

Recruiting and Retaining Women

By Susan De Cicco

Coed leagues often face the problem of gender balance. It's rare that just the right ratio of men and women sign up for a league—and though a surplus of women is possible, this is uncommon; the problem is almost always one of too many men and too few women. When men greatly outnumber women, the league may face problems. For example, while there may be enough men and field space to field a certain number of teams, if there aren't enough women to go around, some of those teams can't form (and some men therefore won't be able to play). Also, women may become discouraged by the lack of other women in the league, or even by the league's efforts to manage the gender imbalance. Discouraged women may drop out of the league, and so the problem feeds itself.

This chapter examines the problem of recruiting and retaining women in coed Ultimate leagues, and offers a number of possible solutions. It draws heavily on the experience of the Madison Ultimate Frisbee Association (MUFA), a league that started with a very low number of women, but whose coed summer league now regularly fields over 2,200 people, and whose spring league now includes two women-only divisions.

One League's Experience

Before launching into the techniques MUFA used to build a healthy gender ratio, it helps to know a very brief history of the league:

Early Days (1993-1999) MUFA exists as a summer league only. It is a clique league (in which teams are self-formed, as opposed to a hat league, where teams are built by league organizers). The gender ratio is 5:2 (five men to two women on the field at any given time). Even with this uneven ratio, many teams struggle to field enough women.

Ratio Switch and League Development (1999-2000) After a fair amount of debate, the summer league switches its gender ratio from 5:2 to 4:3 (four men, three women on the field). A coed fall hat

league is also launched, in addition to the mainstay summer league.

Spring League and Further Ratio Change (2003) In 2003, single-gender spring leagues are added as a complement to MUFA's summer and fall offerings. Also, a change is made to the gender ratio of the coed summer league: now the team on offense may, at its discretion, choose to play four women to three men for any given point. The team on defense must match the offense's ratio. (This is the 4:3, Offense Decides rule; more on this rule later.)

Further Adjustments (2003-Present) The women's spring league is subdivided into beginner and intermediate leagues. The fall hat league also begins to experiment with concurrent, single-gender divisions in addition to the main coed league.

MUFA grew from a small, single-league organization that struggled to maintain a 5:2 gender ratio, into

a large organization that uses a flexible 4:3 ratio in its coed leagues and offers women-only leagues in the spring and fall. How was this possible? The new few pages will summarize the lessons learned from this league's experiences.

Equalizing Gender Ratios: Solution, Not Problem

Each time MUFA made a change to the gender ratio—first from 5:2 to 4:3, and then to “4:3, Offense Decides,” there was skepticism. A substantial contingent felt that the ratio changes were either not feasible or not desirable. The main concerns were:

- “It’s hard to recruit enough women as it is. If the ratio changes and more women are required, teams that fail to recruit more women will be unable to play.”
- “Women will take spots on the field that men would otherwise take. Since we already have lots of men who want to play, and not enough women, changing the ratio will just steal spots from existing (male) players.”
- (Regarding the switch to 4:3, Offense Decides): “Our team is finely tuned to have just enough players, so that everyone gets maximum playing time. If we can’t know in advance whether we’ll be playing four men or four women, we’ll have to add extra people to the roster to cover every situation. And then our team will be too big.”
- (Again regarding the switch to 4:3, Offense Decides): “Changing the gender ratio between points will be confusing and will slow down the game. Also, some teams may use it as a tool to gain an advantage over teams with fewer women.”

For the most part, these concerns disappeared within a few months of implementing the new ratio. Here are some results from the ratio changes:

- A more equal ratio encouraged teams to make use of their women rather than ignore them. Each time the ratio equalized, women became more involved in the game: after all, it’s relatively easy to ignore two of the players on the field, but if there are three or even four women, it becomes very difficult to flow the offense without them.

