

Promoting Your Club and Club Programs

Junior Programs, Beginning Classes, Leagues

By Larry Hodges

Before you can promote a club, you need to have something to sell. It could be just a place where people play table tennis. However, let's think bigger!

A club without a coach, a junior program, classes for beginners, and a league does not meet the needs of many of its potential members, and would be hard-pressed in getting new members. Not all clubs can have all of these programs, but the more you have, the more you address the needs of your current and potential players. A club that relies on walk-ins coming into a club, calling "winners," getting killed by an experienced player, and still showing up again, will have difficulty getting new players. In any successful sport, there are programs offered for new and continuing players.

Any USATT club that aspires to "greatness" (or at least "goodness") should have, at the least, a **Junior Program**, a **Beginning Class** (and perhaps private coaching) and **Leagues**. USATT has manuals to help out with these, which are all online at www.usatt.org/club_programs, or available from USATT (info@usatt.org). They are:

- **Junior Table Tennis Training Primer**
- **Beginning Table Tennis Class Primer**
- **Professional Table Tennis Coaches Primer**
- **Instructor's Guide to Table Tennis**

I also strongly recommend the ITTF's Level 1 Coaching Manual, which really covers techniques right up to the advanced intermediate level and is excellent for coaches. It is available at www.ittf.com (click on "Publications," then on "Order Form.")

To run the Junior Program and the Beginning Class, and for Private Coaching, your club should have a coach. For information about coaches in your area, or on becoming a coach yourself, see the online listing of coaches at www.usatt.org.

Junior Programs – Your club's coach should run at least a weekly junior training session. The most important things required to get junior players into your club are:

1. **Have a junior program.** New junior players will rarely join a club if they have to call winners on a table where they get killed, and where most club members avoid them because of their age and because they are beginners. They will come to your club to join others their age in junior training or junior leagues.
2. **Promote the program.** No one will come to your program if they don't know about it.
3. **Reach critical mass.** Once you have a core group of perhaps 15 or more regulars, then the program becomes almost self-perpetuating because new junior players who come to your club are more likely to join the program when they see others their age.

I need to warn against one seemingly common-sense idea. **Trying to build a junior program up gradually is the cause for more failed junior programs than just about anything else.** The problems with growing gradually is that you start with too few juniors, and so have difficulty recruiting new players or keeping current ones, and so lose them as fast or faster than you gain them. To avoid this pitfall, when you start your junior program promote it

all-out, using all the methods outlined below *at the same time*. You need to get to “critical mass” right from the start.

Beginning Classes and Private Coaching – Probably the biggest difficulty in promoting table tennis is the huge disparity between a beginning player and someone with just a little serious training. The purpose of a beginning class is to give beginning players this training so they won’t be lost in a club environment. Even more importantly, if you get together 12-20 people at once for a class, these players become their own “peer” group, and continue to play for the social interaction, leading to larger membership. A beginning class and private coaching are ways to bridge the huge gap between the typical “basement” player and a potential club player.

Leagues – Leagues for all levels address the needs of players at all levels. A beginning league allows beginners to come in at the same time and play other players their level. When a new player comes in, instead of telling him to “call winners” against a more experienced player, you refer him to the beginning league, and he knows what days and times to come in. Intermediate and advanced leagues address players at those levels and so they keep coming back. Clubs can take part in the USATT League (www.usatt.org/league), Teams or Singles.

Spurring Participation in Your Programs

There are four fundamental parts to the success of any table tennis program. They are:

1. Show the sport to the masses. (**Show**)
2. Get them to **Play** at your club. (**Play**)
3. Get them to join your club and USATT. (**USATT**)
4. Get them to **Rejoin**. (**Rejoin**)

What this means is that for each program you set up, you need to find a way to let the masses know about the program; get them to come to your club and play; get them to join your club and its programs, as well as USATT (if they are serious players!); and get them to rejoin. If you do three of these successfully, then the program will not be very successful. *You must do all four.*

Getting Players For Your Programs

Before you start on these you should put together a flyer about whatever programs you are promoting, and a press release. You should also create a web page with info on your club and its programs. Make sure USATT links to your web site from their club listing (www.usatt.org/clubs).

