



Trends in Sports & Fitness

A review of what's hot and what's not in Parks and Recreation Programs.

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A challenge for any Parks and Recreation Director is to stay on top of the latest trends in programming. Once members of the community get word of a sport that they think is interesting, they will often look to your agency to see whether or not it is provided.

The word from our GreenPlay Consultants, who work with towns and cities all across the country, is that Pickleball is the most mentioned recreational sport that communities have added, or plan to add, to their programming. Also trending are the concepts of "Small and Simple": small groups, mini-soccer, Ultimate (Frisbee),

body-weight training, short, intense exercises, and shortened seasons. Agencies are finding it easier to integrate these trends into their programs because they require so little investment in space and equipment. Four Pickleball courts fit into the area of one tennis court. Same with mini soccer, which is a scaled-down version of the international game. Both of these games extend opportunities for older players who want to play but no longer have the stamina to play traditional soccer or tennis. Popular with children as well as adults, mini-soccer uses fewer players per team and a smaller field, meaning individual players get more ball time. Games can be five-versus-five, six-versus-six, or seven-versus-seven.

In order to accommodate busy adults, some Recreation Department managers are cutting back the time commitments required for some leagues. Shortened seasons are in demand, according to John Prue of the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation department at Naval Station Great Lakes in North Chicago, Illinois. In an NRPA Connect forum, he mentioned that seasons are cut from 12-16 weeks to four to eight weeks. This shorter season works well for his transient sailor populations and for residents who want more time to devote to family and other activities.

Also trending are low-skill, low-cost, social leisure sports like Baggo (a bean-bag toss game), ladder toss, and nostalgia sports like kickball,



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dodgeball, wiffle ball, and hula hoops. These games are more lighthearted and less athletic and fit easily into time spent after work. These low-pressure recreational leagues also draw members of the community who lack the athletic prowess for the more competitive basketball, softball, volleyball, or tennis leagues. These additional participants and leagues help to raise more revenue for recreation departments — often with little cost for equipment. As a bonus, most of

archery (driven by interest in the Hunger Games). One of the most fun emerging sports is BubbleBall (or bubble soccer) which is, "... more fun than soccer, safer than football, cheaper than hockey, and bouncier than basketball," according to Bubbleball, Inc. Players wear transparent inflatable bubbles around their bodies that guard everything from their legs up and turns a simple game of soccer into a full-contact sport, like bumper cars. Players run into opponents causing

"back to the basics" according to the article in the November/December issue of ACSM "Health & Fitness Journal." Another trend mentioned in the report is Group Personal Training where a trainer works with two or three people at a time. Yoga is still strong as is strength training. Zumba and Pilates still have some enthusiasts, but health experts expect people to gravitate toward workouts they can do anywhere and look for other ways to boost their performance in the coming year.



these games don't require custom spaces: Kickball can take place at any baseball field or open field, and Baggo can take place at any park. Another advantage of these trending sports is that they are inexpensive for the participants, which opens up more opportunities for lower income groups who, according to the U.S. Census, have a participation rate of half that of higher income groups. Other emerging sports are foot golf, disc golf, sport climbing (which adds time trials and head-to-head races to traditional climbing), and

them to fall over, but they bounce right back and are left unharmed.

Fitness trends also reflect a blast from the past. Body-weight training leads the list of the top 10 fitness trends according to the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM). Body Weight Training uses push-ups, pull-ups, planks, lunges, and squats, to name a few of the old-style calisthenics, now referred to as body-weight exercises. This style of exercise utilizes minimal equipment making it more affordable and allows people to get

One of the biggest new trends is "Wearable Technology" such as fitness trackers (Fitbit) and smartwatches (iWatch). Runners have long used heart-rate monitors to measure the intensity of their workouts, but these days, people are wearing all sorts of devices to track their calorie intake or number of steps taken during the day. Recording that sort of biometric data is likely to take off this year. The latest generation of smartwatches and fitness bands have sensors that can monitor just about anything. This will eventually impact recreation programs with new opportunities in the future.

Budgetary trends are not so healthy. According to the NRPA's "2015 Field Report," "Although park and recreation department responsibilities have expanded well beyond traditional park-related functions in recent years, agencies have not seen corresponding increases in budget. In fact, both operating and capital budgets have remained largely static across the past four years.

"Total operating expenditures for agencies surveyed stayed

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flat in 2014 — much as they have since 2011 — regardless of agency size. Agency budgets, across the board, have not returned to 2010 levels. (The median remains at about two-thirds 2010 levels, and the upper quartile stands at about 56 percent.) Yet, as the sections on Responsibilities and Operations and Maintenance attest, park and recreation departments have seen no corresponding decrease in the demand for their services.”

That’s why listening to community desires and paying attention to predicted trends is so important. All of the trends listed above create new recreation possibilities (new leagues and expanded opportunities) and put more dollars in recreation coffers.

A ray of hope for the future is that after years of pushing hard for Americans to “get off the couch,” activity trends suggests that those words may have actually reached a few people. The Physical Activity Council noted increased spending on team sports at K-12 schools, and a 2% increase in fitness sports activities by Americans of all ages. The group also reported that 72% of the U.S. population (290 million age 6 and older) is physically active in one way or another, a slight increase from previous estimates. Aspirational sports, swimming, fitness, and outdoor activities feature high on the list for most adult age groups. Team sports are also important for the younger age groups.

Another ray of hope is that according to *Recreation Management*

magazine, the coming year sees a “continuing growth—if slight—in the optimism of respondents to our State of the Industry Survey. While operating budgets and revenues are still recovering, a growing number of respondents are planning for construction and staffing up. And while the economy remains a top concern, many are turning their sights to other issues, from ensuring access to fitness options to operating top-notch programs at top-quality facilities.”

The top 10 planned features include:

1. Splash play areas (22.7%)
2. Synthetic turf sports fields (17.8%)
3. Playgrounds (16.5%)
4. Park structures – shelters and restroom buildings (16.5%)
5. Trails (15.6%)
6. Disc golf courses (14.2%)
7. Bleachers and seating (14%)
8. Fitness centers (13.4%)
9. Concession areas (13.2%)
10. Dog parks (13%)

While encouraging people to participate in sports and other recreation programming is always a challenge, staying on top of trends is one way to motivate people. It helps to know which trends are passing fads and which have potential staying power. Fortunately, many of the trends that have emerged over the past few years have involved sports with lower equipment and facility costs, so they are relatively easy to implement. Find out what is going on in your community by reaching out and asking your constituents what they’d like to see. Or contact GreenPlay, and we can help to engage the public.



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