

Case Study

Retaining Gymnasts: Effective Practice Case Study (4)

Background

This Gymnastics Club is located within a small town in the East Midlands. It is situated in a large gym and has sole occupancy. The club has around 350 members and this has been achieved actively, by offering additional classes in response to identified demand for them.

The coaches are all voluntary or self-employed. There are a number of young coaches who have been through the club and are now qualified coaches. Some of the coaches coach at other clubs and this provides an effective way of linking with other clubs. The club has three male coaches but there are aspirations to have more.

Club Ethos

The club approach is based on promoting gymnastics for all whatever their ability:

‘As a job we’re trying to promote sport for all, gymnastics for all, so anybody that comes can have a go. We’re not just into those that have actually got the potential to go on and compete. It isn’t about that. I mean some children come into rec and never leave recso it’s just about a community theme really and to be able to give that opportunity to everybody to have a go’. (Coach)

The coaches within the club are said by the young gymnasts at the club, to be very supportive towards the young gymnasts.

‘They give you confidence. You say you can’t do it but then they say yes you can and they help you.’ (Gymnast, aged 13)

‘The coaches are dead nice to you.’ (Gymnast, aged 13)

The club is also very pro-active in listening to its young coaches and ensuring that they develop the skills they will need in order to ensure they remain with the club and become involved in developing and sustaining the club.

Club Approach

The club tries to respond to any unmet demand for gymnastics provision and therefore actively develops new classes to accommodate enquiries that are made. The club has an adults' gymnastics class that is for people new to the sport, because of the demand for it. In order to be able to respond in this way the club committee is pro-active in listening:

'I think as a committee we listen to our coaches, our gymnasts, parents and listen to what the needs are out in the community as well, and then we can work on that and try and bring that in to the journey.' (Committee member)

The club will refer gymnasts on to other clubs if they feel that they have grown beyond the capabilities of the club's coaches and they have good links with other clubs to cross-refer. A small local club refers boys onto this club because they only have female gymnasts in their club.

Interviewees at the clubs suggested that coaches need to have different skills when working with different age groups and that they need to be flexible and respond to the needs of the gymnasts they work with.

Drop-out and Club Response

Interviewees at the club were able to suggest a number of different reasons why young people drop-out from gymnastics, such as competition from other sports. Financial constraints were also considered to be an issue, but the club tries to respond to this by offering support where it can do so.

Puberty was perceived to be a key time when gymnasts may leave the sport. A key factor in this decision was suggested as being that some gymnasts cannot cope with the difficulty and challenges presented by gymnastics at this age. The club has been pro-active in responding to this by offering alternative classes for teenagers.

The club has developed a 13+ (general gymnastics) class and a 16+ class to allow progression from one session to the next. The 13+ does not require a high level of skill to begin. The 16+ group is a very sociable group who meet in a very relaxed format and do not do regimented training. When they have a display planned they will practice for this but alternatively they will decide what they want to do session by session. The flexibility of the classes is proving to be key to their success. Some of those that attend are also maintaining their squad involvement, alongside this more relaxed session and they see this class as a welcome addition to their weekly training. The following comments were offered by two male gymnasts who were both squad members but who also attended the 13+ class:

‘It’s a bit more laid back and they do more variety of things here. We are practising free running.’

‘We have learnt things here that we would never do in other sessions. This session is like the most fun really.’

‘In the squad it’s a bit more strict...This one is more laid back and fun’

There are also gymnasts who are new to the sport who are able to access this session, but do not attend any other gymnastic sessions. The following comments were made by two female gymnasts who joined the club in order to attend this session having never done gymnastics before:

‘I like it because when we get here they always ask us what we want to do and we do something different every week.’

‘And they help you if you get stuck on something they help you.’

‘We’ve got mates here and we have made new friends and everything.’

‘You want to come every week because you learn things and you get to see other people.’

The 16+ session is also attended by elite gymnasts within the club who are already committed to an extensive training programme. The following comment was made by a 17-year-old elite female rhythmic gymnast who is part of this class:

‘It’s really friendly and you get to do loads of new things so that’s why I chose it.’

Key Strengths

- Committed coaching staff with shared ethos and approach
- Focus on development of young coaches as coaches and as stakeholders within the club
- Strong emphasis on listening to young people and other stakeholders
- Willingness to respond to unmet demand for gymnastics
- Good links with other clubs through coaching staff
- Provision aimed directly at preventing drop-out amongst teenagers
- Flexible approach to working with young people

Key Challenges

- The high rent for the facility is a big challenge for the club which tries to offer a value-for-money membership.
- Ensuring that any increased membership can be accommodated within the existing facility

- Develop disability provision within the club as this is currently an aspiration
- To gain additional male coaches within the club