

## Recruiting Players For Leagues

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*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.*

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### Important Factors to Consider

When organizing an Ultimate league, an early frustration is often not being able to translate passion, creativity, and organizational skills into actual bodies for the league. The greatest entrepreneur can line up every other pertinent detail: field permits, shirts, waivers, online schedules and even sponsors, however, without a critical mass of players, the league will never get off the ground. While organizers are seldom alone in forming a league (often there are teammates, pick-up partners, or friends forming a base of players), the first thing to recognize is that no one knows enough people to make a league from one social circle alone, and even if someone did, to do so would be a disservice to the sport at-large, as well as the specific local community. Disregarding streams of publicity and recruitment besides word-of-mouth excludes many potential players. It's a great way to make a team, but the wrong, or at least long, approach to making an enduring league.

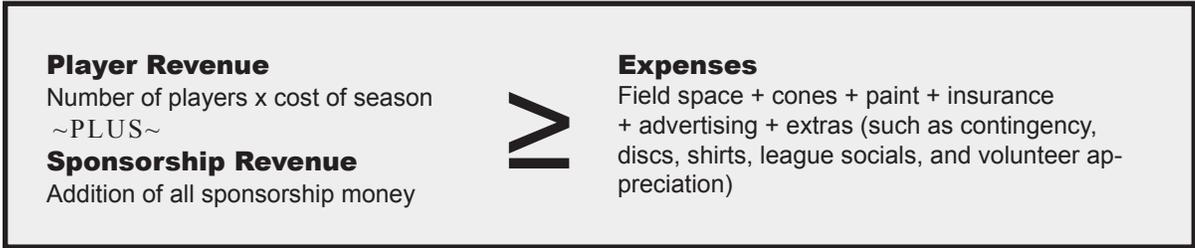
Starting a league takes hard work and is largely thankless, so keep in mind your own personal goals and vision for the league and remember to celebrate the small, day-to-day victories when they are achieved. Start early with an adequate budget and clear vision and plan to achieve a critical mass, or better. Borrow freely from ideas here and elsewhere,

and tweak and mold these methods to your unique community. Be sure to use any and all organic talent already existing in the community/league. Share the responsibilities of recruiting and work as a team to come up with new ideas, artwork, posters and ways to advertise. Identify graphic designers, natural recruiters, web-gurus, and marketing and advertising specialists within the league as early as possible—do not reinvent the wheel. A smart organization may start by recruiting volunteers to help with the recruitment of players. Be creative and relentless with recruiting.

### Practical Constraints: Critical Mass

Recruitment is not just something an organizer arbitrarily does; there are some very practical and economical considerations that an organizer needs to factor into the league's recruitment model in order to calculate a league's critical mass. This is due to the fact that the number of players in the league is one of the only negotiable factors in the league budget equation. So, when planning recruitment, it is essential for an organizer to know, very early on, how many players the league will need to break even.

The number of teams and number of players on each team's roster are practical factors of consideration for the equation above in that each directly



affects the quality of the experience, as well as number of fields required since both will inadvertently affect the Ultimate number of league participants. The more teams a league has, the more fields (or time) the league will need, and an organizer must not overlook the critical mass each team will need to field a full team week in and week out. The organizer must consider commitment to the team, the time of year of the league, and the day of the week and time of the games when coming up with a number for each roster. A cautious organizer will roster two and one-half times the number of people required to play on the field. For example, in a seven-on-seven league with a two-women requirement at all times, each team would have roughly 17 or 18 players (with five women and 12-13 men) to address situations in which players get injured or miss games due to prior engagements. Over time organizers may find that 17-18 players is too many or too few and may adjust the player count per team to meet the needs of the league.

Finally, it is important, even at this planning stage, to keep in mind that if the league is coed, and has gender requirements, the organizer will have to satisfy two separate critical masses: number of male and number of female players. Additionally, the organizer should have a plan to address the participant overflow issue. While having more players than the league can take is a better problem than having too few, crowding each team can significantly affect the overall experience and it ultimately affects league retention.

