

Beavercreek Youth Softball Association, Beavercreek, OH (Bob Darden, Commissioner; P.O. Box 340216; Beavercreek, OH 45434 ; (937) 429-6421)

- Most difficult to implement of three template programs (getting kids at an early age for purely recreational activities)
- NOT competition for varsity baseball/softball 'cuz COED and REC
- In Cincinnati (Anderson Youth Softball Leagues) they do the same thing but with 1,400 youth; combo of youth fast-pitch, boys and girls but not coed for ages 7-18; great 'cuz we were mirroring each other without knowing we were doing it
- Worth – and presumably all SGMA members -- wants to create a potential lifetime softball player (capitalism at its finest: the more players, the more \$\$ spent on equipment – average player spends \$10-\$15 per year)

Interview questions with Bob Darden, Beavercreek Youth Association commissioner (4.9.02):

What is your background in softball, esp. youth?

I've been involved in softball for probably 40 years. I've been playing (slow-pitch) since I was a senior in high school, so I played a lot of slow-pitch. Played a little bit of fast-pitch softball in the service (Air Force for 30 years) and college intramurals. My own kids (two boys – 29 and 25, and a daughter – 24), they all played softball. After my oldest boy played T-ball, **I thought there's something better than T-ball** (too many artificial rules, and it didn't teach 'em the game). So my wife started the Beavercreek Youth Softball Association (BYSA).

Tell me about Beavercreek Youth Softball Association?

It's coed softball -- for boys and girls together -- though not a pure coed. Ages run first grade through high school. We thought we could do better than T-ball. I hooked up with another person involved with a similar youth program in Oklahoma City. **We started with 250 kids the first year, then went to 500 then 750 and then 1,000**, and it's remained there the last 15 years (in 2001 had 1,050 kids). We've since added a kindergarten league, and three years ago we added the college league.

The leagues (most are in two-year intervals):

- **Kindergarten and Grades 1-2**
 - The coach pitches; we use an 11-inch softball and the kids wear gloves; the coach/pitcher gets out of the way and lets the little kid field it; we use 55-foot bases. It's **just like you would play in the backyard** -- trying to get the kids to make the plays and learn the game.
- **Grades 3-4, Grades 5-6, Grades 7-8**
- **Grades 9-10 and Grades 11-12**
 - We used to do Grades 9-12, but that wasn't working 'cuz a 12th-grader could intimidate a 9th-grader. In the high school leagues, **we'll have 200 people come out on a Friday night** to cheer each other on, give each other a hard time, that kind of thing. We try to let the older teams put their own teams together.

About BYSA philosophy: We're not afraid to tinker; we're not too structured. Like with all programs some want it to be democratic and even, while others are more competitive, so you have to find a balance in between. Some would rather have their kids play every position every game; we tried to legislate who played where but found that doesn't work 'cuz people will find a way to beat the system no matter what you do. So now we try to make this a fun social thing, especially in the high school leagues. **Our whole intent is to teach them to play socially with each other and learn sportsmanship. We don't stress winning but the kids do.** We have an end-of-year tournament and play becomes really serious -- we give prizes and people work real hard to win T-shirts to show they're league winners. We spend quite a bit of money on prizes. If we have eight teams in the league, for example, we try to put groups of equal caliber to play so they have an equal chance. Every year it always amazes us who wins the tournaments!

What is the biggest key to making it a success?

If you're lucky enough to find two or three people on a mission . . . it wasn't me, it was her. My wife went out years ago to talk to these people. My wife had some soccer contacts so she started calling folks. But **you've gotta have**

someone stubborn who's gonna push and be the advocate. Gotta get four of five committed parents that're gonna get in there and volunteer their time and ramrod it, 'cuz it does take time. Someone who enjoys softball and who enjoys kids. We do this (BYSA) with a minimum number of volunteers. Our volunteers have stayed with us. We take in \$35,000 a year with this program with 5-6 volunteers who have been around a long time.

And **don't take too big a bite the first year** – maybe just up through the eighth grade, or just high school kids. You can potentially grow the programs. I would do Grades 1-6 in 2-year increments in Year 1, then maybe add Grades 7-8 – phase it in over time 'cuz your volunteers have helped you and they'll move ahead with the program. You need a league coordinator to take names and put them into teams.

About umpires: A 12-game season is ideal because it pays for softballs and umps, and we pay good money (\$17 for a 1-hour, 20-minute game for Grades 9-10). **We've trained our own umps so that's another selling point:** Train 'em with Grades 1-2 (we pay \$12 to start) and then keep them along. Some are even going to college but still working here in the summer.

About fast-pitch: 2001 was the first year we co-sponsored a fast-pitch league where travel teams come in (we don't host a rec league) -- we **didn't exclude fast-pitch when we could have.**

About using a public facility: We want to control our fields, which were built specifically for a BYSA league (4 lighted, township-owned and city-operated diamonds). We take care of the infields (drag diamonds, line bases) and the city mows the grass. We care – three girls who play here do all that work in the summertime. A city won't sit and put teams together 'cuz they have no staff and really don't care. BYSA was a private organization, then the city took control, then 4 years ago we broke apart from the city. That was the best thing we've ever done 'cuz city was gathering all the money and revenues and using it on other things. Now we can buy bases and pay our umps - - now we're making money and not trying to. **Biggest thing we did as a group was become independent to do more for the program without city siphoning off the funds.**

How can you best get started?