- The increased emphasis on women encouraged more women to join the league. It became clear that some women had either avoided the league, or had tried it and quit, because some teams had been treating their female players as placeholders. As the ratio changed, teams that ignored their women struggled, and often were forced to change their ways.
- While a few teams did in fact have difficulty finding more women for their teams, most did not. The increased ratio forced teams themselves to recruit new women into the league: in effect, the gender ratio changes put the onus of getting more women into the league on individual teams, so that the league directors didn’t have to attack the problem alone.
- Switching to the 4:3, Offense Decides gender ratio introduced a little confusion during the first year, but at present time it is not an issue. Many games are played entirely with a 4:3 ratio of men to women, but many are played with four women on the field much of the time. This arrangement doesn’t appreciably slow down the game.
- The most competitive teams tend to have large rosters, so players can be fresh at all times. The need for extra women is not an issue for these teams. In practice, almost never has the 4:3, Offense Decides rule been used to force a team to play down a woman or to play savage women. It is, however, used strategically, when one team feels its women are superior to another’s. This provides teams with even more incentive to recruit skilled women to their team.

As a league changes the ratio to include more women, organizers can expect a variety of concerns or complaints at the outset. Once the new ratio has been in place for a short time, however, it tends to become a non-issue, and the league will have an easier time incorporating women in the future.

Getting Women Into the League

The following suggestions may help league organizers to equalize their leagues’ gender ratios. Feel free to try one or many of these ideas.

Set Ratios Proactively

As the MUFA example demonstrated, if organizers wait for more women to show up before adjusting the

league's gender ratio, they may be waiting forever. Instead, consider adjusting the ratio and letting the league adapt to it. Expect some complaints in the first year, but also expect that most teams will manage to recruit enough friends, friends of friends, sisters, girlfriends, and acquaintances to make up the shortfall.

Build Women-Only Leagues

Some women are intimidated by, or uninterested in, coed leagues. If at all possible, consider launching a small women-only league or division to go along with existing coed league(s) or division(s). Keep the fees low and actively promote the league. Encourage current league members to recruit friends. Though the women-only league or division will likely start small, it may gather players who would otherwise not try Ultimate. These players will then filter into the coed league(s).

If possible, try to have two divisions: a higher division and a lower. The lower division will attract women with concerns about their own skill level, in addition to any higher-level women looking to play as much as possible. (These women will likely play in both divisions, if allowed to.) The higher division, on the other hand, will attract women who are certain of their own skills but concerned about playing in low-level games that might bog down with turnovers and poor play.

(As a side-note, if there are two divisions of women's play, it helps to call the upper division "Intermediate" rather than "Advanced." The term "Advanced" seems to frighten off a number of perfectly good players.)

Host Skills Clinics and Full-League Gatherings

Many potential women players have never played organized sports, or have played organized sports but not Ultimate—and they assume that they need some level of experience in order to join an Ultimate league. If the organizers host free, open-invitation events, such as a skills clinic that teaches basic throws and cuts, these events can convince women to join the league.

When going this route, have existing women players run the clinic, and mass-email current league players, asking them to invite anyone who might be interested in Ultimate to come see what the sport is all about. Consider holding such a clinic before launching a women-only league or division, as it might help boost initial membership.

Full-league gatherings such as all-star games and championship games are a great place to show new people what Ultimate is all about. For example, consider ending the league's season with a party, complete with food, drink, and the league's championship game. Encourage players to bring friends, family, and significant others to this event. Newcomers will be able to mingle with current players, and will also see firsthand what Ultimate looks like. More than a few of them may decide to join next season.

Allow Women on Multiple Teams

Ideally, a league won't need to make any special concessions to get enough women involved. In reality, since the supply of women players may be limited, the league may have to allow women to play on multiple teams (while men cannot). So for example, a woman who wanted to play extra games could be a member of two different teams, so long as those teams were not in the same division. (Obviously, belonging to same-division teams would cause problems.) This rule allows the most enthusiastic women players to play extra games, and effectively increases the number of women in the league, allowing more teams to exist.

Is this policy perfectly fair? No. In a perfect league, men and women would have exactly the same opportunities. However, this policy may be the only way to have both a large number of teams and an acceptable gender ratio.

For the record, MUFA's summer league allows women to play in multiple divisions. However, if and when the number of women in the league is no longer a limiting factor (for example, if the league's gender ratio becomes almost 1:1, or if the league runs out of field space), this policy will likely be discontinued.

