

# Starting an Ultimate Camp

By Mark Rosser

*In running an Ultimate camp, it is important to realize that many different situations exist throughout the country and the world. There is no one “right” way to run a camp. Information in this section is put together based on experiences from running the Philadelphia Ultimate Camp with Jim Brose for the past several years. A number of the decisions made have been based on the Ultimate community in Philadelphia, along with personal preferences. Our camp organizers have different strengths and this serves us well. It is important to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the organizers and to fill additional important roles as well. Getting good people involved is the key. For kids, much of a camp experience relates to the counselors. It is important to find counselors who are knowledgeable, teach the game well, and that will help the kids have fun.*

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In addition to the suggestions shared in this section, consider other paths that could be taken. In general, one of the main goals should be to breed Ultimate and to pass on the game to the next generation. Doing things right can help the camp be financially sound, but a number of conditions must be present to create a camp which is consistently a financial success. For example, the goal in our first year was to get the word out and to make sure the kids who came had a great time. A strong investment is necessary in the first year in order to help build success for the future.

## Operating Independently vs. Through Another Organization

There are advantages to each of these approaches. Operating independently allows organizers more freedom, but will also be a lot more work. Much of that work will be paperwork. It is important to

consider what is best for YOU and the organizer’s involved. The Philadelphia Ultimate Camp operated independently for the first three years. In the third year, the Camp was contacted by a local township recreation department to run a camp for them. This provided us with the opportunity to see both situations.

If you are interested in running a camp through another organization you should talk with the director of recreation centers or coordinators of summer programs for townships. Our camp with the local township was geared for kids ages 7-11. They ran a number of other programs and they advertised our camp in their summer catalog that was mailed to all of the residents in the township. They handled all of the registration and the camp’s responsibility was just to show up and teach. Administration and advertising were handled by the township. The campers had a fun, educational week of Ultimate. The income and expenses were smaller numbers, but fairly predictable.

In contrast to this is our program for older players. A majority of these players were ages 14-18 and also play on their high school teams. With this camp, we did the advertising. We had flyers and discs available at tournaments. We mailed flyers to the players. It

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helped that I run the local high school league in Philadelphia as well. I was able to mention the camp in emails or at league meetings. It's been said that people need to hear something six times before it sticks with them. Get the word out to people who work with kids. Get to know the people that run the youth programs in your area so you can work with them. It is a win-win situation. It can help you attract players to the camp, and it can help them to improve the level of play for their players.

## Determining the Location

If you are operating independently, you will need to find a site. If you are not operating independently, you will need to find an organization to work with. In terms of groups to work with, check with existing camps and township programs. Groups like these are often excited to add new activities to their lineup. Emphasize to them that Ultimate (or perhaps just "Frisbee™" if you are working with a younger group) is a fun way to get kids to learn sportsmanship and get good exercise.

If you are operating independently, finding a site is the most important step. Without a location, camp can not occur. Be persistent with this step. It may take many phone calls or emails. What should you look for? Depending on your location and your campers, weather may be a consideration in choosing a site. What will you do if it rains? Ideally, your site should also include a gym where you can go if there is heavy rain. It is also nice to have a classroom with video capabilities. Other perks to look for would be access to an ice machine and water. If there is a lunchroom, that is also a plus. You may decide that you do not need all of these, but it is best to try to plan for adverse weather conditions. Many parents sign their kids up for camp, and then expect that no matter what the weather is like, you will run your program.

There is a great deal of competition among camps for summer sites. As a result, it may be difficult (and expensive) to find a site. Be prepared to put in the extra time initially to find a quality site that is within your financial range. Often colleges and public high schools will be a bit more expensive. Private or parochial schools are sometimes more flexible and more reasonable in price. Township parks are also an option, but you will need to develop a plan in case of heavy rain.

When approaching the site coordinator, be prepared to answer the types of questions they will ask. Some will want information in writing. Prepare a description of your camp's mission statement and the staff. People want to know that you are a responsible person and that even if the camp is new, that it will be a reliable entity. Give your background in running programs and working with kids. Some places may want background checks.

One of the questions you WILL need an answer for is insurance. We participate in USA Ultimate's Affiliation program and I strongly recommend this as an option. Another option would be participating in your local Ultimate group's policy. Insurance is a must. Take care of it early so you can move ahead with other essential planning items.

## Determining Your Target Group

This may depend on your community. Consider what is available and your resources.

- Is there a local high school league?
- Are there a number of players in your adult leagues with kids?
- Is the local recreation department looking to add programs?
- What age groups do you want to work with?

As a general rule with younger groups, it is best to have a slightly shorter program and perhaps mix in a few non-Frisbee™ related activities. For example, consider a session for kids ages 8-11 that is 3 hours a day for one week. When grouping kids together, a good guideline is to think of elementary, middle school, and high school as a good general barometer. There may be some activities where there can be some mixing beyond these guidelines, but in order to help kids challenge themselves safely in age-appropriate drills or activities it is best not to have too large a disparity in members of the groups. Day camp environments work fine when combining girls and boys or separating them out. It may depend on further details of the program as to which may work best for you.

