



Starting a High School League

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This section will cover the basics of starting a new high school Ultimate league. There aren't many differences between starting a high school league which is comprised of teams from various high schools and a youth club league which can include randomly put together youth teams. In fact, some high school leagues are club team leagues. Therefore, this section will be helpful for those starting any youth league, but will also focus on more specific issues related to starting a new high school league.

Why Start a Youth League?

Why should someone consider starting a youth league? Why not just run a youth tournament? Tournaments are an important part of the growth of Ultimate as they do a great job of getting players hooked. Tournaments are also better at picking the “winner” and this is often an important part of a youth team’s motivation for playing other teams.

League play, however, is vastly superior in terms of teaching the game and helping introduce newer, younger players to the sport. And this should be the goal of any organizer interested in starting a new youth league within their community. Many players at the H.S. level who will join the league have never played or perhaps even heard of the sport of Ultimate before. Organizers of youth leagues should be aware that they will likely be the “face” of Ultimate for most of these players. Players’ experiences in your league will likely be their first impression of Ultimate and will shape their future thoughts of the sport.

Because league games have fewer time restrictions and often less competitive pressure, they tend to allow many more opportunities for teaching than a tournament game. Experience in league games allows teams to be better prepared for the faster paced, more competitive tournaments. This distinction is important as players are

often intimidated when they first begin playing. Offering new and inexperienced players an environment that is supportive and instructional helps players develop their skills and gain confidence as an Ultimate player.

With the additional opportunities for learning, a league environment is also a great time to teach players about the unique aspects of Ultimate such as Spirit of the Game™ (SOTG™) and self-officiating. Not only is it a great time to teach players about this but these aspects alone are a primary reason for introducing the sport to youth players. Practicing and learning about SOTG™ teaches players honesty and respect and will have a critical impact on their development in sports and Ultimate.

League play is also much simpler to organize from an economic and man hour perspective since organizers may use various field sites for a single league. In general, tournaments make good teams and leagues make more teams. Obviously providing opportunities for both is ideal and for most H.S. youth leagues the culminating event is a state or league tournament.

Preliminary Research

While you can continue to move forward in the planning process, a couple of issues need to be addressed and researched from early on.

Finding Fields

Where will the league games be played? Many places can be used and even if you have one site that you can use, it doesn't hurt to investigate other options. Approaching high schools, especially ones with Ultimate teams or pick-up already in existence, is an obvious place to start. But also consider contacting local parks and recreation departments. City parks, churches, schools, and businesses with athletic fields are great places to start. When looking for fields it is important to visit the site. Most fields are built with other sports in mind. When you look at a site consider if the fields are the appropriate size, are water and rest rooms accessible, are the fields themselves healthy and will they be safe for the players? This needs to be looked into early on as there won't be a league without a field site. And many sites may get reserved the longer you wait.

Insurance

Another thing to consider is insurance coverage. It is not recommended to organize any league, whether adult or youth, without liability insurance coverage. There are several resources available for exploring your opportunities to obtain insurance. Some schools and other sites may automatically provide liability coverage for activities on their site. Check with field providers when considering whether or not to use them. Local Ultimate organizations often have their own coverage and may be willing to let you be covered under their policy. Of course you can consider contacting insurance companies directly and discuss options for obtaining your own insurance coverage. And finally, insurance can be obtained from USA Ultimate through its sanctioning program.

Establish Contacts Within the Community

Assessing and making contact with people in the community should be your first step in preparing to put together a league. Don't forget to search outside of the Ultimate community for potential support. The more you can draw the community into discussions and involvement with organizing the league, the greater support your system will be and the more people are likely to hear about your league. Following are a few questions to consider when looking for support within the community.

Explore the Non-Ultimate Community

Is there a person or group in the local community who can help in organizing the league as part of their current job description? Most communities have a person designated to developing or running youth programs. Prime examples often exist in current communities with the strongest youth teams. Many youth camps also use Ultimate as a semi-regular part of their instruction. Some college administrators may be interested in helping out to some degree as Ultimate can be a recruiting tool for smaller schools. Local parks and recreation departments are often interested in integrating the ever-growing sport of Ultimate into their current curriculum.

