

Timing Strategy When Starting a League

By Carey Goldenberg

Organization, planning, and delegation are cornerstones to running a successful youth league.

One structure we have used to produce high-level high school and middle school leagues involves spreading out objectives over a 10-week span. It helps to get started early, so you can spread out the tasks. This entails working from just about the beginning of the Fall semester—as teams are being recruited and leadership is being passed to a new set of players and coaches. Good management tools include lining up supporting volunteers, having a planning meeting, and spreading out responsibilities. In the past I have done everything myself, and have found that is much easier and fruitful to share responsibilities with a supporting cast.

Planning Meeting Topics

1. Disc design
2. Shirt design
3. Permit acquisition
4. Coaches clinic
5. Coaches/Captains meeting agenda
6. Pre-season tournament planning
7. Regular season and coverage planning
8. Final tournament planning

Disc Design (Late December)

If possible, try to have disc designs into Discraft by the beginning of the year, when they tend to be the least busy. Between college and spring tournaments, Discraft can get very busy, causing the wait for discs to be up to six weeks. With your design approved and

paid-in-full during early fall, you can get your league discs as soon as ten days!

Shirt Design (January)

Similar recommendations to those for disc orders apply if you are using a local company for league T-shirts. A good goal is to have participant T-shirts ready by the coaches-and-captains meeting, or at the latest by the Pre-Season Tournament, so it makes a big difference to get started early.

Some leagues find it both fun and useful to open up the designs for discs and/or T-Shirts as a contest. This can often manifest many different design options to choose from.

Permit Acquisition (January)

Obtaining legitimate documentation to use certain field sites may be a greater problem now than at any point in the past. Our league was actually moved this year due to permit problems, which causes a huge hassle for all involved.

The main league fields should be as centrally located as your geography permits. Among the thirty two teams we have in our league, we need enough room to set up at least 12-16 Ultimate fields for both the season and the tournaments.

Try to cultivate a good relationship with whatever organization provides field space. Attempt to get local schools involved in hosting games on a rotating basis,

so no one gets too much of a home field advantage. Share the responsibility. Keep in mind that even if you are lucky and do not initially have these issues, Ultimate leagues often lose their field space so you may run into problems in the future. Soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, baseball, and other sports are all trying to find fields to use as well. At one point, we changed game times for the entire league to Sunday afternoons so we would not have to compete with school usage.

Coaches Clinic (Late January or early February)

We start the year with a coaches' clinic in January so that participants get as much time as possible to communicate and convert their knowledge into practice. USA Ultimate has a great coaches' certification program and will likely schedule one in your area every other year. If a clinic is not already scheduled, you can contact USA Ultimate and work directly with the organization to schedule one.

Have a clinic every year because as students graduate and move on, so does your coaching group. Depending on seasonal weather in your area, this clinic might need to be held indoors at a school or field house. If you have the resources, the clinic should be offered to the local community as well as the specific schools or teams that have coaches. Every team in the league could benefit from having a coach, and some community participants might become coaches later on that season or a subsequent one. Help the coaches set up a network of email addresses to facilitate more efficient communication, then encourage players to check every couple of days for posts.

Coaches/Captains Meetings

The month following the coaches' clinic, our league holds a coaches captains meeting at a restaurant in order to get all the details and rules of the league out to each team. Our adult league has been very generous and paid for these meetings, and you may find your local adult league similarly generous. These meetings offer each team a chance to renew acquaintances, meet coaches if they have expressed the need, set up scrimmages, pay fees, get cones, get discs or shirts, and get psyched up for the season! As the coordinator, this is when I get to spread the wealth of information gath-

ered during the year from The USA Ultimate newsletters, *The Huddle*, and any other well-written articles. I also have offered to go to each school and do clinics to offer basic concepts and drills for the teams that did not have a coach come to a clinic.

Pre-Season Tournament

To sign up pre-season tournament participants we have used a "first come, first served" format. Every new team is invited to come out and play, but due to time limits (one day), I decided to limit this tournament to 16 teams. We use a single elimination format to crown the champions. The winners get \$5 off their individual fees. All teams should be guaranteed at least two games. This day provides an opportunity for all the teams attending to turn in their fees and waivers, pick up their shirts and discs, and learn where the fields are before the season begins.

Regular Season Coverage

Every team should provide any foreseeable schedule conflicts ahead of time in order for organizers to create the week to week schedule before the season. If possible, each team should get two games per day to reward their efforts in getting out to the fields to play. We have found it beneficial to have an Administrator on Duty (AOD) at the fields every week. The AOD's holds a copy of the field permits and extra schedules to help reduce confusion and ensure that everything runs smoothly. If necessary, our AOD may also explain rules and make clarifications on disputes. Each team in our league must have an adult on the sidelines for every game. Ideally, this adult should be their coach, but if necessary it may be an older (over 21 years) relative or parent. Make sure that all participants know where the nearest medical facilities are located.

Final Tournament

Our season culminates in a one day playoff—the reason for all that hard work. Teams are seeded into the tournament based on their regular season win-loss record. This is our first year splitting the league in half

into two divisions, one “Competitive,” and the other “Recreational.” We will have two distinct champions. Some school teams send a squad to each side, so they can have their B team players work up towards the A squad. In previous years, after teams lost their first game, some would leave and miss out on seeing the more competitive, successful teams play. If players are given another reason to stay, it may motivate them to stick around and watch high-level Ultimate. If your league can raise enough funds for a player lunch or if you can encourage teams to plan a bar-b-que, it can make the entire experience more enjoyable.

Another idea is to give a special disc to each team. The team can decide which player gets this “Spirit Disc.” We have also held a “Coaches versus Captains” game before the semis and finals. This can be a great learning opportunity, a teachable moment. Encourage beginning and intermediate players to “Watch what they do that we don’t.”

The day should have four rounds of play because that is about the most this age should play in one day. Every team should be guaranteed at least two games,

just like during the regular season, in order to figure out final standings. USA Ultimate has a Formats Manual that breaks down pretty much every possible format. Make sure to use common sense in applying these formats to youth teams, as they were originally designed for adult play. We provide bagels for all the teams. All winning teams should get some sort of prize. Prizes have included a single trophy for the champion team and shirts and discs for each player on the winning team. This year, we added the stamp “Champions” to a different color disc for both winning squads.

After the season I created a online survey on SurveyMonkey.com to assess the season and get some feedback for future planning.

Post-season Survey

1. Rate your experience 1-10
2. Favorite aspects of the league?
3. Suggestions for improvement?