

Building Youth Ultimate Programs – Tim Laverty

Summary and Take-Aways

After the call-out for help regarding youth ultimate growth in the Netherlands I reached out to a friend who helped with the Seattle youth program. This document is the result of that conversation and follow-ups. Any mistakes or errors are mine.

This document contains: 1) this summary, 2) take-aways, and 3) raw notes from conversations with William (Bunny) Bartram and Valerio Iani about youth ultimate program development. Bunny and Valerio are experienced leaders who helped build youth ultimate programs from nothing to healthy, self-perpetuating programs in Seattle (Bunny), San Francisco (Valerio), and Italy (Valerio).

1. **Finances** - Dedicate a financial budget specifically for youth program development to ensure sustainability and growth.
2. **Coordinator** - Hire a “Youth Coordinator” into a paid position. This person should be single threaded focused on growing the youth scene.
3. **Play opportunities** - Focus on giving the kids consistent opportunities to play for a distinct season (e.g., Spring League or Fall league that lasts for ~2 months). During the season offer one practice per week and one game on the weekends. Plan the season with bookend events, a pre-season clinic and post-season jamboree, to keep kids engaged.
4. **Middle School Focus** - Focus on middle school students (10-13 years old) as they are enthusiastic, learn quickly, and can safely compete in mixed-gender games, increasing long-term engagement.
5. **Small Team Formats** - Instead of large teams, start with small teams (3v3 or 4v4) to ensure more playtime and touches for each kid, making the games more enjoyable and keeping them engaged.
6. **Culture of Giving Back** - Build a culture of “giving back” where former youth coach youth teams. Offer them a small financial compensation and recognize the benefits for their CVs and university applications - it shows balance and community engagement.
7. **National Team and Club Team Involvement** - Recruit from the existing National teams for coaching and other youth specific help. *Require* that every national team member gives back a set # of days over the year as part of being on the team. Partner with and ask the club teams (city teams, GRUT) to do the same. Note the club teams benefit from this as it results in a sustainable pipeline of players for their future. If a national team member cannot coach a youth team then volunteering time to help the Youth Coordinator is a good substitute.
8. **How to start a new team** - Build a "package" for new coaches for how to start a new team that includes a draft recruiting flyer, communication plan/norms, SPOTG explanation, goals for the team, and a rubric for how to run the first ~5 practices before the kids play their first official league game. Note that coaches of kids teams **do not** need to be former players - some of the best coaches of kids teams haven't ever played.

9. **Youth Flywheel** – focus on building a ‘flywheel’ that generates a sustainable program year after year for more and more youth. One-off successes are great but most important is an enduring program that grows.

Conversation with Valerio Iani who worked with the San Francisco youth program and the youth program in Italy.

You can start with a Single club, split that club into multiple small teams (3v3) that play against each other, and grow from there. The ideal is you start with multiple clubs of course.

In the US they are lucky that they can start teams in schools. This provides an easy recruiting place and also keeps the kids in contact with each other on a consistent basis. It also makes it easy for kids to recruit other kids. It also generates “school spirit” where the kids are proud to be part of their school teams and compete with other school teams.

Having the sport recognized by institutions is valuable as they will support you. This is also critical in the US for insurance and field space organization.

Early on you need passionate coaches that are parents most likely that are willing to volunteer their time to coach teams (likely with their kids on those teams).

You need many folks to go out to help for events – cones, lining fields, etc.

There are typically few folks that want to go out to help coach or develop a program

In San Francisco a full time employee invested into growing the youth was critical to success.

Most important was investing in someone that worked on youth programs. Part time or full time as their paid job, not a volunteer.

Volunteers, even when really organized, aren't going to be able to drive things when under pressure with other work or family commitments.

This paid “youth coordinator” can set a north star. You need to be careful that every time someone leaves this position you do not start over. The north star needs to be a solid plan that outlasts the time that your coordinator spends in role.

Investing and paying for 1-2 part time folks in youth coordinator positions is ideal. Oftentimes these positions can be young adults (18-25yo) that are passionate about ultimate, likely former players, and want to help build a youth scene for kids.