A person or group like this may be able to provide a great amount of administrative assistance in starting the league if they can be convinced of the benefits to their community. Often these sources will also be able to provide the facilities for organizing the league. Knowing something about the local Ultimate community in terms of numbers of youth playing will allow you to present a case for starting a H.S. youth league.

Adult Leagues

Is there an adult league that can provide some assistance? Communities with large established adult leagues can often be very helpful in getting a H.S. youth league started. In many cases youth are already participating in these adult leagues. Finding them can help get you more information about where kids are playing and provide potential contacts for teams. Later on, as coaches and advisors need to be found for teams, the adult league may be able to help you match up youth teams with adults who can help to coach. Adult leagues are generally volunteer organizations, however, and they are usually short on resources. So new H.S. youth leagues should not get discouraged if the local adult league is indifferent to H.S. youth league outreach. Reminding them that new youth league players quickly become new adult league players may help.

Locating Players

Where are kids currently playing? This can be tricky to find out and usually involves some email and phone work. If your community has an established youth team it would make sense to start there. What other schools/locations are aware of youth Ultimate? Emailing athletic activities directors in local school districts can sometimes be a good start to finding the hidden pockets of players. A surprising number of

high schools have some sort of regular pick-up game being played. Finding these groups will be important for establishing a new H.S. youth league. Additional resources can include the teams, tournaments and organizations listed on USA Ultimate website www.usultimate.org and contacting USA Ultimate's Director of Youth Development.

Obviously each area will have different time line requirements but ideally a new league will have done much of this initial assessing two seasons ahead of the first league season. Most H.S. youth leagues happen in the spring (since that's when USA Ultimate runs its larger scale youth events) so planning and assessing needs to happen in the fall and early winter of that school year, that is fall of 2010 for the Spring 2011 season.

Getting the League Off the Ground

Sites have been explored and interest for the upcoming league is spreading. Now it's time to get organized and find the help needed to see this thing through.

Contact and Communication

Now that the initial legwork and assessment has been done, it's time to choose a contact person that can help get the project off the ground. This could be a person with contacts in the youth recreation or programming world whose title adds credibility to the cause. It could be a person with lots of Ultimate experience that people in the can connect with. Ideally this person would have both. This person will be responsible for collecting emails and answering questions. Basically they will act as a clearinghouse while teams are starting to trickle in. They should have regular, daily access to email and a cell phone and they should have the time, desire and ability to answer questions about the league.

Set up a Yahoo group or a similar email list for group communication. This can be done by the main contact person, but can also be facilitated by another involved organizer. This should be ready to use by the first meeting if not before.

Prepare for Initial Meeting

The next step is to establish a time, date and location for an initial meeting. This meeting is for anyone who may be interested in helping get the league started including but not limited to coaches, captains, players, local Ultimate organizers, parents, school officials and anyone else who can be persuaded to attend. This meeting should take place about two to three months before the first league games (i.e. meet in late December or early January is ideal for a league that will begin in March). Choose a location that people are familiar with or one that is easy to find. Perhaps a school would allow you to use a classroom or cafeteria. To get the maximum number of attendees, choosing a week night evening (especially Monday or Tuesday) tends to work well.

The last step is to get as many people possible to attend this first meeting. Email local adult Ultimate groups and advertise the meeting. Especially target Ultimate players that are teachers at local schools; their contacts with Ultimate, school administration, and students makes them ideally placed to assist in starting a team, attaining resources and connecting them to the league. Contact everyone you have been in touch with during the first stage of assessing interest in the community. Over communication is the name of the game. The answer to every "How are you?" question should be, "Great! We're starting a youth Ultimate league, have you heard about it?" You really never know where you'll meet someone who knows someone who has a high school pick up game in their back yard. These are the contacts that will make the league thrive.

