

Five Firsts: Creating the Ultimate Experience for New Players

First Impression

An advantage that ultimate has over high profile sports is that most people don't already have a preconceived notion of what it will be, or an opinion on whether they might like it or not. We still have the opportunity to shape that opinion early!

First Environment

Coming into a new place when other people there are already comfortable can be intimidating. While some people will put themselves out there and seek out what they need, many will too shy and will stay out of sight. They might just watch, or they might just go home.

First Interaction

Almost all ultimate players remember the first player they met! How new players are greeted (not just by the coach or organiser, but all other participants) will paint them a picture of the environment they are entering in to.

First Mistake

A critical moment during a participant's initial experience with a new activity is how their first error is treated. Fear of judgement for incompetence is a common mental barrier for people without extensive sporting experience in trying out new activities.

First Follow-up

Instead of assuming new participants will come back, particularly if it is evident they enjoyed themselves, an effort should be made to maintain contact with them. Personal interactions after initial sessions will yield better retention rates.

Things to think about

- Where are they likely to have seen or heard about ultimate before?
- Where can they find out about your club? Where can they find out about other sports clubs?
- How is Ultimate presented to them in your area?
- If you are promoting online, does the imagery you are using resemble the experience they will have?

- What do they do once they arrive?
- Is there a designated meeting point?
- How difficult is it to travel to and from the venue? Where can they park?
- What facilities (change rooms, toilets, water tap) are there?
- What activities are going on when they first get there? What other activities are happening nearby?

- Who is likely to be the first person they will meet?
- Do all of your members know what to tell new people when they arrive?
- What do you need new players to do before they play? Do they need to register so they are covered by insurance?

- What is the reaction of the coach when they make a mistake in a drill?
- What is the reaction of their teammates when they make a mistake in a game?
- What is the reaction of other players to new players doing something unexpected on the field?

- Do you collect their contact details? What details do you collect?
- Does someone specifically speak to new players at the end of the session?
- How do you find out if new players are enjoying their experience? How will you get feedback if they don't back for a second time?

Ideas to try

Think about where potential players are seeing ultimate in your community and what you can do to influence their initial impression.

Get some photos and videos that show what new players will be doing the first time they come.

Make a simple website that shows the important information – especially when and where – and answers questions you commonly get asked by interested people.

Social media channels use various algorithms to control what people see. If you use only them to communicate, then interested people may not see or know where to find details.

Look at your location through the eyes of a new visitor. Remember that they might not know what an ultimate field looks like.

Have some signage showing where the facilities are

Have something brightly visible, like a flag, put up to be the meeting point. Make sure your advertising or website tells people to look for this!

While experienced players like to have a throw before games, seeing people who are already very competent can be very daunting for new players. Move the "warm-up" area away from the main entrance or meeting point.

Have your volunteers or coaches wear a specific coloured shirt or jacket. Make sure your advertising or website tells people to look for them!

Have some key welcome messages or actions that all of your members know. It could just be as simple as saying hello and introducing them to the coach or organiser.



Set the expectation early that mistakes will probably be made by everyone! There is no need to get the skills right on their first try

Don't draw attention to the mistake by being overly reassuring. This has the potential to come off as patronising. Just move straight on and try again.

Speak to experienced players and highlight that enjoyment for new players at their first session doesn't necessarily mean winning the game.

Talk to them at the end of the session and ask them how they went. The feedback gained straight away can give you hints about how to improve the experience for other new participants.

Don't put the expectation on them to reach out to you, like asking them to find a Facebook group. Collect their name and email address on a signup sheet so you can connect with them later.

Contact them individually the next day (or soon after) and tell them about the next session. A personal invitation or text message can be much more meaningful than a mass mail out or group post.