

**Midwest Sports Complex, Indianapolis, IN** (Tim Fishburn, Park Director; 7509 New Augusta Road; Indianapolis, IN 46268; (317) 875-8833)

- Easiest to implement of the template programs
- Sent mailer in Winter 2000-2001 to previous year's players offering free-agent sign-up service for \$30 fee
- Spent no money for advertising, but did work trade-out (20K value) with local radio station for free ad air time in exchange for spot in Corporate Co-Ed league
- Results: 500 players 35 teams' worth of free agents, or a . . . percent increase that negated an industry-wide overall decrease (signifies bottom-line victory for Midwest in 2001 by maintaining status quo vs. losing numbers)

*Interview questions with Tim Fishburn, Midwest Sports Complex park director (5.1.02):*

**What is your background in softball, esp. free agent?**

First **I was a player**, part of Fish and Friends team (featured 5 brothers) that won the city championship; first team to win three back-to-back (2 "C" and 1 "B") titles. My bro Steve was inducted into Indiana ASA Hall of Fame (coach, player -- fast-pitch catcher -- and sponsor). I was 10 years younger than him and always tagged along as the bat boy. One of the highlights of my life -- they were allowed to pick up two players, and I got to go to Decatur, Ill., in 1982 (Wilsey Construction) as an extra player. That's big-time softball -- 5,000 people in the seats and all the games were on local radio. It was as close as you get to the major leagues in softball. We finished third (Decatur A's won).

Was putting myself through college and **started an umpires association** to make money (Indianapolis Officials Association -- IOA). Was a combo of basketball, volleyball and softball, and softball was the biggest. It was before the advent of the complexes like Midwest. We did YMCA, post office, Lilly, Allison's leagues, etc. Our idea back then 23-24 years ago was to negotiate contracts; we got 16 bucks a game (we'd pay the umps \$10 and we'd keep \$6), and if any of the core of us three did it we'd get \$16. So I was officiating every single night and going to school in the day (Ivy Tech for electronics). That's how I really got involved in softball, through the umpiring.

With my background in the umpiring, I had **approached (Midwest owner) Chuck Walters in 1981**. I could do the math -- they had six diamonds and I wanted to schedule all the umps. There was an entrepreneurship there, some money to be made. Chuck had some nice things to say, but said he couldn't afford us (Jimmy Carter era with 19-21 percent interest rates). So we kinda forged a relationship at that point and what we did was every time he had a cancellation either I would come ump or send a guy to cover for him. He and his wife talked and said this guy needs to be working for us. I had just graduated (1984) and was going to work for Kraft Industries and he offered me what I would be making there to come work for him. I worked part-time in 1983 under Chuck, then full-time in '84 at Metro Stadium's park director, then to Midwest in 1985. I always knew I had my degree to fall back on, but I had always been in softball and enjoyed it. I really can't imagine doing anything other than what I've been doing the last several years 'cuz I've built my reputation and hopefully integrity through this game we all love. Been running Midwest since 1985 and leased with option to buy in 1995 and bought outright in 1999. (Walters owner from 1981 to 1989, when Bob Thompson purchased.)

**Awards** (won in 1990s): NSA Hall of Fame 2000 (director); NSA Park of the Century (1999), NSA Park of the Decade (for the '90s), NSA State Director of the Year

I created **the Free Agent program**. Toyed with it in 2000, but got really serious in 2001. We used to have people call in and try to get on a team and we were full so we didn't really do much with it. But we had all these names -- literally from 200 to 500 names. Thought about the teams and how we could get this a little more refined, and that's when I came up with the idea to charge these people to get on this list and we'd create teams for them to play with. It exploded in 2001. Now, our whole thought process with softball and volleyball, and even golf, is everybody has an opportunity to participate (similar to how your parents used to sign you up for little league baseball). Our philosophy will be, we will always have a FA program cuz it works. Especially when they pay their money, they're gonna be there every week. The beauty of the FA is even deeper than that. And we're finding that the FAs that are calling in are younger and younger -- anywhere from 16 to 25. One Tuesday night team has four 18-year-olds on it and they're winning the league. And they're having a blast.

On the **volleyball** side, we had a core of teams, and from that it's mushroomed into 24 teams 'cuz they've split apart and created their own teams. They went their separate ways and got others involved. We see a real core there for the future.

### What inspired you to start this program?

**Softball (participation) was dwindling**, especially on Sundays. I looked at the FA program as a way to create more teams, have more of a base. Especially as the baby boomers were getting older and teams just weren't playing any longer, you needed a way to regenerate those teams that were leaving your program.

### What is the biggest key to making it a success?

**Making them pay up front.** Once they put the money down, they show up and you can put 'em on any team you want. The only way we were able to get them to show up was through the radio promotion. One without the other doesn't work very well. You can still do a FA program and add 5-6 teams by just going a round to local businesses with a flier, but the radio tradeout was the key.