## Advertising

Advertising is more related to recruiting than most in the Ultimate community acknowledge at present; so closely is it related, that advertising and recruiting in the sense of a local Ultimate league are almost synonymous. Advertising is the single most important factor that can make or break a recruiting campaign as it is an organizer’s strongest tool in terms of getting the necessary information out to the target population.

For this reason, vigilant planning, grave attention to detail, and significant resources (both volunteer and monetary) must be allocated for advertising to hit its mark. Very few start-up leagues budget adequately for advertising and those that do often inadvertently miss their mark by directing the resources to the wrong media with the wrong presentation. The importance of an exciting and up-to-date website supported by an effective advertising campaign cannot be overstated in terms of recruiting. For ideas beyond this section concerning advertising, consult local advertising talent you may have in your league such as career professionals with experience in advertising, marketing, public relations and mass media.

## Communicating the League’s Vision

Advertising planning starts with a vision for the league because successful advertisers know that it is all about image! This vision defines: who the target populations are, where those populations are, and how to reach and motivate them with advertising. It is important to anticipate stereotypes about Ultimate in the community and each form of advertising should do its part to address objections from the target population before they are even verbalized. For instance, if an organizer recognizes that many in the community might ask questions such as: “isn’t that for \_\_\_\_\_?” (insert hippies, white men, dogs, kids, or people who know how to throw a disc),” the resulting ad campaign will go to great lengths to debunk such stereotypes, and instead encourage the targeted population. The posters might show two professional-looking women dressed in eye-catching uniforms throwing on a lined field, with no hint of dogs, children, or tie-dye. The poster might include creative phrasing communicating who the league is open to (the targeted population i.e. “Wanted: Young Professionals looking for a Fun Coed Team Sport: Great Way to Meet People and Workout.” There should also be some mention of who

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the league is not open to, i.e. “Sorry, no youth under 17 years of age in the Adult League, but check with \_\_\_\_\_ (insert the local youth league organizer if applicable). Childcare available!!!”

## Word of Mouth Advertising

In any human endeavor, person-to-person advertising is the most powerful advertising tool, but as mentioned before, it is seldom the most prolific way to reach potential players and it is often not the most effective, stand-alone approach due to its self-limiting nature. However, that does not mean that it should be completely disregarded. Quite the contrary, word of mouth advertising is a wonderful starting point for league recruiting. Promoting word of mouth advertising among early participants can effectively supplement other forms of advertising, and “Bring a Friend” events such as clinics and development tournaments can go a long way while developing a mass media advertising campaign. Some players and volunteers will be better at recruiting than others because it is ultimately about personality and comfort level. As an organizer, it is important not to be frustrated with players who are not good recruiters. No amount of frustration will make a player who is uncomfortable with word of mouth recruiting more motivated or effective. Every community will have a few outgoing members who are natural sales persons. It is an organizer’s responsibility to identify these people and enlist their help, whether on a volunteer basis or with incentives such as a free league membership, discs, gift certificates, etc. This incentive method can work for creating sponsorships as well, especially if the organizer is the type of person who does not feel comfortable person-to-person.

One type of league that especially relies on word of mouth advertising is the league in which players join as a team and captains are responsible for drafting players on to their own team. This type of league will not work in every community and it works best when there is already a developed and prolific Ultimate scene, but then when it does work, all an organizer has to do is recruit captains, who are in turn responsible for recruiting their own roster. For all organizers who are intimidated by recruiting or who favor the laissez-faire approach to building the league, the league that uses a captain draft format to create teams can be a dream-come-true, as long as the community is large enough to support it and the captains come through. On the flip side, team leagues are not the best way to encourage

growth. Existing teams are more passive and do little to bring brand new players into the scene. Either way, there are important factors to consider, aside from recruiting, when choosing the appropriate type of league for your community. Read more about team vs. draft leagues in the Drafting, Ranking and Choosing Teams section of this manual. Also bear in mind that in terms of league coordination, the economics of a league that uses a captain’s draft to form teams are at the scale of a team, not its players.

