

Good Practice Guide

An insight guide on... short format leagues



Introduction

Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is important for not only managing stress and fatigue, but also a government priority for preventing inactivity related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and mental health issues.

Adults typically not getting enough exercise reported that the demands of work were the main barrier to being more active. Advances in technology mean that staff can now be constantly connected and feel there is a subsequent expectation to work beyond the office space.

In contrast, for a young person today sport is perceived as becoming more serious and places greater demands on their time when they are also under pressure to achieve in education too.

Combined with family responsibilities and a social life, it is easy to see that sport is the first commitment to be sacrificed.

Table tennis needs to adapt by providing offers that fit in with peoples busy lifestyles. This guide provides an overview of short format leagues and examples of good practice, which have been split into two sections; juniors and adults.



Background

Numerous local league matches take place on a weeknight, often starting late and finishing late. 94% of matches start after 7pm, which means most matches are finishing after 10pm. This is the typical picture for many leagues around the country.

From previous membership surveys, we have seen that member satisfaction is directly linked with league satisfaction. Many of our members reported being unhappy about how late their league finished. This dissatisfaction was particularly emphasised in young people and parents, who have to consider school the next day.

Not only is this the case for our younger members, but many over 18 year olds feel that traditional league format is not right for them. There are of course many who are happy with the traditional forms of the game, by providing alternative formats to run alongside the existing league offer will help retain those at risk of dropping out of the sport altogether.

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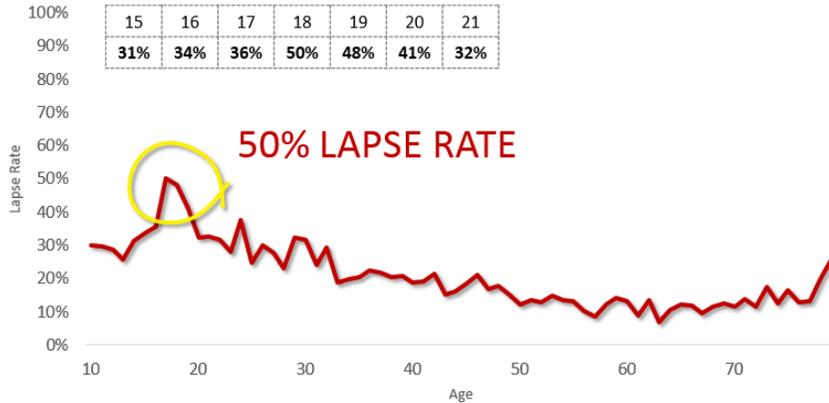
Being at school is difficult to play in midweek until late as I have homework

Often matches finish too late to play away on a school night

I think earlier starting and two person teams, or play matches on two tables. Matches go on really late which stops kids playing

Stop late nights; matches should be shorter and not past 10pm

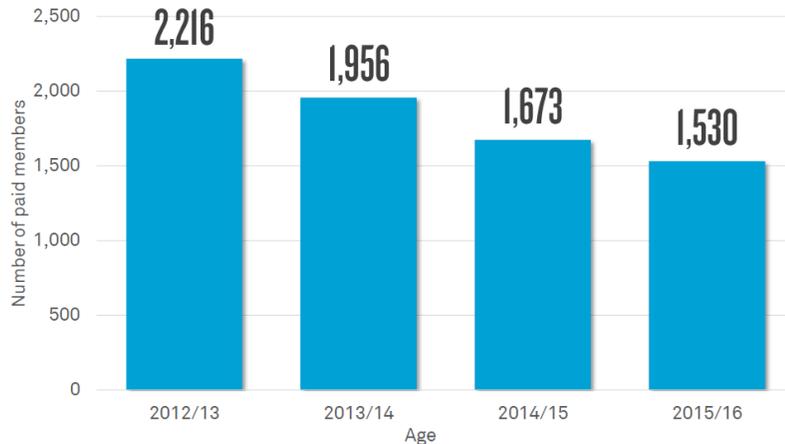
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The Impact

We know from our membership insight, that players start dropping out of table tennis around the age of 14. The highest lapse rate is at 18 years old as players go from juniors to seniors.