When people sign up, look to see if there are any business owners and see if they want to sponsor. Not good to go to national chains 'cuz they can't do anything locally without going to corporate office, so **go for smaller, locally owned businesses 'cuz they're more apt to do something for you.** We had 60 sponsors last year; local realtors are good. Look at our website – you'll see air conditioning, electrical, home repair. For shirts we go to a local supplier and order two-button Henleys in a solid color, then silk screen them with logo and color and put on the BYSA logo.

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

Being innovative, not going with the norm, listening to your customers. Don't be afraid to spend a few dollars, and don't be afraid to charge people for a good program (we charge \$40 per kid, which is 10-12 games with a shirt and a hat and tournament prizes). Private complexes would have an advantage. If I was a complex (instead of a public facility), the first thing I'd do is offer fast-pitch competitive leagues. If slow-pitch, I think they could follow our model 'cuz gonna put money back into diamonds and get money back through the concession stand. Owners have a profit mode – sell 'em the concessions and get 'em into the park. Need an advisory committee to help put together the team.

What is the best way to get your information out there -- schools, direct mail fliers, etc.?

Beavercreek, a suburb of Dayton, has a population of about 38,000 with only one high school. Before we could even take a flier out, we had to go to the local superintendent's office to get permission (find out their policies for giving information to teachers and to the kids). But that was not very reliable. We took 5,000 fliers to the schools, but I wonder how many ever get home? (Maybe 18 years ago people were better at taking stuff home). We pre-packaged everything and put them in teachers' slots, but **word of mouth works best now.**

We also use **local libraries and city buildings, the chamber of commerce and the local Kroger store -- and now the website.**

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

You have to be **willing to not stick with traditional coed lines**; everything we play here is basically 7 guys and 3 girls (gotta have 2 girls on the diamond at all times or defensive penalties). We stress that it's competitive but fun. A lot of kids who play fast-pitch come back and play slow-pitch in the summer (On the myth that playing both fast-pitch and slow-pitch is bad: "That's B.S.!"). Some kids would drive 60 miles to play, so we did six-week summer doubleheaders.

Can you offer tips on effectively soliciting co-sponsorship?

About sponsorship: Originally we got 'em to agree to \$50 or \$100 sponsorships (now it's **\$125 for sponsoring one team, with a \$40 entry fee for the players**). For that the kids wear a shirt with the sponsor name and logo on it, and the local paper will put in articles about teams (a form of free advertisement!).

About the website (<http://www.beavercreeksoftball.com/2002Home.html>): We have a **sponsors' page** where we give them credit and tell about what services the companies provide, and we have a **link to company websites (it's a publicity advertisement for the sponsors)**. And a lot of times companies have kids in leagues. This is our 4th year for the website and we use it more and more; one of our volunteers who does it for a living does the web stuff for us.

What's the best way to acquire student leaders (what to look for, how to woo)?

Important for Grades 9-12: **Find someone who really enjoys the game and ask 'em to talk about the program**. You need someone you observe over time who is a fanatic about playing softball. Look for ones who are **student leaders** and work on them to help push program. Our two best ones just graduated so we're looking to replace them (though both gonna be in college leagues playing) -- one was our valedictorian who couldn't quite make the basketball or baseball teams but was popular.

Any tips on fliers?

Go to our website (<http://www.beavercreeksoftball.com/2002Home.html>) and spend some time there -- we have a good, **very detailed registration form** we worked really hard on. Print it out and use it as a model.

SGMA BASEBALL/SOFTBALL PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE (BSPC)

HIGH SCHOOL CO-ED PROGRAM TEMPLATE

The Problems: Under-utilized complexes
Declining softball participation in general
Aging softball player base without adequate amounts of younger players to fill the void

The Solution: High School Co-Ed Program

How It Works

Goal: Establish league of high school co-ed teams with the promises of 1) safe & healthy recreation; and 2) social outlet

Actions:

- A) Assess Complex schedule and target dates/times most needed to fill. Idea: Schedule evening games during summer months, thus making event more social while not interfering with summer jobs.
- B) Create flyer with dates/times/cost/etc. of program
- C) Solicit co-sponsorship from local restaurant and/or beverage company to provide free/discounted food & beverages at complex on league nights
- D) Approach individual schools, school districts, P.E. teachers, and coaches to obtain support for the program even if no direct affiliation
- E) Seek out student leaders who want to play. They can be your best salespersons!

How To Get Message Out:

- A) Distribute fliers to schools, local hangouts, churches, etc.

- B) Direct mail flyers to students or parents if possible
- C) Request PSA's in local media (TV, radio, newspaper)
- D) Utilize website messages/advertising
- E) Request listings in Community Event sections in local media
- F) Other?

The Challenge: Each BSPC member to establish High School Co-Ed Program at 1 complex in local region by Super Show '02. Desired effect: 10-12 leagues in '02; 25-50 leagues in '03; etc.