During the month before the meeting, stay in good communication with those that have expressed interest in being involved. Encourage questions. Provide people with opportunities to get involved even at this early stage. Make information available whether on a website (best option), electronic flyer or elsewhere. This gives them opportunities to share information about the meeting and league with others and it also serves as a reminder. Keep people talking about it and then make sure to send reminders once or twice before the meeting.

Initial Meeting: Meet and Discuss

The first meeting is key to getting the league off to a strong start as first impressions generally go a long way. Make sure that all logistics (time, place, directions, refreshments, paperwork and handouts) are double checked the day before. Disorganization at the start is not acceptable. The meeting should go NO LONGER than two hours and closer to one hour would be ideal. Respect people's time and get them out of there excited and hungry for more. If people are still curious about things then let them hang around after the meeting and ask questions.

Things that should be provided at the meeting include:

- Tables and chairs
- Refreshments/snacks
- Name tags, markers, and extra pens
- Note pad to capture the contact information of everyone who attends
- Examples of discs that are acceptable for league play.
- If possible, provide a complimentary disc (approved for league play) for each team represented—perhaps donated by the adult league
- Handouts with the agenda and basic league information (contact info., Yahoo group, website, etc.)
- Ultimate magazines for people to look through and take home
- Packets for each team contact that include copies of all forms that will be used (roster, waiver, medical authorization, chaperone, etc.)

Goals of the Initial Meeting

There are several things to accomplish during this initial meeting most of which should happen fairly organically.

Get acquainted Bring people together so people can put names to faces.

Develop relationships and establish contacts These first two goals should happen naturally but time should be give during this meeting to make them happen.

Assess and brainstorm league goals This should be an agenda item and should be run as a moderated group discussion. Ask the general questions, “What should this league look like?” Allow everyone's ideas to be heard and look for consensus but lead the discussion towards establishing some group league ideals. This may take the form of a mission statement eventually.

Establish buy-in to league ideals It is not uncommon to have a variety of opinions about what the league should look like and how it should be organized. These opinions may take on a practical form (“We don't want to wear uniforms!”) or general form (the ever present competitive vs. spirited debate). Though all opinions should be heard, for most new H.S. youth leagues the focus should be on learning the rules and how to play safely. In a community with many established teams, focus on high level competition may be more natural but as a league—growth of the sport is what's important and helping new players learn the game should take priority to helping experienced players dominate the national scene. Listen to all opinions and try to come to some agreement on some group values.

Be sure everyone feels heard Allow time for questions and ask for suggestions multiple times through the meeting. Obtain input about additional league details such as scheduling. Just because someone is facilitating this meeting doesn't mean they have all the answers. Part of getting group buy-in is making sure that everyone had something to contribute.

Discuss need for volunteers Most new teams will not have coaches and so skills and rules will need to be taught fairly quickly. One to two hour clinics can be a great help for getting new teams established and this meeting is the time to schedule those clinics and find volunteers to run them. Volunteers may also be needed for help with finances, registration, paperwork handling and processing, web design or upkeep and tournament directing. This meeting is also a great time to work on finding those people.

Set the next meeting time and location Make sure to do a head count during this first meeting to find out who expects to be able to show for the next. This should help gauge the level of interest in helping with league needs. Ideally the second meeting is about two to three weeks before the league starts.

Set a registration deadline for teams wishing to play in the league The deadline may have to be

extended for a few teams but if there is no deadline, no one will be registered when the schedule needs to be made. For many leagues the second league meeting will be the deadline. Scheduling games can't be done until the basic numbers of teams is established.

Elicit suggestions for contacting schools

Some suggestions should be given to coaches and team captains about the best ways to approach a schools administration for help (start small, be professional, be clear and thorough in what you'd like from the administration, use parents!). Some other thoughts about how to best use parents would be in order (treats after games, drivers, website help, uniforms, etc.). Much of this can be done over email after the first meeting as well.

Generate enthusiasm Most importantly, people should leave this meeting excited to help make the league a reality. Maintaining a level of interest early on will help make sure that come league-time, people are still working with the goal in mind. A video clip or two, whether instructional or game highlights, can do wonders to fire people up. Being organized and enthusiastic about helping new people learn the sport is also infectious.