Not only are we seeing those within the sport dropping out, but we are also seeing less new young players coming in each year. We rely on grassroots to help build a solid base of players and to ensure the future of the sport.



Numbers of under 15 NEW players

Whilst schools often provide an introduction for young people to table tennis, local leagues are typically the entry point for competition. Regular competition is the most effective way of influencing and measuring a playing habit.

If we continue to do as we have always done, then we will always get what we have always got.

Evidence for Short Formats

The average age for a 2-person league is 19 years younger and have 5% more females compared to a 3-player league.

We also know that players who compete in 10 or more league matches per season less likely to lapse than those who play less frequently.

Other sports who have successfully introduced short format include; football (*Powerleague*), rugby union (Sevens), hockey (*6-a-side*), and cricket (*20/20*).

Some proactive clubs and leagues have already taken steps to test new formats for both juniors and adults. This guide has been developed using the key themes and learnings from those clubs and leagues to share good practice for those looking to introduce a short format for either juniors or adults alike.

	Average Age	% Females
2-player league	30	13%
3-player league	49	8%



1. Understand the Target Market

Take the time to understand what the target audience (e.g. juniors) want and what might stop them getting involved to help shape plans for your league and increase your chances for success.

Our insight has already told us people play table tennis because they want to improve and develop and for the general enjoyment they get from the sport.

Things to consider:

- Young people in full-time education, shift workers, those needing to arrange childcare, which may all result in irregular attendance patterns
- Motivated by enjoyment and satisfaction of their own personal development and skill mastery
- Growing independence in young people which may include financial independence i.e. paying for their own table tennis sessions

Common Barriers	Potential Solutions
<i>"I don't think I'm good enough"</i>	Communication of who the competition is fit for. Will there be tiered divisions, is it suitable for beginners / improvers.
<i>"I like playing in a league but I don't have much time along with schoolwork and football"</i>	Test a short format with low commitment such as once a month or a singles league
<i>"I won't know anyone there"</i>	Promote the social aspect of the league and providing opportunity to play lots of different people through short formats. Can you offer special rates if they bring someone with them? E.g. 2-4-1 at first session

2. Insight into Action

Right Offer

The atmosphere and experience created is one of the most important considerations. The best way to create the right feel is to involve people in the planning stages.

Develop a low commitment or flexible 'offer'. E.g. once a month, singles rather than a team, lots of promotion and relegation to accommodate a range of abilities.

Build in achievable goals and challenges. For instance, in the BATT'S junior league they provided rewards for progress, persistence and a positive attitude as well as performance.



Right People

Are there local partners that could support the development of a junior league format e.g. schools, local league, clubs, CSP, community groups.

Involve young people to ensure focus on young peoples' needs and also help to develop their own skills. The *ParkRun* model recommends that for every 5 runs individuals then volunteer - something similar could work for table tennis.

Do you have coaches who can connect with young people? Young people are more likely to keep coming back if they like the coach.

Right Time

Consult with people about best timing and be willing to consider non-traditional times. Facilities are often under used and the cost is more likely to be negotiable

A number of clubs are already running junior sessions on a Friday evening, which also provides an opportunity for people to socialise.

3. Getting people there

Communicate

Ask existing players from your club to be advocates within their school, workplace and community. Use school links as a route in where appropriate.



Photo by sprocketphotography©

Advertise within the community, at faith groups, scouts/guides and youth clubs to attract people beyond the school network.

Communicate within your club so everyone knows what is happening and they can tell others about the new playing opportunities too.

Promotion should be a continuous activity. If something works once, do it again. If it didn't work, try to understand why not and then try something different.

Marketing

Ask young people already at the club if they would design hand outs or flyers about the league – they'll have fresh, innovative ideas and be more likely to produce something they would find engaging for other young people.

