality soccer field. The soccer group paid to grade the field and install irrigation; they bring their own portable lights. The church pays ongoing maintenance costs and the soccer group is the only user of the field.

Partner with a developer Often governments place restrictions on big new developments, such as requiring a certain number of parks or a certain percentage of open space. For example, a giant development under construction east of suburban Redmond (about 10,000 houses) includes a lighted 10-field turf soccer field park. This is because the Lake Washington Youth Soccer Association (LWYSA) partnered with them. The developer owns the land and is basically donating it for the purpose; LWYSA is paying to build the fields. Construction costs big money—expect to pay a minimum of \$1 million per field—but sometimes grants are available.

Partner with a school School levies can be a source of the money needed to build a field. An individual with an interest in youth soccer persuaded a Seattle elementary school to replace its asphalt playground with a field turf soccer field. He spent an enormous amount of time lobbying the school district, talking with the PTA, getting local merchants to chip in cash, and shepherding the engineering study. He raised about \$50,000 from donations, another \$100,000 from grants, and his reward was \$800,000 from a recently passed school levy to actually build the field.

Partner with a parks department

Parks departments own the most fields, and they are nearly always interested in upgrading their fields. In some ways, partnering with a parks department is the path of least resistance—at least the parks people will be on your side.