Determine form of future communication

Having an established electronic form of communication before the meeting starts that everyone can use (i.e. Yahoo group) will be very helpful in keeping the ball rolling after the meeting is concluded. Make sure that whatever you use is established and relatively simple to use. High school students who are captaining and coaches with little tech experience should be able to join the group and receive all emails that are sent. Make sure that everyone has been given some instruction on joining the group before they leave. Providing a handout which explains this process or even having a computer on site, which can be used to walk people through the process after the meeting is over, can be helpful. This email group should be used to disseminate all league specific information and advertise meetings. Remember that there is often lag time between sending emails to the group and when people receive them. When sending meeting reminder emails keep it in mind that there is a fine line between sending the reminder too early and too late. About one week in advance of the meeting is probably optimal depending on the group. Much earlier than that and people are likely to forget.

Finalizing League Preparation

Much of the work has been done and by now there should be a core of volunteers willing to help organize the league. Many details were established at or since the meeting. The time between the first and second meeting is a time to find or confirm league details.

Registration Determine how you are going to do it, where it will be available, who can sign up/will you invite, when can people do it, etc.

Paperwork What forms are needed? Where are they available? Where do they get sent? Who's going to process them?

Field site Have your field site determined and make sure to have a contract or written agreement clarifying when you will have access to the fields and for how long.

Insurance coverage Have your insurance decisions finalized, contracts signed and an insurance certificate for proof of coverage in hand.

Executive Committee Does it make sense to establish a steering committee of adults? Assuming it does, who is that going to be?

Schedule Even if this hasn't been finalized, determine a general schedule for league play. When, where, etc.

Budget Make sure you have prepared a budget outline. Determine all set and expected expenses. Based on the budget determine what the team or player fees will be.

Many of these may be answered at the first meeting but if not, they should be answered by the time the second meeting happens. New teams may still be attracted at this point and no one should be turned away.

Second Meeting: Registration & League Information

Once again this is an open invite meeting but those who are taking an active role should encourage a select group of people they consider crucial to the organization and planning of the league. This would include a select group of coaches, captains or team representatives, people with web experience, people with experience directing tournaments, those that have volunteered to help, and those that have expressed interest in being involved, etc.

The second meeting should take place around two to three weeks before the start of the season. The function of the second meeting is to solidify the primary group of coaches, captains and volunteers that will be running the league and handling registration. Things that need to be on the agenda include:

Registration and paperwork Showing people how to register at the meeting will be critical. In youth leagues especially, there can be a lot of paperwork. Be prepared to provide the necessary forms along with detailed instructions and to collect forms from those that received them at the first meeting and are ready to turn them in. Collecting as much as possible now is important. Players should not participate without necessary forms completed correctly (usually required for insurance purposes) and sometimes this may take more than one try. So don't wait until the last minute.

Hand out the league schedules In some cases, leagues won't be able to set the schedule until after this meeting and teams should have a definitive understanding of where and when they will receive their schedules.

Hand out the league rules Explain the purpose or goal of the league and go over rules regarding spirit and rule. Some teams will still need to attend rules and skills clinics before game play starts and this second meeting can be a time to set up such clinics. A good general rule is that league teams can't play in league games unless the league has faith that they will be able to self-officiate and play the game in a safe manner. Having these clinics can go a long way to establish credibility with the other teams.

Discuss coaching A second major issue that will need to be dealt with is coaching. Care should be taken to avoid unsupervised teams. With new leagues there will always be concerns about rules, self-officiating, and SOTG™. Teams that don't have an adult advocate tend to be more defensive with their interpretations and this leads to situations that can get out of hand very quickly. Encouraging coaches to attend USA Ultimate Coaching Certification Clinics can help get teams on a similar page and ensure cleaner games, knowledgeable support and, therefore, more fun for everyone. At the very least teams should not be allowed to play a league game without an adult present who knows the rules. Providing clinics to teach people how to self-officiate and/or requiring teams to have certified coaches can greatly improve the nature of all league games. Do not make the mistake of let-

ting teams get by without an adult just because they feel like they can handle themselves. Make it clear to captains and coaches of other teams that they should not play a league game if there is not an adult present.

