

WELCOME TO PLAY BALL

Play Ball is a joint initiative of the Australian Baseball Federation and the Australian Softball Federation and forms part of the Australian Sports Commission's Targeted Participation Growth Program.

The ASC's new Targeted Sports Participation Growth Program is a three-way partnership between government, business and sport. The Program targets a small number of sports for special support, under the Australian Sports Commission's Active Australia banner, to grow their business by expanding active membership of clubs and associations.

Funding for Play Ball comes courtesy of the Australian Sports Commission, with Major League Baseball International providing the major sponsorship. The program utilises several modified bat and ball games to introduce participants to skills and activities common to Softball and Baseball. Safety and developmental considerations have been built in to accommodate the range of ages and skill levels of participants, and amongst the aims of the program is for it to provide an entry level and pathway to both sports.

Baseball and Softball are truly international games, with participants in over 100 countries, and well established professional leagues in the Americas and throughout Asia. The popularity of both sports worldwide is also reflected by their dual Olympic status.

The origins of Baseball and Softball in Australia can be traced back as far as 1856 to the goldfields of Ballarat. Since then, they have grown to become an integral part of Australia's sporting landscape, offering well organised local, state, national and international competitions at all participant levels. Australia has also enjoyed success on a world stage across both sports, as evidenced by Baseball's gold medal in the 1999 Intercontinental Cup, and Softball's bronze medal performances at the '96 and 2000 Olympic Games.

The objectives of the Play Ball program are to provide opportunities for children to participate in games and activities in a learning environment that are fun, safe, and embody principles of fair play. These introductory activities will also provide an entry level for children wishing to progress to the sports of Baseball or Softball.

"How does it work?"

Baseball and Softball State Associations are given funds and resources by the ASC and Major League Baseball to facilitate developmental activities in targeted growth areas. The Development Officers for each sport go to schools and community groups and initially provide instruction and equipment to children utilising MLB's Pitch, Hit & Run resources.

Children are then encouraged to participate in after-school competitions and activities using modified games such as Tee Ball, Blast Ball, Coach Pitch and Mod Ball. Local club representatives assist with the activities and are given ongoing support in attracting new members to their clubs from the children that have participated in the program.

"How do the children benefit?"

All participants in the Play Ball program receive a MLB tee shirt and hat, an information folder explaining the program and the sports of Baseball & Softball, as well as expert tuition from our professional Development Officers.

They also have an opportunity to participate in the Pitch, Hit & Run regional, State and National finals.

"How do clubs benefit?"

The Play Ball program is a first. It is totally devoted to providing linkages between schools and local clubs. Clubs will be able to access potential new members by linking in with the activities of the Play Ball coordinator in their area.

Historically, most development activity has been focused on exposure of sport and servicing the community. While these elements are still a priority, more emphasis has now been given to the need of clubs to attract and retain new members. This also fulfils the Australian Sports Commission's agenda of creating a more active and healthy Australia.

"How can my club become involved?"

Proactive clubs that position themselves to take advantage of the interest created in their sport by Play Ball programs will benefit the most. Some steps you can take:

1. Call your State office and speak with the Play Ball Coordinator. Find out if there is a program currently running in your area.
2. If there is, then ask how you can get involved and what your club has to do to help. If there is no current program operating in your area, then talk to the coordinator about considering your area for future programs.
3. While you're working on getting involved, talk to other club members about how best to cater for new participants, ie: what can your club offer to make it an inviting and enjoyable experience?

Have a look at some of the recruitment strategies we have compiled on the following pages for more advice.

Club Recruitment Ideas

Schools and Clubs!

(Some information courtesy of Aussie Sport paraphernalia circa 1995)

Before you start

Contact your state association to find out how they currently work with schools, and what special programs and resources have been developed to assist schools. You may be able to link into an existing program or get some valuable advice on working with schools.

Recognise that schools and teachers generally are very protective of their students and are sometimes fearful that people outside of the teaching profession may not be sensitive to the needs of all students. For example, schools are committed to making sure that all students have the opportunity to participate regardless of ability, that sport is fun for everyone and that all students develop (both socially and physically) through the experience.

Identify what you are trying to achieve

The next step is to look at what your club wants to achieve and look at ways in which working with schools could help achieve this. Be specific and plan ahead. There is little point offering coaching clinics to the schools in a bid to recruit players for the current season if the teams are already full and there is no hope of adding additional teams.

Be realistic in what you can offer. If none of your club's accredited coaches are available during school hours, don't offer the local school coaching clinics during school hours. Also, consider the consequences of a recruitment drive. Extra players require extra coaches, officials etc. Think ahead and identify ways that you can cope with this additional demand.

Find out about education protocols

Many state education departments have quite strict requirements for non-teachers who are working with school students, particularly those acting in place of a teacher. These requirements are often based on legal responsibility for the students. If you're not sure of the appropriate procedures, contact your state association.