On a related note, for markets large enough to support them, the best approach to recruiting is to have a diverse offering of leagues. Offering both team and individual sign-up on competitive and recreational, coed and same sex, with diverse choices for days of the week or times, allows players to pick the league that best suits their level, schedule and fancy. This is rarely possible as it requires a massive Ultimate community, but it can be a goal to work towards. In the end, this model will be the most effective in terms of recruiting because the players will be the most satisfied and have the best experience.

## Diversity

Diversity should be an important consideration to any organizer preparing to recruit for their local organization. Efforts should be made to reach out to all populations equally. While it is not wrong to want to make a league look like the overall community it represents, it is important that methods chosen for encouraging diversity within an organization maintain equal and balanced treatment of players regardless of race or sex.

In regards to promoting diversity, and targeting new populations, an organizer must keep two questions front and center when assessing recruitment materials/policies and the overall league experience. First, ask if everything (policies, advertising, etc.) are inclusive for everyone? Then, reflect on the league and whole recruiting process and speculate whether anything (a situation, team name, altercation, anything) could have made anyone feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in the league at any time? Even the slightest ambiguity in the mind of the organizer in regards to answering these questions should throw up a red flag. As with all conduct issues, organizers should address questionable acts or issues regarding discrimination immediately and clearly for all to see that this is not accepted.

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## Targeting Populations

Placement of advertisements and posters affects who will respond to an advertising campaign. Ask, who will see this ad and how can it be made visible not only to more people, but to all races and sexes. So how does an organizer appropriately outreach to new populations? Start with asking members of that population (women, racial minorities, youth, etc.) already playing how they became involved and try to assess a pattern or mechanism from which more new players might come. If the league is completely new, the organizer should contact members in nearby leagues to learn local best practices.

Ultimate can be a relatively cheap sport to play. But consider providing players with opportunities for discounts. Offer new people a way to see what the sport is about and help them become comfortable with the idea of joining. Hosting one or a series of beginner's clinics is a great way to address these issues. Then offer league discounts to clinic attendees. This gives brand new players a chance to learn skills and have an incentive to continue playing. Offer opportunities to volunteer and have incentives to reward those that get involved. Use incentives or creative rewards to encourage players to bring new members to the league. Get everyone involved with the recruiting process. How you as an organizer recruits helps to ensure that everyone can have an opportunity to participate in the local leagues.

While the league should be open to everyone equally, it is common to have too many men and not enough women sign-up for a coed league. Extra efforts in targeting specific groups are often needed to fulfill league requirements. Organizers could further target women by distributing the posters at women's fitness centers or in the women's health section of the local news paper. The ratio of a coed league may not seem like a big issue, but anyone who has played in a recreational coed league knows that unless the ratio is written into the rules, and addressed during recruiting, the potential for resentment and inequity is likely later on both on and off the field. Recognize the role that gender-specific recruiting plays in ensuring that each team in the league has an adequate gender ratio that keeps the peace, and recruit accordingly.

One of the best ways to promote women's Ultimate is to provide an alternative for same-sex competition. A good way to recruit for a niche league, such as a women's-only league, is to help some natural and representative leaders organize a women's only pickup game. Pickup is free and less of a commitment than an entire season, so it is more likely to get

new players out, especially if it is structured with some drills to build skills. Once the numbers start to grow, and the competition improves, recruiting for the league will be much easier.

Many leagues overlook the effectiveness of advertising in the mass media because of the perceived cost. Before judging television, radio, or newspaper advertising campaigns too expensive, at least investigate the prices, which are extremely variant across different localities. There is often an affordable or even free (to non-profits) opportunity, which would otherwise be overlooked.

Another method, which can help new players (both targeted and in general) feel comfortable is to allow "baggage" in the drafting and team-making process. Allowing baggage means providing a space on league registration forms for players to designate at least one other player whom they will be guaranteed to play with. This makes new players, especially from minority populations, feel more comfortable reassuring them that they will be on a team with familiar faces. The baggage method also works well with couples (especially if they have to share childcare responsibilities), parents and players coming from far away who prefer to carpool. While it complicates drafting, the benefits can far outweigh the hassle, especially in small Ultimate markets where recruiting is difficult.