Explain league operational details Where can all field site directions be found? What should I do if a team doesn't show? Who should I call if there is a threat of weather cancellation? How do we handle conduct issues? Who do we contact if there is a complaint or concern?

Discuss State/League Tournament This is the meeting to decide if there is a final tournament to be planned and who will direct it.

Finalize a basic Executive Committee structure and organizational chart

Decisions will need to be made about who needs to be at the meeting (simple majority, certain members, etc.)

League Begins

Plans have been made for all circumstances. The teams have registered and everyone is ready to begin playing. No matter how prepared the league is it's natural for new leagues to experience some early hiccups. The key is not to panic or overreact, but to make sure that issues, mishaps and conflicts are dealt with relatively quickly and thoughtfully.

Check-In

Someone on the league Executive Committee should make sure to check in with captains and coaches periodically to find how things are going. Good communication is key to staying on top of situations and making sure everyone is getting the best experience possible from the league. This shows participants that organizers care and forces captains and coaches to hold themselves to a higher standard.

Handling Issues

The biggest threats to a new league are no-shows and spirit/rule disputes. Teams must show up to games that they are scheduled to play. Every time a team doesn't make it to their game, other teams are left with a bad taste in their mouth. Similarly every time two teams can't find an agreeable resolution someone

is potentially turned off from Ultimate. New leagues can't afford very many of these situations. For a new league it is probably best if most/all of the questions and concerns are funneled through one person. Designate a person before hand, such as the Executive Director or a level-headed committee member who is accomplished at problem solving and communicating. It should be clear to the players, parents, coaches and team captains who they should contact in the event that a situation or concern should arise. It may be appropriate to establish an email committee or such group to handle issues that may arise such as eligibility or rules violation concerns.

Parents

One other consideration should be made for the above issues. Parents are the single biggest resource for youth Ultimate teams and at times the biggest challenge. Most parents are attracted to the self-officiating and spirited aspect of Ultimate but they can also be tremendously turned off when teams are not playing fair. They can also bring a "shout at the ref" mentality to Ultimate, which has no place in a player-run sport. The league should make sure that appropriate parental sideline behavior is explained and insisted upon. This can be done through coaches and captains but should also be covered through email and website resources if they are available.

Third Meeting: Executive Committee

The third meeting should just include people who are interested in helping plan or prepare for the end of the season tournament. This meeting should generally take place one to two weeks after the start of the league in order to provide plenty of time to prepare for the final tournament and also allow some league issues to be addressed. During this meeting, it should be established who is involved, what each person's tasks are and when they need to have it done. A fourth meeting could be scheduled shortly before the tournament to continue the planning and preparing process and for the discussion of last minute details.

League Wrap Up

It is a good idea to allow one to two flexible weeks near the end of the season so teams can make up missed or rained out games. Spring break, inclement weather, and lack of planning generally mean most teams will miss at least one game over the course of a season.

The league can do a lot to ensure its future by investing some time and energy in an end of the season event. For most leagues this is usually their league or state tournament. To wrap up the league, organizers can keep it simple. Consider a smaller hat tournament, perhaps a small tournament followed by a social gathering. Perhaps just a root beer float party. When a league gives back to the players it helps those players buy in to the league.

Fourth Meeting: Assessment and Evaluation

For the fourth meeting there are two main tasks, get feedback from the past season and prepare the seeds for many more years to come.

Have an open and honest assessment of the season and tournament In addition to discussion, consider providing anonymous evaluation forms to players and anyone involved for feedback.

Examine final details of the budget Determine what should change for next time.

Offer THANKS and PRAISE Make sure everyone that helped gets recognized and rewarded. Leagues should be creative in how they reward good work though some small cash stipends for work above and beyond the call of duty can go a long way to making sure people are interested in coming back the following year. Also consider gift certificates, customized gifts, etc.

Plan ahead Set preliminary plans for the next season including, setting a basic schedule of the season and league meetings.