Focus on Spirit

Do whatever it takes to keep the league as spirited as possible. Many women players have less tolerance than male players for arguments, insults, and general poor spirit. If the league has difficulty recruiting or retaining women, consider whether the games are generally fun and positive, or whether the league is facing a problem with attitude and spirit. While a discussion of how to improve spirit is beyond the scope of this chapter, organizers might

want to brainstorm or consult with other league organizers (not necessarily Ultimate leagues; any will do) about how they've managed to keep their leagues reasonably positive and pleasant.

Allow Baggage

If running a hat league (in which the organizers create random teams from the pool of available players) rather than a clique league, the organizers may allow baggage (small groups of players who are guaranteed to be placed on the same team). If a league doesn't currently allow baggage, and it's having difficulty getting women to play, consider allowing it.

Hat leagues can be especially daunting to first-time players, to low-skill players, and to people with no team sport experience (and many potential women players will fall into one of these categories). Instead of joining a group of friends, as is the case in a clique league, hat leagues force players to deal with a group of strangers. If a player is worried that her skills won't be up to the task, and that her teammates will be annoyed or critical, the player very likely won't join. Even if the player is skilled, the prospect of dealing with an entire team of unknowns can be a turn-off.

Allowing baggage softens these concerns, because players know that they'll have at least one friend on the team. Furthermore, allowing baggage lets male players bring wives and girlfriends into the sport. These women in many cases will not join if they can't be on the same team as their partner; sometimes this is for social reasons, and sometimes because it's simply too hard to manage two different team schedules. But regardless of the reasons, allowing couples into the league opens the door to more women.

Lower Fees

Potential league members who are on the fence or uncertain of their own skills can be swayed by league costs. Since many women may fall into this category, keeping league fees as low as possible will encourage those players to join. This is particularly important if women are allowed to play in multiple divisions; if the league is too expensive, joining multiple teams may be cost-prohibitive.

Offer Financial Incentives for Women

If an organization has tried everything else and still struggles to get women into its league, it may have to lower the league entry fees for women. This should be a tactic of last resort, since the men in the league may (correctly) feel it's not a fair policy. However, the tactic can work: think of bars that offer "ladies' night."

One approach might be to combine lower fees for women with a rule allowing women to play in multiple divisions. In this scenario the league would charge full price (or nearly-full price) for the first division a women played in, but drastically reduce the fee for each additional team she played on. This would make it feasible for women to play on multiple teams even if the league normally charges high fees.

If the league does have to offer financial incentives, don't view it as a permanent solution.

Direct Recruiting

If organizers have tried all of these ideas and are still short of women, or if they're in the process of starting a women-only league or division, here are some suggestions for recruiting women into the league.

Send Personal Email

Have veteran players and league organizers send personal emails to women who might play. Emphasize that they are good enough to play in the league, and that no prior experience or skill level is necessary. This approach can grab players who would otherwise think they aren't capable enough.

Everyone knows someone who could potentially play in the league; that's why it's easiest for the league organizers to email their core players and encourage each of them to personally recruit a female friend or two to join the league—and for those friends to recruit other friends, if possible. Think of it as a benevolent pyramid scheme.

Encourage Cross-Participation

If running multiple leagues or divisions, encourage existing women players to participate in more than one. This can be accomplished with financial incentives, as mentioned earlier, but it's also

important to send emails and get the word out that cross-participation is desired. There may be fence-sitters in one of the leagues who can be persuaded to join another as well.

This is especially the case when running a women's league with two or more divisions; encourage some of the advanced women players to participate in the lower division as well as the upper. They will serve to anchor the beginner teams and prevent the games from being discouragingly sloppy.

Recruit at Pickup Games

If there are ongoing pickup games in the area, it might be worthwhile to stop by and spread the word that the league needs women players. Often these players will already know about the existence of the organized league, and some may already have joined. But there may be others who are on the fence, and a personal invitation will be the deciding factor for them.

Advertising

Traditional advertising may be beyond a league's scope or budget, but it may be useful to advertise the league in non-traditional (viral) ways. For example, organizers could ask core players what other sports leagues they play in, and then have those core players spread the word about the league whenever they play those other sports.

If this approach is combined with an incentive—say, a free league membership for any member who brings two or three new women into the league—the organization can find a number of new players very quickly.