Identify what your club is able to offer

Don't underestimate the expertise that is contained within your club. As well as being able to benefit from links with local schools, most sporting clubs and associations are able to offer a great deal.

Here's some ideas:

- Identify if there are teachers among your existing club membership and utilise those persons to initiate relationships with their schools.
- Adopt a school!
- Offer use of facilities and resources etc to create a linkage between the school and your club.
- Offer help to the school staff with sport-specific skills, officiating and administration.
- Offer assistance with the selection and coaching of a school team.
- If your club has a high profile player, offer their services for speaking to the kids.
- Provide advice on the appropriate modifications to the sport for a specific age group.
- An advertisement in the local school newsletter promoting your club through a calendar of events is an effective way of letting the community know what is going on in your club.

There are many ways a club can link with a local school. Approach a school today and build a path for students to your club's door!

Other Recruitment Strategies & Ideas!

Come 'n' Try Days

Come and try days are an effective way of promoting your club to the local community. They attract potential new members to your club and the involvement of the community and publicity you may receive gives your club a competitive edge over other sporting clubs in your area. Your club's credibility can be enhanced through your involvement with the local community and your efforts to promote your club to local schools.

Step by step guidelines to conducting a Come 'n' Try day

1. Have a clear vision of your Come and Try day including the theme and the duration. Will it be activity focused or will it have a carnival atmosphere? Will it go for a whole day or just a morning?
2. Set a date and construct a timeline giving yourself at least six weeks planning time. It may be necessary to establish a committee with each member having a specific role. When setting the date, make sure it does not clash with events already being conducted in your area. However, aligning your event with another may in fact enhance its impact, so give this consideration also.
3. Prepare an event outline that states your aims and objectives, roles and responsibilities, marketing and promotional strategies, Come and Try day activities, schedule and budget. Develop a contingency plan so that you are prepared for inclement weather and other variables.
4. Contact people in the local community who can support or assist your Come and Try day. Some people you may want to contact are:
 - local business to provide sponsorship
 - local police to assist with a fastest pitch competition (radar gun)
 - local media to promote the event
5. Promote Come and Try day by sending promotional material to local media, schools, community groups, local businesses, supermarkets and other relevant organisations.
6. Prepare an equipment checklist for the day. You may need to consider a photographer, public address system, registration table and forms, prizes (seek donations from local businesses), music, tee ball equipment, and other promotional items provided by your state and national body. You will also need responsible volunteers to assist with the management of the event.
7. Allow enough time to set up on the event day. Make sure all areas have been set up and someone is available to oversee its activities.
8. The event day - GET INTO IT! Appoint one person to act as the convenor for the day.
9. Follow up the event day with feedback from the participants, send out thank you letters to the supporters of the event.

There are many ideas you can consider for your Come and Try day. The opportunities (and strategies) are endless.

Word of mouth

Can come in the form of 'Bring a Friend' membership drive. Offer rewards or discounts for current players who bring along a new recruit. Suggest that it be coordinated with a specific game that the potential new players can come along and watch. Organise a BBQ afterwards with the opportunity for the kids and their parents to try the skills out. Can be a strategy to assist Come 'n Try days.

Shopping centre community noticeboards

Use them; they work! A leaflet with your club's contact details will help expose your club to a broader audience.

Play Ball courses

Contact your state association to appoint a Development officer to help organise a Play Ball course at your Club (suggested duration 6 - 8 weeks). The Club helps to advertise this through word of mouth, shopping centre billboards etc. The course is overseen by the DO for the first two weeks (largely skill-based component), then a trained club-appointed person takes over for the remainder of the course. At the end of the course, the Club members organise inter-squad games of a modified nature and then try to encourage games against other local clubs undertaking similar programs. If this is not available then continue to have games between themselves. The important linkage is to have the new recruits play in this post course period **in club uniform / colours**, so you'll need to have this resource available. It brings a sense of belonging (to the club) to the new players and their families. It's also important that parents, (who will be present throughout most of the course) be encouraged to assist the Play Ball coordinator during the course activities. This will help them learn the sport, interact with other families and club representatives, and also prepare them for a role in the club activities.

Fee costs for Play Ball courses can be set by the state association. Income generated should be utilised to train and compensate a club coordinator and develop resources to support the program.

Club Registration Day

Advertise in the local media, school newsletters, and erect signage at your grounds promoting your sign-on day.

Club Open Day

Advertise that your club is having an open day where anyone can come to your club grounds to watch training or games. Have a nominated club person available to take through a club & sport orientation. This gives people who are interested in your sport an opportunity to become more familiar with the club prior to joining. Promote your best features to those who attend: teams in all age groups, safety measures in place, club principles etc.

Show me clinics

Have your club coaching or development staff organise visits to local schools to take classes and show students the skills of the game.

Gala Days at Clubs

After you've established good working relationships with local schools, organise a one day inter-school competition at your club grounds. Invite all available club personnel to attend and assist.

Have you got a great member recruitment strategy and want to let others know about it? Contact us via e-mail with your ideas:

club.development@baseball.org.au