



BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

Sport and social clubs look to parks for fitness and community

BY MARY HELEN SPRECHER

THE FASTEST-GROWING DEMOGRAPHIC OF ATHLETES IN PARKS ISN'T MADE UP OF YOUTH ATHLETES, ALTHOUGH IT DOES INCLUDE MANY PEOPLE WHO ONCE WERE. ADULT PARTICIPANTS ARE JOINING THE RAPIDLY PROLIFERATING LEAGUES OF SPORT AND SOCIAL CLUBS.

And, according to Galen Beers, executive director of the Sport and Social Association (SSA), the league and club programs offered by organizations in cities throughout the U.S. are not only helping adults stay active but are also helping them make friends and keep a competitive spirit alive after graduating from high school and/or college.

“One of the biggest challenges,” Beers says, “is that we definitely live in a digital world, and you have a lot of people who find it easier not to be active.”

SPACE TO PLAY

Sport and social organizations help avoid the problems caused by isolation, which become prevalent among adults who have left behind their schedules of practices and games (as well as their teammates) upon graduation.

And that's where parks come in. A significant number of these programs are held in parks, where facilities, such as baseball and softball diamonds, sports fields, and municipal community centers, can be



In the parks and recreation sector, where professionals see their workload increasing, thanks (or no thanks) to budget cuts that have resulted in diminished workforces, many sport and social clubs have stepped in to provide management services. This alleviates the problem of department employees having to handle all the administrative work, like hiring referees, scheduling games, keeping track of scores, and setting up parties at the end of the season.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

There is great variety in the sports offered nationwide, Beers told ASBA.

“It varies by clubs, and by the locations of those clubs. Overall, though, I’d say that volleyball is at or near the top; there is also a lot of participation in soccer, softball, kickball, basketball, flag football, and pickleball. Cornhole, bowling, and dodgeball are also represented, as are a lot of other sports.”

Golf, bar games, swimming, darts, Ultimate, and table tennis are also offered, as are sports with various permutations, like bicycling (including street riding, paved trails, or gravel grinders), running (including track workouts, street runs, or running on greenways or dirt trails), and meetups to hike or walk dogs, as well as an almost infinite variety of other ways to gather for activity. (In wintry climates, for example, cross-country skiing or snowshoeing in parks, as well as snow volleyball, may be among the offerings.)

Some club owners tailor their offerings to the needs and wishes of the participants. Small-sided play in soccer and other field sports allows for easier team setup, since fewer players are needed for each team, and one field can host multiple games at once. (Another plus: Adults who don’t play regularly do not experience the wear and tear on their bodies caused by running back and forth across a full-size field.)

accessed affordably by local clubs.

Beers counts facility availability as one of the biggest challenges facing programs.

“The day-to-day management of these organizations as a whole can be challenging, but what can be really difficult is trying to keep up the inventory of facilities. It’s not just registering the people who are interested; it’s having space for those people to play their given sport. If facilities become unavailable, it creates a real problem.”





And even within sports offered by clubs, there can be different levels. For example, pickleball can be competitive or social. Cycling can be serious, or it can involve leisurely rides that culminate in lunches or happy hours afterward.

Another major challenge for outdoor sports is rainouts, says Beers.

“Climate drives a lot of frustration. Some markets are hardly ever rained out of a game, but in some areas, it’s a constant concern.”

CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Park managers who reach out to sport and social organizations should be ready to ask the following questions:

- ▶ Who is responsible for publicizing programs, assembling teams, setting up schedules, and communicating this information to all participants?

- ▶ Who is responsible for making sure there are appropriate personnel, such as referees (if needed), lifeguards (always needed), etc.?

- ▶ Which sports facilities are available (and when)? Ensure that no facility is double-booked with local Little Leagues, camps, or other programs.

- ▶ Players should know about any facility upkeep for which they will be responsible in advance. (This might include picking up any

litter left behind by players or spectators, for example.)

- ▶ What time will play start and end? (If there are homes near sports facilities where residents will hear the sounds of games in progress, this is particularly important.)

- ▶ Where will players park? (If there is a specific parking area for athletes, or if there is permit parking that only area residents may access, participants should be alerted.)

- ▶ Who has the responsibility for moving or storing equipment? This may include goals, nets, bats, balls, discs (for disc golf or Ultimate), and other supplies.

- ▶ Who will be lining or marking fields? (Note: Depending upon whether small-sided play is used, and if fields are natural-grass or synthetic turf, different techniques must be applied.)



► Who keeps track of scores (if this is a competitive league that will move to playoffs and to a championship)?

► Who will set up post-league happy hours, parties, dinners, etc.?

► Who will make any weather-related calls and communicate with players if there is a rainout or other issue? Who is responsible for rescheduling?

Nailing down these points can save a lot of questions (and potentially, finger-pointing) once leagues are up and running.

Overall, the marriage of parks with sport and social clubs can be a win for everyone involved. It can increase the use of facilities, attract more people to the park, and, of course, provide all the social and health benefits sports offer. **PRB+**



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