- **Do a mailing to all current and past USATT members in your area.** The USATT can sell you mailing labels at \$.03/each. They can send you labels for an entire state, or by zip code, for current or past USATT members, by age (for junior programs, for example), and numerous other ways. Contact the USTTA at ratings@usatt.org or call 719-866-4583 for further information on ordering labels.
- **Get on the Weekly calendar section of your local newspaper.** Send a short flyer about your club and its programs to the paper, addressed to Weekly Calendar Section, or call first to see where to send it. Most newspapers will include you. It’s free!
- **Advertise!** Place small ads in local newspapers. If you advertise in local Asian newspapers, you will get great results.

- **Give copies of the class flyer to all local club members to give out to relatives or friends.** Family members of current club members are a treasure trove of new players, especially junior players. Make sure to give a copy of the flyer to any new player who comes to your club.
- **Run tournaments.** It spurs activity and gets new members. It also gives you material for press releases to send to newspapers.
- **Get a table tennis robot.** It draws new (and current) members like flies, and gives the first person who comes in each night something to hit with.
- **Don't forget the current members.** Getting new members doesn't help if you keep losing them; treat all members with courtesy, act professionally, listen to their input, keep table tennis literature handy, make sure the playing conditions are excellent (lighting, floors, background, equipment, etc.), schedule tournament and coaching activities, and keep the club clean.
- **Email or fax regular press releases to the newspapers.** How do you go about getting table tennis covered in the local media (in addition to the calendar section listed above)?
 1. Set up local events – run a tournament, or schedule a challenge match between the top two players in the state, for example. Or perhaps a team match between two adjacent states.
 2. Go through the yellow pages or search online, and write down the name, email and phone number of all local media – newspapers, magazines, TV and radio.
 3. Email or call each one, and ask for contact info for their Sports Department.
 4. Email or fax press releases to all sports departments. You should do at least three different press releases: one at least a week in advance, the second 2-3 days nights before, and the third immediately after the event takes place. For weekly papers, find out when the deadline for each issue is, and send out releases accordingly.
 5. Call the day after sending the press release to make sure the right person got the press release and to check if there will be coverage, or if you can send in results. Often they will say, “What press release?” and say they didn't get it. That's your chance to ask if you can send it again to whoever you are speaking with (or whoever they turn you over to), and you now have a contact person there.
 6. Keep careful records of your press contacts. Getting that first article or broadcast is the hardest step – after that, it gets easier as they now know you and know that you are serious.
- Throw bottles out to sea with your flyers.

For Junior Programs (in addition to the above)

1. **Distribute flyers at Asian schools. Look them up in the phone book, or ask local Asian players about them.** (They usually meet at local schools on weekends.) Then mail, fax or email the flyer to them. If you call up the school leaders and tell them about your table tennis program, they will probably send students your way. The Asian community (especially Chinese) is the easiest group to reach if you live near any large city, and can be the foundation of your program – or at least get your program to “critical mass.” (This is the same theory used in martial arts in the U.S.) This is probably the single most successful way of getting new junior players.

2. **Distribute flyers at local schools.** Offer to teach a class during their PE classes, or do exhibitions. Then you can talk about your program, perhaps offering free introductory lessons or classes.
3. **Put up your flyer in every local Rec Center, YMCA, and Boys' and Girls' Clubs that has tables.** Look them up in the phone book, and call to find out if they have tables. It might be a good idea to create a flyer with tear-off phone numbers at the bottom. You might also ask if you can teach a class at the facility, and get them to promote it for you.

Has your club got a coach? A junior program? A beginning class? A league? Are you thinking big yet? If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at larry@larrytt.com.