### How can you best get started?

The first step is to **have a clear-cut view of what you want to accomplish.** How large do you want it to be – a few teams or a massive start-up? If you're doing volleyball or a whole new program, I think you can create from a beginning, grass-roots level an entire program. My deal was I had a picture that I didn't want to lose anything I already had, so I was trying to create a 30-40 team base from people retiring and so forth that I was losing.

### What tips can you offer complexes using this start-up program?

The main thing is if they **don't have a budget or can't get a radio station involved, they can do it on a smaller scale** by doing press releases (through basic press outlets, and there's a zillion of them). We only charge \$30 per person, but that's better than nothing. Once you get 'em hooked, they're going to break off and form their own teams and pay the full fee the next time.

### What are the best characteristics your call-taker can have?

Most important thing is to be **friendly, helpful and courteous, and knowledgeable about the program.** These people are calling not knowing anything about what we want them to do; they've just heard an ad and want more info. If you can do those things then they're going to go ahead and give you their money, and that's key. You've gotta look at every phone call that comes in as being a potential player and customer.

### What can complexes do/advertise to get players back to the ball fields?

The biggest and most important thing that any of us can do is create a fun-filled atmosphere that people want to come to and identify with. Softball has an identity problem – people think it's a bunch of fat, over-the-hill, non-intelligent people playing, and with that (misconception) a lot of people steer way from that, especially if you're trying to get the women involved at the coed and recreational level, 'cuz women don't want to be involved in that sort of atmosphere. So once you get 'em there, **create an atmosphere that's friendly and an identity that this is a clean, nice place** with good-looking, attractive people.

### What's an acceptable tradeout offer to pitch to radio stations/TV stations/newspapers/other outlets?

We did **signage and a golf course tradeout – no dollars out of our pocket.** We asked for them to partner with us and they could use Midwest as a medium to get their info out (through their call letters, Radio Now 93.1). We made them the official radio station of the volleyball league, which means we only play their station over the speakers. Made 5-6 signs with them, which for us is minimal – we're getting about \$100,000 worth of air time, and when we started this we were only getting \$20,000. I originally made a phone call and said this is my idea and asked how it would work to see if there was interest from their end. It was immediate that there was something we could do and they weren't looking for money from me specifically, and radio stations are looking for those types of promotions all the time. And it really helps if they already play at your facility, which they were (Corporate Coed team in Media League). We picked Emmis Broadcasting 'cuz they have several stations in their group.

### Any tips on fliers?

Something becoming more popular is this local weather station thing (very inexpensive) or going door-to-door in an industrialized complex in their geographical area with a flier that's nicely done - **target a particular zip code**. You may get other stuff like a company sponsoring a whole team but if not, the flier should say things like players wanted on specific nights and at what complex, with a phone number.

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## **SGMA BASEBALL/SOFTBALL PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE (BSPC)** **FREE AGENT PROGRAM TEMPLATE**

**The Problem:** The time & effort required to organize/manage a softball team has resulted in an untapped network of unaffiliated players with the desire but no team.

**The Solution:** Free Agent Program

### **How It Works**

**The Message:** "Whether you have a team or are an individual looking to play, call [complex] and they will hook you up!"

### **Actions:**

- A) Meet with Complex manager and determine times and fields available. Calculate number of teams this will support
- B) Identify the person at the Complex who will take the calls, record the information, and make the follow up calls with team and schedule assignments. Schedule time to meet with this person to create teams and place players
- A) Begin process of distributing message and generating calls
- D) Calls will generate leads/database of players who pay sign-up fee of [\$xx] to become a "Free Agent" (*Note: Sign-up fees help make program self-funding*)
  - Name
  - Address
  - Home/Work Telephone
  - E-mail Address
  - Days Available To Play
  - Ability Level & Interests
    - Positions Played
    - B, C, D, E, Rec, etc.
    - Men's, Women's, Co-Ed, etc.
  - Willingness to Captain?
- E) Database will generate teams and fills league nights that need to be filled or fills open slots on existing teams
- F) Word-of-mouth will hopefully generate even larger database

### **How To Get Message Out:**

- A) Partner with local media (radio station, TV station, newspaper) to trade public service announcements (PSA's) for ad space and/or "official" designation at complex. (*Note: Contact existing players at complex to see if any work for or have connections with local media*)
- B) Create and direct mail a flyer promoting the program to existing database if available
- C) Distribute flyer door-to-door and/or through local hangouts (restaurants, bars, etc.)
- B) Utilize website messages/advertising
- C) Request listings in Community Event sections in local media
- D) Other?

**The Challenge:** Each BSPC member to establish Free Agent Program at 3 parks in local region by Super Show '02.  
Desired effect: 30-40 parks in '02; 100-150 parks in '03; etc.