

Case Study

Retaining Gymnasts: Effective Practice Case Study (3)

Background

This Gymnastics club has members from a large geographical area. The club provides a wide-ranging programme for the community and is known for its success at international level. There are around 600 members at any one time and of these up to 40% are male gymnasts and around 100 are elite gymnasts.

The club has seven full-time coaches and another 20 coaches who work at the club on a part-time basis. There are also some volunteers who support the coaching programme. The club offers a baby massage class from 8 weeks old, pre-school classes, general recreational classes, adult classes and classes for both young people and adults with learning difficulties or physical disabilities. It also has a thriving elite section.

The club has traditionally had a long waiting list as demand exceeds capacity. It was noted that the club and perhaps gymnastics generally, attracts more affluent families who are able to drive their children to the club and afford the fees, but the club will subsidise families who cannot afford the fees.

Club Ethos

The club was said by the Head Coach to have two main aims:

1. To ensure that the elite gymnasts succeed and reach their full potential.
2. To ensure that the general recreational gymnasts learn and develop their skills whilst they also have fun. Meeting these dual aims provides considerable challenges for the club.

Club Approach

Gymnasts in the club will begin competitions at the age of 8 if they take the competitive route and will continue into their twenties. The coaches spot talented young people within recreational classes, who have the right physique and who learn much quicker than their peers.

For their development, recreational gymnasts will undertake badges and awards and also take part in displays and competitions. The Head Coach suggested that coaching was the most important factor in the development and retention of young gymnasts.

‘It’s all about motivation and targets for the gymnasts although the key thing for me is making sure we have the right coaches to motivate them.’ (Coach)

Recreational gymnasts make up the majority of the membership of the club but the elite gymnasts require and receive much greater resource input.

The club has many male gymnasts and is meeting their needs well. The key contributing factors to this were said to be the availability of male role models as the club has male gymnasts performing at national and international levels and the quality of the coaches that the club has developed.

Drop-out and Club Response

The most typical age for drop-out was suggested to be puberty. Coaches usually know why elite gymnasts drop-out as this happens infrequently, but they do not always know why recreational gymnasts leave. It is not unusual for young people to leave the club after being there a couple of terms and this type of drop-out is accounted for as arising from young people sampling gymnastics and deciding it is not for them. The Head Coach did note however that:

‘We need to make sure that those kids who want to do more we have the availability to support that. It is a concern but I don’t think we monitor it enough in our statistics.’

According to the Head Coach, in some cases young people needed more from their coaches in terms of their technical knowledge and in responding to their needs as young adults. He believes that inexperienced coaches need to be mentored to ensure that they have the necessary skills to work with different age groups.

The club does try and recruit young coaches and this was said to help with retaining gymnasts within the club. This was something the club was seeking to expand, because it was felt that this was the best way to ensure high quality coaching provision:

‘Our best coaches will come from our former gymnasts definitely...They have the experience and the knowledge that has been assimilated over a number of years. ’ (Coach)

Key Strengths

- Large coaching staff
- Strong elite performers competing at international level with coaches in place to support this
- Strong record of developing coaches within the club, particularly male coaches who have expertise in male disciplines
- Strength in recruiting and retaining male and female gymnasts
- Diverse programme across the age range
- High demand for services
- Supportive parents

Key Challenges

- Meeting the needs of both elite and recreational gymnasts within a club that is predominantly recreational
- The club has reached capacity and needs to expand in order to meet demand and to be able to expand the elite section
- The club would like to offer more disciplines in the future, but recruitment of coaches and limited capacity currently prevents this.