Promote the suitability of the session – is appropriate for people just starting out, do they already need experience to enter?

Try to engage parents as well as young people – you need to gain their trust and build their confidence so they keep bringing their kids back to the club. If the parents are not engaged, kids tend to follow suit.

Westfield TTC gave pupils stickers with club details at school sessions which meant students became a walking advertisement to other kids and also increased parental awareness of the club.

4. Keep them coming back

Motivations change as frequently as life changes, so check in with participants regularly to understand what they like and dislike doing.

Delivering a positive experience for new and existing players will give them a reason to keep coming back. They will also be more likely to talk about what a great time they had and spread the word about your new league.

Young people want to feel like they are **part of something** and a valued within it. They want to shape their own experiences. Young people seek meaningful experiences and need a reason to keep coming back, for instance, something that helps them develop as an individual, or reinforces their place in their social group.

We know from our own research that players enjoy table tennis for skill **development** and the opportunity to **socialise**.

What traits do successful short format leagues have?

- Playing in a central venue
- Opportunity to play lots of different players (through promotion and relegation)
- Flexibility / low commitment
- Early / advanced communication
- Drinks available



All You Need to Know About...

Junior Leagues

The Headlines

Retention rate for under 15 year olds was 62% for the 2016/17 season, compared to 88% for over 15's

Lapse rate is highest at 18 years old

Fewer and fewer under 15 year olds new to table tennis are playing competitive table tennis each year



CASE STUDY: Carlton Le Willows, Nottingham



Chris Turner
Talent Development Coach

“
Our junior league format has such a positive effect on keeping juniors hooked in the sport, as well as transferring them from playing a little in a school to joining a club
”

The Problem

As a Talent Development Centre, the club got a lot of interest from schools. There was a great deal of table tennis provision, but no real competition to get kids hooked.

We wanted to provide exposure to competitive table tennis, keep young people in the sport, and give them something to work towards.

The Solution

We recognised we weren't going to compete with football, so we put an u12 league and an u18 league on a Saturday afternoon, once a month.

At local school table tennis sessions the coach gave each pupil a form to take home to their parents about the new junior league. We did this at *every* session, not just as a one off.

At the beginning of the season we grouped players into divisions depending on their playing experience and ability. We have a maximum of 7 players per division, and had 12 divisions for the 2016/17 season.

All three sets are played, and every set won results in a point. Players were promoted or relegated ready for the next round.

Matches started at 1pm and usually finished around 4/4.30pm. We charged £20 for the series (6 rounds).

We presented really nice trophies at the end of the season, every child got a medal and we have a big celebration at the end of the year.

The Result

For the 2016/17 season we had 90 players, 12 divisions, taking part on 12 tables.

Juniors are more likely to keep playing as they've had a good competitive experience. The kids get to play lots of different people because there are large amounts of promotion and relegation.

We've attracted players who may not want to go down a performance route. They not only want to play in the junior league, they now play in the TDC, play in their own after-school clubs and all the TDC players take part in the junior league too. They all just want to play more.

We were able to generate an income just from making cups of tea and toasties – we get a profit of about £100 just from catering.

Retention for under 18s in Nottingham was 82% in 2016/17, and clubs increased their junior membership base which brought in extra funds.

Secured £1200 through sponsorship and re-invested the money into buying a table for a school.

“ We took the time to understand what young people wanted – lots of matches and competition ”

What made it work?

The branded banners made it look like a professionally run program and gave parents confidence bringing their kids along.

We created a really good atmosphere in the hall so that kids enjoyed their time while there.

We made it individual - kids didn't have to be a member of a club to play

The kids had something to work towards and a tangible reward at the end of taking part

What advice could you give to others wanting to learn from Carlton Le Willows?

- Run it on Saturday afternoons and make sure it's done by 5pm.
- Provide lots of competition to minimise waiting about.
- If your club is already linked with a school, the school may be able to print the flyers or forms either for free or at a good rate through their own reprographic department.