Final Thoughts

Finding enough women to play in a coed league can be challenging. League organizers may have to make concessions, be they financial (free or reduced memberships for women; free or reduced memberships for players who recruit new women) or rule-based (allowing women to play in multiple leagues or divisions). Sometimes the best way to get new women into the league is completely counterintuitive: for example, adjusting the league's gender ratio, or starting an all-new women's division, seem like ludicrous things to do when the league struggles to get enough women into the league as it is. However, these moves often prove to be the part of the solution rather than the problem.

Regardless of how it's done, equalizing the number of men and women in a league is always a worthwhile goal. It makes team creation easier; it allows a coed league to truly be coed, rather than a men's league with a few token women; and it encourages a balanced approach to the game that results in a better experience for both genders. Taking the time to address a league's gender ratio before it becomes a problem will pay dividends for the league in future years.

Youth Ultimate Strengthens the Women's Game

By Meredith Tosta

In the fall of 1999 the idea of freshmen women coming to college with any sort of Ultimate skill was largely unheard of on the west coast. In those days, everyone started out totally green and learning to throw, with the majority of the fall being spent on the most basic of skills with the seniors and grad students modeling proper techniques for the underclassmen.

Now fast forward to the spring of 2009, on the sideline of USA Ultimate College Championships in Columbus, OH. There are now alums from the 2008 Girls' Jr. National team shredding through the competition as freshmen. Granted, these ladies now have a season of college Ultimate under their belts but their skills were developed years ago in high school. But it's not just the girls from the Jr. National teams that are having an impact on college programs; it's every girl who has the chance to find Ultimate at a younger age and carries that passion into college.

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This isn't about being hyper competitive. It isn't about getting the early edge over the competition. It's about opportunities for young women to play team sports. It's about being fit and eating healthy. It's about making lifelong friends. And it's about reaching out to the community and giving back. In the end, if it also means that a college program gets a head start on the season, or has more tools available to succeed in USA Ultimate College Series, than that's just the cherry on top. So what can a women's college team do to encourage the growth of girls' Ultimate?

Be a mentor

By taking an active interest in the high schools and middle schools near your college, you have the power to get girls hooked on Ultimate. There may only be a handful of girls on the local team, but having college women coaching and playing with a youth team will make a difference when it comes to retaining female athletes. The USA Ultimate can put you in touch with schools desperately in need of coaches, and can even schedule a Level I Coaching Workshop to generate momentum.

Run clinics or hat tournaments

This can be a great fund raiser for your team (ask for donations or charge a small fee), and also gives you a chance to get to know youth players in the area and interact with the Ultimate community beyond your college campus. Open it up to women of all ages and you may be surprised who comes out of the woodwork to take part. If you need insurance, USA Ultimate can sanction your event and provide it. There are also free Women's Clinic kits available.

Play showcase games with regional rivals

Believe it or not, the market for Ultimate as a spectator sport is growing, and it's the youth players who are driving it. Don't underestimate how cool it is to watch college teams battle it out. This could be another fund raising opportunity, plus its good "show time" practice for your squad. Advertise through the local youth organizers, find a venue that's easy to get to, and where you are likely to draw a crowd.

Promoting Women's Ultimate today builds future participation

When it comes to USA Ultimate membership numbers, women's memberships increased 8% in 2008, slightly more than the 7% for men. The fact that the growth percentage is comparable between the genders is fantastic. What we should also consider is that women represent 31% of the total membership. While this approximate 30/70 split is on par with other team sports organizations, the more that you can help cultivate girls playing Ultimate, the stronger those numbers will be for every generation going forward. The investment made in developing the younger generations will of course pay off when it comes to our competitive teams down the line. Yet, in a culture where girls aren't necessarily as supported and encouraged to participate in sports as their male counterparts, the impact of bringing more girls into the fold goes beyond our immediate experience.

Ultimate is a powerful sport, most notably in the aspect of self-officiating where players learn to have a voice and speak up for themselves. It's an endurance race every game—players must take care of their bodies and eat right to be strong. It's also being a part of a bigger community—one that emphasizes respect, hard work and fair play. Bringing more girls into the community at the youth and the college level not only grows the sport, in numbers and in level of play, it also builds confidence and weaves a network of support that girls can benefit from in many facets of life.