

Case Study

Retaining Gymnasts: Effective Practice Case Study (2)

Background

This Gymnastics club is located within a school hall in an area of socio-economic disadvantage in South London. The club is run by the Head Coach and her team who are all volunteers. Club sessions are offered on a Wednesday and Friday evening and all day Saturday. Coaching staff do not receive any payment.

The club currently has around 70 members but this is less than normal, the reduction in membership is accounted for by the effects of the recession. All the coaches are female and the majority of the members are also female, but the club does welcome males who would like to become members. The membership age range is from pre-school through to 50 plus.

The club is self-financing through members' fees. However some gymnasts are supported financially by the club, as they would not be able to attend the club without this support. The club also engages in regular fundraising to allow members to attend festivals in the UK and elsewhere.

Club Ethos

The club prides itself on providing a family ethos, where gymnasts are encouraged through praise and reward. In addition there is a strongly held belief that gymnastics should be fun and that the young people will only sustain their interest and commitment to gymnastics if they enjoy their experiences.

'There's big friendships and loads of laughs. We go out all the time. We go out on day trips. We are going on one soon. It's really fun and we get to do fun things as well.' (Young gymnast and coach, aged 18)

An important factor in ensuring young people enjoy their experiences is the opportunity to compete and perform in displays. The young gymnasts appreciate both the event itself, as it provides an opportunity to showcase their talents, and the social opportunities it creates for them.

Club Approach

Coaches ensure that the efforts and the progress of all gymnasts in the club are noticed:

‘We are here to provide gymnastics for all regardless of ability. We are not elitist. We get as much satisfaction from someone doing a forward roll as doing somersaults. It’s about providing grassroots gymnastics ’.

(Coach)

Coaches at the club actively adopt positive language whilst ensuring that their gymnasts progress successfully, as noted by one young gymnast:

‘They know what you can do and what you can’t and they don’t push you too far. They keep you within what you can do and they work you towards the more hard things and they are very encouraging.’

(Young gymnast and coach, aged 18)

The club operates a “buddy” system for new starters, pairing them up with an existing and sometimes older, member to mentor them. In addition to easing the induction process, the “buddy” system allows the gymnasts to support the new recruits in developing their skills through their ability to demonstrate. Gymnasts in the club also support each other by being constructively critical using informal peer assessment.

The club is very ably supported by young volunteer coaches who are essential to its survival. These coaches are inspired to volunteer by their experiences within the club and realise that their involvement as coaches contributes not only to the club, but also towards helping the coaches that have supported them over many years.

Drop-out and Club Response

The key ages for drop-out at this club are 8-10 and 14 plus. The club always knows why its squad members leave and coaches usually know why recreational gymnasts leave the club.

The club has been very successfully involved in the British Gymnastics initiative of creating Leadership Academies. Gymnasts aged 13 plus meet as a committee to discuss club matters, development opportunities and any other issues identified by the young people. This is regarded by the club as a very successful venture, as the gymnasts have developed a range of new skills through their experiences including marketing, CV writing, financial management and agenda writing skills. They have volunteered within the club and beyond and have undertaken a series of training opportunities.

Key Strengths

- Dedicated and experienced volunteer coaches
- Family ethos where each gymnast counts
- Emphasis on praise and rewards for effort and achievement
- Opportunities to compete and perform
- Young coaches who have made the journey through the club
- Buddy system to support gymnasts socially and with their progression
- The Leadership Academy
- Good links with other clubs locally and further afield which provides increased opportunities for their gymnasts
- Strong parental support and effective relationships with parents

Key Challenges

- Affordability of coaching qualifications
- Sustaining revenue during times of economic hardship. The club distributes leaflets locally and at events it attends, to boost membership
- Moving to new premises to a more central location
- Capacity is limited as all adult volunteers also have full time jobs elsewhere