Leading by Example

Leicester Development League

Knighton Park TTC already had a lot of young people in the club, so a junior league provided a fit for purpose competitive playing option and also attracted additional players from smaller clubs and schools in the surrounding area.

Format

Held on Saturday mornings from 9am - 1pm four times a year plus individual junior championships.

Limited to 36 teams, 9 divisions of 4 teams. Teams play the other 3 teams in their division each session; 18 tables are used meaning all teams are playing continuously throughout each session.

2-a-side playing singles matches only, but have a minimum of 3 players registered per team. One person sits out and rotates through the team so the person not playing does the scoring / umpiring.

In the first 2 rounds, the winners move up a division, the bottom team move down a division, teams then stay in the same divisions for the final 2 sessions with the combined results of these 2 sessions deciding final league positions. The fifth Saturday is an individual championship grouped by age.

Key Points

- Communication – league invite distributed in June to be returned by Sept, first round played at the end of Oct / early Nov.
- 4-5 volunteers to run who provide the scoring sheets and are on hand if needed
- The organisers are on hand to help but the sessions are fairly self-regulating
- Play is more or less continuous
- Clubs and schools are provided with reports after each round, which includes player averages
- The individual championship encourages new players to attend and incentivises current players.

Advice

- Recruit and secure volunteers to support the structure
- Secure a large central premises to run the league from
- Consider the source for getting people in
- Ensure there are clear parameters for parents early on about what parents can and can't do.

Leading by Example

BATTS, Harlow

BATTS had already tested the Carlton Le Willows model with great success. However, it was felt that doubles is neglected particularly in top competitions and tournaments, so BATTS piloted a Junior Pairs League which included doubles for the 2016/2017 season.

Format

Players register for the whole series but individuals are ranked on the day based on who attends and the strongest and weakest players are paired together, which results in a matched ability.

Three games are played per match, with 2 matches played per session. One point is awarded for every game won. The day starts at 1pm and is usually finished by 4pm. This timing was intentionally kept the same as it was well received parents for competition to finish early.

Cash prizes were awarded at the end of the round to the pair with the most points ('Dynamic Duo') and also to the runners up. In the final week medals were awarded and included 3rd place as well.

Challenge

As a pairs league, the number of players has to be divisible by 4. When it isn't, there are two ways of managing this, either;

- 1/ have somebody available on standby
- 2/ recruit a parent to join in so a junior doesn't miss out – this worked very well.

Key Points

- Entry by individuals then paired on the day
- Open to all juniors without age boundaries and all abilities
- League dates are communicated at the beginning of the year / as early as possible
- One Saturday per month from April to July; ~4 Saturdays in total
- Starts at 1pm, finishes at 4pm.
- Charged £24 for the series
- Although it took time for young people to get used to doubles, juniors really enjoyed it

Advice

Plan it carefully; think about the resources available to you, consider what the right competitive structure is for your club. Communicate with juniors *and* parents before it starts.

All You Need to Know About...

Short Leagues for Adults

The Headlines

Appropriate competition is the most effective way of preventing players from lapsing

The average age of a 2-person format is 19 years younger compared to a 3-person format

2-person leagues have 5% more females playing than 3-person leagues



CASE STUDY: Ilfracombe Table Tennis Club



“ Top Pairs has a great atmosphere. Everyone gets to know each other and it is really friendly but hugely competitive. It is so popular we’ve now made Division 1 and Division 2 a pairs league. ”

Phil Goulding
General Secretary

The Problem

People still want to play in regular competition but in modern life something always gets in the way. The pairs league was introduced to provide a shorter evening of matches to meet the needs of the players.

The Offer

Players are invited to take part in the league via Ilfracombe and advertised throughout North Devon. Players are internally ranked from 1-22, then paired top to bottom, for instance:

Player ranked #1 is partnered with player ranked #22. Player 2 is partnered with 21, and so on.