## Be Informative

How to communicate registration information, directions, and general information is another important consideration within advertising and recruiting. Many organizers have seen the merit of having a league website. The internet can be a fantastic advertising tool abounding with opportunities for free or nearly free advertising such as email lists, online social networking opportunities and online communities (both disc-related and non-disc). However, an adequate website is very important to effectively outreach on the web. The league's website should be captivating, well organized, user-friendly, updated often, and graphically appealing; otherwise the internet is at best, an untapped resource and at worst, an agent of misinformation communicating inaccurate and outdated information. Carefully consider the artwork and presentation of the website because both will considerably affect registration and influence a potential player's image of the league and the overall sport. Presentation and effectiveness can be hard to evaluate, but the good news is that there is probably a talented web designer within every Ultimate

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community who may be able to help with designing and maintaining an interactive website which will be powerful for recruitment, and useful in other aspects of organizing.

## Retention

Unfortunately, even once the first season is up and running and recruiting is seemingly over, an organizer's work continues. There will be countless concerns throughout the first season and beyond which require attention, but player retention ranks amongst the most important as well as the most difficult to predict. Everything contributing to the overall experience in the league, which is to say everything related to the league, and even many uncontrollable things beyond it, will affect whether or not players return each season. It is important to have a vehicle for feedback such as an evaluation form because this can help with improving the overall experience of players in the league which will lead to higher retention. This, in turn, will lead to easier recruitment and less demand for it. Many of the comments and demands will be impractical and misinformed, but it is critical to give players a way to voice concerns even if nothing can be changed.

In markets large enough to sustain more than one type of league, one way to improve the overall experience is to offer a variety of leagues which fit the needs and abilities of potential players. Judge whether the local community could benefit from a beginner league, or leagues that are age-specific, time-specific, or location-specific. Ask players how they feel about same-sex leagues, or captain drafted or team leagues, or what niche leagues they would like to see in the future. As long as there is adequate participation, diversity in offerings leads to higher retention because players feel more comfortable, and game times are more convenient.

Pay close attention to feedback regarding team size. This is less important in team leagues where the captain is making the roster, but play time will be an important factor throughout all leagues. It is a difficult thing to balance because it depends on the player and the team, (and the gender in coed leagues) but the fact remains that either too much or too little playing time affects league retention.

It is important to save energy, resources, and time for recruiting even into the second and third season. Some organizations will reach a point in which they can no longer accept everyone who is interested in playing, while other organizations will never seem to grow. Recruiting in subsequent seasons can still

be just as time-consuming and energy-draining as the first because the methods should expand each time to include more ways to reach potential players. But, especially in smaller markets, it is important to continue to promote recruitment. Continuing year after year to serve the same players without outreach attempts to bring in new faces, often results in a stagnation of growth and eventual decrease in size of the league as players drop out for various reasons.

## Summary

Following is a summary of guidelines to keep in mind when recruiting for your league. Remember to reassess progress often and make adjustments as necessary. Recruitment work will never really end as retention and growth are always imminent issues.

- Start by recruiting volunteers. An organization will always be more affective working in numbers than as individuals. Additional help means additional resources, opportunities, talents and time. Use all resources available, talk with other league organizers, talk with various groups and populations and find local talent to help with advertising needs.
- Know how many numbers are needed. Have a specific idea for the number of players per team. Who do you need and want to target?
- When preparing to advertise and recruit, organizations should convey a clear message, vision and goal.
- Use all means possible to recruit. Consider advertising, word of mouth, web, email, posters and media.
- Be sure recruiting methods are representative, welcoming and informative.
- Be creative when working to bring in new players to the league. Offer clinics for beginners and discounts to attend the league, baggage opportunities, volunteer discounts. Provide opportunities so that anyone (regardless of income, race and sex) could participate.
- Provide incentives to players to bring in new recruits, friends, etc.
- Always recruit and strive to bring in new players. Even if your league is well-established.
- Address discrimination issues within your league quickly and effectively.
- Provide opportunities for participants to submit evaluations or feedback on the league.