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Coaches' Playbook

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

BUILDING A TEAM ALUMNI PROGRAM

By: Christie Lawry – Executive Director, Pittsburgh Ultimate

It's the spring season, and you've got a million things to think about. You're acquainting your most recent recruits, you're trying to keep your captains on the ball, prep for tournament travel and finalize your end-zone strategy. You've got parents to rally, fundraisers to organize and late uniforms trickling in. At this point in the year, your alumni are the last people you're thinking about—other than maybe missing them when your new kids make mistakes that your alumni never would have made…

But team alumni are the **best** ambassadors of your programs—they are the ones who have not only become better/great ultimate players because of it, but stronger leaders, more serious athletes, positive teammates and reliable friends. They have been able to escape from their worlds to find comfort in a team—a program that supports them, challenges them and loves them—for years. And they trust you as a mentor.

Your team family gets bigger every year. Keep alumni players and parents involved, along with your current players and parents.
Photo: Jolie Lang/UltiPhotos

YOU CANNOT FORGET ABOUT THEM, AND YOU CANNOT LET THEM FORGET ABOUT YOU.

Step 1) Don't lose touch.
Step 2) *Actually* keep in touch.

The best way to keep alumni involved is to set up systems, **so you never lose touch in the first place**.

Create systems that can continue each year:

- ★ Start a spreadsheet with **shared contact information**. Everyone has access, everyone can update year to year, and new alumni are added at the end of each season. By keeping all this contact information together, you can push information to the whole group when you need to. Anyone can use the email list if they ever need to reach out.
- ★ Get some **online groups** going—whichever makes sense for your crew: social media groups, group messaging apps or a forum on the team website.
- ★ Set up a **newsletter**. You can send this to anyone who wants it, including parents, alumni, alumni parents, teachers, team sponsors and/or local youth who may be on the team someday. Make it so that families can opt out if they want.

- ★ Create a **website** and make sure you update it. Assign a current player to be in charge. Keep an alumni page with previous rosters, stats and photos. Where are they now? Who do they play for?

- ★ **Arrange regular pick-up**—at least over the summer. Invite current, past and future players. Heck, get the parents out there, too! Need numbers? Invite local college or club players or a neighboring team to join.

- ★ Start hosting an annual **alumni game**. Is it over Thanksgiving? Or winter break? Pick a time of year and stick to it. If they want to come, alumni will expect the same time frame and be able to plan around it each year.

Once these systems are in place, they will continue pretty easily and only need a little bit of attention from time to time. Don't be afraid to ask a couple of alumni to help—give someone access to the website to help update certain pages. Ask alumni to write articles for the newsletters.

Now that your systems are in place, remember to **ACTUALLY** keep in touch. I know you're busy, but it'll be worth it.

General communication is easy—shoot them a quick email at the start of each season with a game schedule, travel plans, fundraiser information and a way to order team gear.

Every time an alumni gets a note about something that happens during the high school season ("we're ordering jerseys!" or "playoff game tomorrow!"), they are going to recall their old jerseys and the big win in the 2010 semifinals. Not only will those memories make them smile, but it will also encourage them to reconnect with the program.

Make sure you're using your alumni as resources. They can be incredibly useful.

- ★ **Create a scholarship fund**. Make it for something you *need*. Are there families who can't afford to let their kids travel? Or is there a player who is paying for the whole season by herself? Inform the alumni about the fund, and make it easy for them to donate.

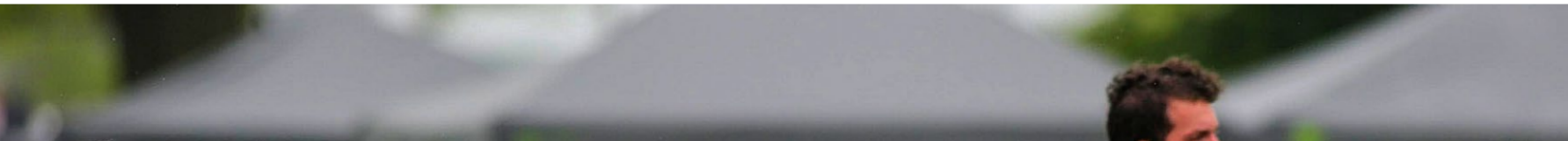
- ★ **Offer them the opportunity to buy gear**—uniforms or otherwise. Make sure you're charging a couple extra bucks, and they're covering their own shipping costs. They won't mind giving five extra dollars when they order their awesome new jacket.

★ Got some leaders in the crowd? Ask around if you need an **assistant coach**. No one feels comfortable committing right now? Find a short-term way for them to contribute. Maybe they can be a **sounding board** for you when you're deciding strategy. Or **provide an idea** when you need a new drill.

★ Find out when the out-of-towners are back in town. **Have certain practices where any/all alumni are welcome to come**. Run scrimmages with specific purposes. Ask the alumni to mimic opposing teams or players. It'll give your players a fun break from the norm during the winter months.

- ★ Ask certain alumni to **demonstrate skills** they are particularly good at or good at explaining. It'll give a new voice to help keep the players engaged and give you a new perspective on how to teach a skill.

- ★ **Set up a mentorship program**. Match current players with alumni and make sure they are staying in touch once a month. Alumni will have the opportunity to talk about how they chose a college/program after high school, share what it's like to play in college or give advice about job searching.



Involving everyone in your community who is interested in your program provides you with additional support and resources. **Photo: Alex Fraser/UltiPhotos**

This isn't just about you—make sure the alumni are seeing what they are getting in return for staying involved with the program as well.

★ If they sign up to help you coach, run a practice or mentor a buddy, they can definitely get **volunteer hours** from it, possibly a small paycheck or even an **internship credit**. Make it into an official relationship, and these things are really great **résumé builders** for a college student or young professional.

★ Encourage them to talk about the team with their families. *Their* parents may want to come out and watch the alumni game—it might be their only chance to see their friend/child play nearby! *Especially* if the alumnus doesn't live in town or play ultimate often anymore.

★ Share information about the alumni regularly. Tell the current players when alumni make new club teams. Invite them to watch the older guys when they play around town. Share social media posts when an alum's team wins a tournament. Watch the old highlight reels together.

Don't forget about the alumni parents, too! These are possibly the ones who have been watching games after school twice a week for four years. They might miss it.

- ★ Did they always donate some football tickets to an auction or buy baked goods from a team sale? Keep shooting them those emails.

- ★ Invite them to games, alumni events and fundraisers. They can be just as helpful as alumni players—and even more so if they still live in town! Sign them up for your newsletter and keep them in the loop.

Every year, your team family gets bigger. You will gain new players and new parents, but you should **also** be keeping the previous players and parents in the group as well. They have gone through a lot with you. They haven't forgotten those long car rides, shabby hotel rooms and muddy uniforms. They can help you as resources, mentors, supporters and friends moving forward.

About the Author

Christie Lawry is a current club player and is in her sixth year of coaching the Hampton High School boys' ultimate team in Pittsburgh, Pa. Christie is the executive director of Pittsburgh Ultimate and has been running leagues and tournaments since 2006. She has also coached high school and youth club girls' teams and captained for multiple years at both the college and club levels. Christie hopes to assist and inspire both new and veteran coaches to better themselves as leaders, competitors and mentors.

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