

The Best Idea for Grassroots Development

by Larry Thoman, General Manager of Newgy Industries

I think one of the easiest ways to promote recreational play is to organize the fringe groups that are already in existence. We've all run into "champions" of the sport that really have no clue how they stack up against real competition. There are school champions, church champions, company champions, fire hall champions, and many others. All of these champions think they're great because they've never gotten the chance to go on to the next level. One school champion thinks he's the best because he's never had to play the champion from the school in the next neighborhood. Also no national governing body recognizes this "champion", so their championship, of which they are so proud, really has very little meaning to anyone outside of their small group.

Perhaps the USATT needs to organize several new grassroots national tournaments. Start with Park Departments. For example, within the city of Nashville where I live, there are perhaps 30-40 parks with community centers and TT tables. Recreation professionals who are proficient at running all types of tournaments staff them. Many already run an annual ping pong tournament.

Could these tournaments be organized so that they led to a national park champion? Each city park department could organize a city championship composed of all the champions from the individual parks. Each State parks department could then organize a tournament for all the city park champions. And finally, the National Park Service could organize a national tournament for the 50 state champions.

The result:

(1) We have just produced thousands of new "official" (recognized by the USATT, the national governing body of the sport) champions. This title has meaning outside of the individual park.

(2) All of these champions begin to understand exactly where they stand in the whole scheme of things. They are given a structure to annually challenge and improve their standing, the natural competitive instincts of champions will cause them to work on their games harder. This could cause them to seek out USATT affiliated clubs and approved coaches and to buy better equipment.

(3) The USATT would have many promotional opportunities in such a tournament. Park winners could receive a free three-month USATT trial membership. State winners could have their trial membership extended to a full one-year membership. The national winner could receive free entry into the USATT National Championships.

This type of structure is a natural for the USATT. Indeed, one primary reason the USATT exists is to facilitate tournaments. Perhaps it is time to "sanctioned" tournaments, as we now know them, and open up the doors and resources to "grassroots" style tournaments. This is one way to fuel the supply of new members into affiliated clubs and sanctioned tournaments, causing USATT membership to grow.

All these champions, seeking to improve their standing for next year, will fuel a need for equipment— a good argument for sponsorships from equipment manufacturers that could fund much or all of the initiative.

Another idea would be to require the parks to provide the USATT with the names of every participant. The USATT could then start a grassroots rating list and send each participant a rating after their first tournament along with information on how and why to join the USATT along with information on local clubs and coaches. This mailer could be funded by advertising that would be included by all the major manufacturers and suppliers of equipment who would be eager to put their literature in the hands of grassroots players.

The USATT could publicize the results of these tournaments in USA Table Tennis Magazine, giving recognition to the new champions, and providing interesting reading to regular USATT members who then become excited by the influx of new talent.

Park and city tournaments could have mentors from local clubs to help new players understand the rules, receive tips on playing, help the park attendant to run the tournament, etc. In return, the mentors would be able to give literature to every participant about the local club and encourage them to join their club.

A structure like this could inevitably attract a major national sponsor, such as the NLTA did with their grassroots tennis leagues and Volvo. The national sponsor would best be a major corporation instead of an equipment manufacturer. A program like this that positively affects thousands and probably tens of thousands of Americans is sure to be worth some sponsorship dollars.

As participation grows from year to year, individual parks with high demand may establish new USATT affiliated clubs to service the local area.

Once the USATT has organized a parks tournament, then they can add tournaments for churches (possibly even further divided into tournaments for separate faiths) YMCA's, industries, fire halls, and any other organization/group that already has the facilities and tables. This would provide positive growth for the USATT well into the foreseeable future.

Organizing tournaments of this nature is likely the most effective, cost-efficient, and rapid method for the USATT to expand its base and swell its membership ranks. We know that these grassroots players are out there. We know that many of them play at parks or other similar facilities. The paid recreation professionals to direct the tournaments and the facilities and equipment needed are already in place. At present, these grassroots players are isolated and uneducated about the sport. Let's bring them together, educate them about the sport, reward them for their improvement, and recognize their accomplishments. And, at the same time, provide a much needed boost in equipment sales, club and USATT memberships, and coaching revenue.

Photos: (left) stock photo from sxc.hu (right) Hardbat Classic runner-up Wayne Oberton (top) and winner Jack Baker (bottom) photos by Marielle Chua