

Informal Sports

Lesson Objectives:

By completing the work in this lesson, you will have learned:

- ❖ the participation factors involved in planning informal sports.
- ❖ operational considerations relevant to informal sports.
- ❖ various programming techniques to facilitate participation.
- ❖ several types of facility scheduling.

Discussion:

I. Introduction

One of the most misunderstood and misrepresented programming areas in recreational sports is the informal sports programming area. By definition, informal sports is self-directed participation in recreational sports. This program area is completely opposite than the structured intramural sports program and one that possesses the least amount of structure for the participant. Activities can range from backyard volleyball or softball at the family picnic to “pick-up” basketball games at the local gymnasium to participation in an aerobics class. However, in most settings (municipal parks and recreation, military, educational, etc.), informal sports involves the largest number of participants.

II. Participation Factors

In order for a recreational sports programmer to effectively administer an informal sports program, an understanding of several key factors which facilitate participation is important. These factors include: *availability/accessibility of facilities, seasonal timing, scheduling, conveniences, cleanliness, personnel, cost and program policies/procedures.*

- A. *Availability/accessibility of facilities.* What recreational sport facilities are available for participants to utilize? In determining availability and accessibility of facilities, it is important to complete an overall assessment of the available sport facilities in your specific environment. Factors such as terrain, weather, transportation and participant interests will have a direct impact on how available and accessible sport facilities are.

The programmer should always be aware of local *trends, sport traditions* and *culture* in identifying facilities. For example, in the state of Indiana, basketball is an extremely popular sport. While in the resort areas of North and South Carolina, golf is king.

The physical placement of all sport facilities should be done in a way to accommodate accessibility for all disabled participants.

Facility availability should be the greatest when the *demand* and *wants* of users are the greatest. Also consider the best times for certain *target populations* such as senior citizens, housewives, professionals, students, etc.

- B. *Seasonal timing.* When is the best time of the year to make certain facilities available? Obviously, outdoor facilities for golf, golf driving ranges, softball diamonds, football and soccer fields, etc. must be available during the spring, summer and early fall months. Indoor facilities for basketball, racquetball, weight training, swimming, etc. should be available in late fall, winter and early spring.
- C. *Scheduling.* Factors which influence the scheduling of a facility for informal sports use include:
 1. *Age* of participants (youth vs adult participants)
 2. *Time* required for participation
 3. Needs of *other recreational sports programs* which use the same facilities
 4. *Budget constraints* of programs and facilities
 5. *Popularity* of the activities.

It is also very important to communicate to all informal sport users the available times/hours of each facility. This can be achieved through posted notices on bulletin boards, telephone voice mail, newspaper ads, radio ads, etc. If the daily facility schedule must be altered (possibly due to unexpected maintenance or repairs), this should also be communicated. Nothing is worse than for a user to come to a facility during his/her daily exercise routine and find the facility closed.

There are basically two types of facility scheduling: *short term reservations* and *block scheduling*.

- ❖ *Short term reservations.* Reservations for facility use are made on a short term basis--daily, weekly or monthly. Short term reservations are mostly used for one-time requests for such sports as racquetball, tennis, golf, etc. or when scheduling special interest or target groups.

- ❖ *Block scheduling.* Block scheduling is the objective, priority review of facilities for use by separate programs or groups. This type of scheduling is usually completed on a seasonal or yearly basis. Participant headcounts during peak use times can be very helpful in determining these priority block schedules. Properly done, block scheduling affords advanced planning, minimizes conflicts, balances program areas and maximizes facility usage.

Regardless of which facility scheduling method is used, there will still be facility conflicts with participants. Suggestions for reducing conflicts include:

1. Changes should be posted as early as possible and communicated to all supervisory staff.
 2. Contact user group representatives by telephone to advise of changes and alternative programming options.
 3. Establish an objective policy for dealing with facility use conflicts and apply it in ALL situations.
 4. Utilize public service announcements.
 5. Conflicts should be handled by the program director who should be on-site during periods of anticipated facility use conflicts.
 6. Use good communication techniques with all concerned parties--can one group come back at an alternative time?
 7. Admit to a scheduling problem and offer apologies.
 8. Require facility confirmation notices at least one week in advance.
 9. Handle all facility use conflicts directly and assertively to obtain acceptance and agreement.
- D. *Conveniences.* Additional benefits or conveniences that are provided by the agency can make the facility much more attractive to the informal sports participant. Conveniences such as: towel service, equipment rental or purchase, adequate parking, concessions, hot tub or sauna, outside water fountains, telephones, bus service, guest passes, daily exercise logging, personal trainers, etc. are just a few that add to a quality sport experience.
- E. *Cleanliness.* This is a factor that we usually take for granted as a recreational sports

programmer but one that is quickly noticed by the participant. A clean and attractive facility helps maintain a positive public image. First impressions are usually lasting impressions.

- F. Staffing. Personnel play a vital role in either attracting participants or causing them to go elsewhere. Staff should be congenial, helpful and knowledgeable about the facility and program. In addition, they should be capable and competent in controlling safety hazards, facility misuse and disciplinary problems.

- G. Cost. The recreational sports programmer should also try to keep participant costs to a minimum. Facility operating costs can be defrayed through reservation fees, equipment rental, access fees, special group rentals and so forth. Traditionally, fees and charges have been more common in commercial settings such as health clubs and private sport clubs. However, in municipal and educational settings they are becoming more and more commonplace due to cutbacks in local, state and federal funding.
 - 1. *Types of fees and charges:*
 - a. Annual user fee: unlimited access to facilities.
 - b.. Daily user fee: golf greens fees, swimming pools, informal sports daily users pass, lift ticket, etc.
 - c. Rental fee: park shelter, softball diamond, etc.
 - d. License/permit fee: hunting, fishing, snow park permits, etc.

- H. Policies/Procedures. The purpose of program policies and procedures is to explain the basic rules and regulations for participation in the informal sports program. All policies and procedures should be written in a clear and concise fashion leaving little room for confusion. When developing policies and procedures keep the following factors in mind:
 - 1. Never jeopardize the safety of participants.
 - 2. Don't burden participants with "red tape."
 - 3. Make sure all policies are understood by the users.
 - 4. Policies and procedures usually pertain to eligibility, fees and charges, facility reservations and general facility use standards. Consider participant rules such as: smoking, litter, food, dress, pets, sportsmanship and lost/found to name just a few.

The key to public acceptance of policy statements is the justification for their existence, consistent enforcement and sensitivity for public relations.

III. Summary

The informal sports program places significant emphasis on self-directed participation through the proper administration of sports facility and equipment. It is the participant who designs and develops the specific personal programs, while the recreational sports programmer facilitates the involvement or experience through appropriate and available facilities and equipment. If managed effectively, the informal sports program can contribute significantly to the overall recreational sports program.

Study Questions:

A. Textbook

1. Describe the various types of information that informal sports programmers can obtain through facility usage reports.
2. Name the five most common types of fees used in informal sports programs.
3. What considerations should be involved in developing a set of facility use guidelines for all program users?
4. Cooperation and trust are deemed vital elements of multiple-use facilities. What are some strategies for developing cooperation and trust among users?
5. Explain "*block scheduling*."

Things to Think About:

1. One of the more difficult problems in informal sports programming is balancing facility scheduling and use. Explain the various techniques that could assist with this problem.
2. What are the major differences between self-directed and staff-directed sport programs?
3. Why would eligibility policies apply to informal sports which is self-directed participation?
4. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of phone-in facility reservations for short term requests.
5. What are typical examples of participant misconduct in informal sports?