Consider these and other factors when determining your target group. Once you have decided on your target group, gear your advertising efforts toward this group.

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## What's in a Name?

The name of your camp tells people who you are so choose your name carefully. It is nice to be creative, but the name should also be informative for parents and players. Consider the message or information you want to share. Be clear and concise. Consider what people will find when they search the web or look in a directory. Some organizations also use an alternate nickname or acronym in place of their full name. Consider this when developing your name. Important things to consider including are who and what.

## Advertising

Advertising is crucial in getting the camp started. Determine a budget for the year. Consider the places where you can get the word out in the most cost effective way. Follow that up by seeing which forms of advertisement were most effective for you. On our application, we have a line where applicants write “where they heard about the camp.” In our first year we spent a large chunk of change on a local newspaper in the Philadelphia area. None of the applicants reported that they heard about the camp from the ad. As a result we dropped it the next year. On the other hand, many of the kids wrote that they heard about the camp from a mailing. So the following year, we increased mailings to the high school players.

A great way to advertise is through custom-made discs. Get your camp logo and web address on the disc. These can be given away or sold at local high school tournaments. Have camp shirts made. Be sure to design a cool logo so people will want to wear the shirt. If your camp is in the summer you probably want the shirt to be white to help kids stay cool. If it wicks away sweat, that's even better. We give a disc and shirt to each camper AND counselor. Build positive feelings in these people and then let them be ambassadors for your camp. Word of mouth is critical to having a successful camp. Make sure the captains of the local teams know about the camp.

There are also other free, or relatively inexpensive, ways to advertise. Where do many of the games occur? Is there a bulletin board? Post flyers there. Do you ever send an email? Have the camp website be attached as part of your signature. Does the local Ultimate group have a website? Ask if you can post camp information on that website. Don't be shy about promoting the camp.

## The Website

In this day and age, it would seem that a website is necessary. For a small cost, it will save you a lot of time. Posting necessary information on the website will make it easier for those interested in attending your camp. It will also save you time in terms of answering questions related to the information on the website. In addition it is also a great chance to show pride in your program and the people who are serving as counselors.

Use a digital camera to take lots of pictures. In our application that parents sign, we ask permission to use photos of the players to advertise our camp. And if a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video must be worth a million. Our camp posted video footage on our website found that this is something players really enjoy watching. It also highlights details and experiences available through the program. Make sure to involve people with a variety of skills.

Give people a reason to visit (and revisit) your website. Post content there that might be of interest to potential campers. On our website, we post the local high school league standings. Keep in mind, that some parents may not know that much about Ultimate. Post links to USA Ultimate, your local Ultimate organization, and other helpful resources.

## Camp Registration

Having forms available online is a great help. We use three basic forms: camp application (Appendix A), medical authorization form (Appendix C), and the waiver (Appendix E). The waiver and the medical authorization form are part of USA Ultimate's Affiliation program. However, even if you choose not to use USA Ultimate's program, it may be a good idea to have forms similar to these. Consult your local attorney and find out specifics on requirements from the group or insurance you choose for your camp.

The application is an important tool in gathering information. How did you find out about the camp? Emergency contact information is also important. Get as many phone numbers as you can in case you need to contact a parent. Get home, work, and cell numbers for both parents. Email is important for communicating so ask them to please write their email NEATLY. If you are going to have groups based on skill level, do what you can to gather some information on their Frisbee™ experience so you can plan in advance.

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## Building Relationships is Key

The most important people are the kids. It is all about giving them a fun experience where they learn more about playing Ultimate. It is also important to develop a good relationship with parents. As director of a camp, introduce yourself to the parents. Encourage them to stay and watch their kids play. Help them to see that you and your counselors are doing a fine job with their kids. Point out positive steps that their son or daughter has made. As it was mentioned before, build strong relationships with the coaches, youth program directors, and the leaders in the local Ultimate community. You are providing a beneficial product for them and they can help you to find the kids that can benefit from that product.

It is also important to build positive relationships with the “support” people. The “support” people are those that do not play Ultimate but play a role in the township or facility that you are using. This could be the recreation director, the administrative assistant at the school, the maintenance crew, directors and counselors of other camps on the site. These days it is hard to find good sites. You want yourself and your camp to be known as people who “play well with others” so that you are welcome guests for years to come.

## Staffing

Building the staff for camp is another important step. Perhaps you are the best person to run the day-to-day activities of the camp. However, take a step back and consider if there are others who might be just the right person to fill that role. The on-site director should be a person with a strong Ultimate background and a strong knowledge of the game. This person should have plenty of experience teaching the game to others. Not all great players are great teachers. This person should also be comfortable working with other counselors. Because teachers are not in school in the summer, you may find that a teacher is a good person to fill this role or the role of counselor. You want to find the best players/teachers available. Often times people who have been captains of teams are comfortable teaching others.