Suggest focusing on 10-13 year olds, middle school in the US. Several reasons for focusing on younger kids instead of teens - kids are studying more when older, they become less interested in sports, distracted w/ romantic partners and friends, are thinking about university or jobs, etc.

Middle school kids are enthusiastic, athletic, and learn quick. Girls and boys typically can compete with each other at this age – girls are starting to grow up and are typically larger than the boys. This makes it easier to play mixed games with both genders on the field safely.

if they get “the drug” of ultimate then they will also stick around longer term through their teens and adult years.

U15 is good for a place to start. Co-ed is good for starters at that age.

Initially you likely start w/ super small #s and you need to set things up so it's all about the kids having fun.

2 groups in a school that scrimmage each other is fine. Make a final tournament amongst the team, splitting them into groups.

3v3 or 4v4 is fine for playing for starters b/c of low #s of kids playing. Playing w/ small teams and more fields provides more touches and playtime for the kids.

Word of mouth, touranments, leagues, pickup will all help.

An idea is for each team to bring a group of friends that then get to play as a team

You can gather all the kids, split them into teams of 3 and then play.

Coaching – early on you need to build a culture of “giving back” where former youth coach youth teams. It is OK for these young coaches to be paid and in fact is a great CV and University application benefit. It shows community engagement.

Recruit from the existing federation and National teams for coaching. Require that every national team member gives back a small # of days.

if not coaching then helping (1 day / week)

recruit players to coach and help the middle school teams.

Italia federation

coaching certification

need a rubric for coaching -

how to start a team package

how to run your first 3-4 practices.

Have the kids immediately play possession games

3v3

Conversation with Bunny (William Bartram), the former director of DiscNW who built the Seattle Youth program from zero to 1.

[1/3/2025 11:01 AM] TL: I wanted to ask your advice. Do you have a top 2-3 things you'd suggest for developing youth ultimate? And do you have a couple other folks you'd suggest I ask?

[1/3/2025 11:01 AM] Bunny: ... Valerio Iani could also be a great resource. He started organizing youth ultimate in the Bay Area. He's more recently worked in Spain and Italy.

[1/3/2025 11:02 AM] Bunny: Top things.... have a budget to go along with your plan. You don't have to make money, but you can't lose money and expect to build something sustainable.

[1/3/2025 11:03 AM] Bunny: Boys are different than girls. With boys, you can throw down some cones and they will play. Girls programs require more planning and intention.

[1/3/2025 11:06 AM] Bunny: There were others in the Seattle area that started things (Fall MS League, Spring Reign), so I didn't start from zero. But it still required a lot of building.

[1/3/2025 11:07 AM] Bunny: One more thing.... communication is hard with youth because you have players, coaches, parents, other organizers. Getting everyone on the same page can be a challenge.

[1/3/2025 11:28 AM] TL: When you think of youth early on, what were the most impactful activities you pursued/funded in Seattle to help the youth scene to grow?

Youth clinics? Youth camps? Youth leagues? Showcase games? Paying coaches? Tournaments (spring reign)? Club team involvement?

How do you build a 'flywheel' starts from - elementary -> middle school -> high school -> club.

NL is different too in that athletics are completely separate from schools - they operate in standalone clubs that parents+kids have to find and join.

[1/3/2025 11:41 AM] Bunny: Summer camps brought in some money, but those won't work until you have a critical mass of kids playing. Seattle benefitted by having some dedicated coaches who started middle school teams, which then turned into a middle school league. As the players aged out of middle school, they and their parents helped to start a high school league so that they could keep playing.

Coaches don't have to be players, just connect w/ kids.

[1/3/2025 11:42 AM] Bunny: As it grew, finding money to pay coaches was crucial to having a consistent, quality experience for kids.

[1/3/2025 11:43 AM] Bunny: Also important to think about seasonal structures... pre-season clinic, league, post-season jamboree. Each event is independent, but they work together to keep kids in the sport.

There are pros and cons to the school-based play model. It provides some build in structures and communication channels. But it is also hard for the player at a school that doesn't have a team.