Each team plays each other twice in the season (Sept – Apr). Best of 5 games are played; 4 singles, finishing with doubles. A 7.30pm start means matches are usually finished by 9pm.

4-5 catch up weeks are included in the season with no fixtures to allow players to play any re-arranged matches.

Prize money is available for 1st, 2nd and 3rd place, with a wooden spoon for the team finishing at the bottom of the league.

The league attempts to pair different players together every year. For new people wanting be part of the league, players are invited to compete in a play-off against the bottom 4-5 finishers at the end of the season for a place in Top Pairs. If unsuccessful they have the option to play in lower division.

The Result

The league has been successfully running for 21 years. The league is financially sustainable and the majority of players join the club – as club members get a discount to play in the league. This also generates additional funds for the venue.

Lower ranked players are learning from the better players and juniors learn from seniors; everyone is developing and benefiting from the format.

The pairs format also keeps players match fit because the standard is constantly improving there are no easy matches. Having different teams every year means a different team is likely to win each season, it keeps players hooked.

Top Pairs has been so popular, that the existing divisions 1, 2 and below have also transitioned into a similar pairs league after demand from players.

What advice could you give to others wanting to learn from Ilfracombe Top Pairs?

- Use a central venue where possible
- Provide players with flexibility

What made it work?

Compact structure, players are playing the majority of the time on match nights, and if they are not playing they are usually involved some other way, such as scoring.

Flexibility. Ilfracombe are fortunate enough to own their venue – teams can play 2 matches in one night if want to. They also have the option to play any other night if they need to re-arrange matches.

Teams don't know who they are playing until they turn up on the night – this means people have been less likely to drop out before a match.

“
The great thing about the Top Pairs league is that you are always guaranteed a tough match each week. There are no teams made up totally of the best or worst players in the league due to the ranking system used to pick the team each season. This helps keep you engaged as a player throughout the whole season, and often makes for very tight finishes to the league, which is exciting for everyone
”

Chris Brown, TTE Area Lead - South

Leading by Example

Burton Uxbridge Table Tennis League

Burton Senior TTL had been running for many years, in one table venues, which were dwindling due to the decline in the local brewing industry.

As Burton Uxbridge TTC grew, new, younger members were being introduced into the league. The existing playing format and venues of traditional league became problematic for the younger generation. With older players retiring, the younger voices needed to be heard. The league needed to modernise or it would fold, which was a tricky and often emotive process for well-established teams and individuals.

Format

Players migrated across the former league and also attracted new players, splitting the standard requiring the 2 divisions. Teams were chosen by the organiser as some players did not know each other. After time players starting forming their own teams, and the league evolved into what the players wanted it to be.

League matches were held on a Weds night; Division 2 started at 7pm immediately after a coaching session. This became mainly a junior league with some adult beginners.

Division 1, for higher standard players, started at 8pm initially playing on one table, moving to two tables to be finished by the building closing time at 10pm.

There are normally 10-14 teams, who play each other twice in a season. Re-arranged games could be built in coaching sessions if necessary.

Key Points

- Playing in a central venue on the same day at the same time.
- The new format was ran alongside a traditional league format that was still available nearby.
- Having more than one division for players to aim to progress into.
- The league was stopped in advance of Christmas and Easter to avoid matches clashing with holidays when availability is likely to be disrupted.
- Results were provided quickly, usually by the following morning

Advice

Be flexible; be open minded to change in order to accommodate what people want, such as playing on more tables. If players dropped out mid season this allows new players to come in. Providing flexibility to change teams around mid season if required will provide losing players.

With thanks to:

Carlton Le Willows Table Tennis Centre

Leicester Development Table Tennis League

BATTS Table Tennis Club

Ifracombe Table Tennis Club

Burton Uxbridge Table Tennis Club

Useful Links

www.tabletennisengland.co.uk

www.sportengland.org

www.sportandrecreation.org.uk

www.youthsporttrust.org

www.workingfamilies.org.uk