Not everyone has total flexibility with their schedule, so be willing to have “guest stars” come in for a day or two as their schedule permits. Be sure to have a solid core of counselors who will be there all week. This will

provide continuity in the teaching and help the kids feel comfortable. However, adding guest stars can provide something new and fresh for each day.

Staffing the camp involves important decisions. Giving the kids a quality experience means trying to keep a relatively low counselor to camper ratio. Of course, the lower the ratio the higher the cost. It is desirable to have one counselor for every 5-7 campers. It’s an added benefit if it’s possible to have an extra “floating” counselor that can move from group to group and give pointers or problem-solve and deal with issues that may arise.

Selection of the staff will also be affected by the age range of the players. Certainly you want to seek out top notch players. However, another consideration when selecting counselors for younger kids (ages 8-11) would be finding players who can maintain an enthusiasm around younger, newer players. High school or college players could fill this role very nicely, along with an experienced player to maintain the organization and scheduling. A teacher could be a very good candidate for this director position.

## Planning the Week

Several weeks before camp, it is very useful to meet with the main counselors who will be running activities during the week. At this point, you can plan the progression for the week and decide on drills and activities. Getting the counselors involved in this stage is very important. These counselors will be the ones who help make the activities successful. You may have a great Break the Mark drill, but if the counselor who is running the drill is not clear about how the drill works, then the drill may be a flop. This meeting is also a good time for the counselors and staff to make connections between the activities so that the kids can build their Ultimate knowledge and see the applications of it.

## Planning the Day

With our younger kids we had camp from 9am until noon. With our older kids we have two sessions that last three hours. The morning session goes from 9am until noon. Lunch break goes from noon until 1pm. The afternoon session is from 1pm until 4pm. Especially with kids who are new to the game, it is important to give them many opportunities to

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be successful and then to build on those successes. As with any team sport, you want to start with a lot of repetitions of individual skills and then build up to incorporate those skills into drills and eventually game situations.

Have a flexible framework established. Know your plan, but be ready for minor changes. We started the morning working on throws. This is a good chance to give kids a few tips to work with, and also to evaluate skill for groups. Your numbers may dictate something a little different, but the past two years we split into three groups based on ability. After stretching and working on throws, each group would go to a different station. One of our head counselors (counselors who were there all week and helped developed the plans) would be running an activity at that station. Our groups were about 12-14 kids. We had another counselor rotate with the group so they could make connections between the stations and work closely with those kids. Because the kids were at different levels, the head counselors did make some adjustments to the activities as needed.

After the three rotations we had teams which we kept all week for the “Camp Cup.” These teams brought all of the players together to compete in healthy competition for the week. The counselors also played on these teams. This was a chance for the counselors to incorporate the lessons of the day, as well as model good leadership and sportsmanship skills for the campers.

Ultimate is a demanding sport. The kids work hard and are often very tired after a grueling week of developing their skills. A number of other sports may not be as grueling and kids could participate for a number of weeks. Because a week of camp can be so taxing, it may be difficult to get many kids to attend for several weeks. Consider the length of each session, amount of time spent on Ultimate and amount of time (if any) spent on other activities and the age group, and whether or not it will include people who have played before or not when determining how long to schedule camp. You would prefer people to leave feeling good, like they learned something, happy but also wanting more.

## Looking Ahead

Once camp has concluded, the question to ask is “How can we improve for next year?” Who better to ask than the kids who attended? Evaluations are a great tool. We have kept ours rather simple with a few basic open-ended questions. What did you learn that you can take back to your team? What was your favorite part of camp? What suggestions do you have to improve the camp for next year? While you may not be able to “put a dome over the field and install air conditioning,” the evaluations do provide useful feedback to apply for the future. See sample Evaluation Form (Appendix B).

While things are fresh in people’s minds, it is best to wrap things up. When you do this, write things down. Something that may seem obvious a week after camp has ended may fade into a memory by the time next year’s camp rolls around. Take care of all necessary paperwork. Toss unnecessary items and file away the useful ones. Taking care of organizational items well in advance allows you and others running the camp to present an organized, well-run program.

Important things to note include suggestions from campers and counselors. Write down which drills worked well and which ones might need revising. Keep records of campers so you can mail them brochures the following summer. Try to stay in touch with some of the campers; they are the key to spreading the word about your camp. If they play high school Ultimate, see some of their games or find a way to volunteer to help the youth community.

## FUN and RESPECT

Most of all, keep looking for ways to make it fun. For the kids. For the staff. For you. For everyone. Breed Ultimate. We all know it is a great sport and we love to lace up the cleats and play. We are fortunate to be part of a wonderful community that has respect for the game and the people who play it. Share that love and respect with the next generation of players.