



5 Tips for Better COMMUNITY OUTDOOR SPORT PROGRAMS



REDEFINE WHAT IS POSSIBLE.



A GREAT COMMUNITY OUTDOOR SPORT PROGRAM DOESN'T NEED TO CREATE OLYMPIANS.



The real value of outdoor sport programs in our communities

is that they can create an environment where people build connections, feel a sense of belonging, and see a clear pathway to keep participating long after the program ends (and continued participation is really the first step to being an Olympian anyhow).

This means great programs have to create an environment that engages people not just physically, but socially and emotionally as well. Community programs are only successful if our community wants to show up and can count on us to make it happen.

We've seen plenty of programs that have taken off, and an equal amount that have faltered. These are 5 tips to make sure your community programs thrive for seasons to come.





1. DON'T WAIT FOR THE WEATHER TO COOPERATE

First things first, outdoor programming means we're working with an unwieldy variable – the outdoors. Don't set yourself up for failure by only thinking about clear skies and perfect conditions. Plan for the days with challenging weather and harsh temperatures.

Remember

1. The weather will almost never be ideal.
2. It doesn't actually matter.

Learning to embrace the weather in all its forms is an important part of creating a lifelong practice of getting outdoors. As the old saying goes "there's no such thing as bad weather, just bad preparation."

You might not be able to do your outdoor sport of choice in all weather conditions, but that's part of learning a sport. Challenging weather days can create powerful learning experiences.



Also we can't underestimate the fact that for some people, participating in the specific sport you're sharing is only part of the reason they're showing up.

We're social creatures, and that connection can mean a lot more than perfect conditions. Which brings us to tip #2...

MAKE A PLAN

- Start your program with a huge list of OTHER things you can do when you can't do your sport.
- Research sport specific games, simulations, and learning tools you can use as a back up.
- Make a plan to create interesting experiences despite the conditions, and you'll be amazed at how prepared you feel when the weather inevitably changes.



2. BE CONSISTENT, DON'T CANCEL

There's almost always a reason to cancel – rain, thunder, too much snow, not enough snow, mud, or half the group is away on family vacations. Once you start canceling, you'll keep finding reasons to cancel. And once you start canceling, you'll start to lose people.



Successful programs are consistent. Even if your snowshoe program has to turn into hot cocoa and conversation because it's 20 below zero with windchill, that's ok. People will come to trust your commitment. It's one less variable they have to consider. If someone in your community is thinking "I want to attend, but is that program happening this week?" The answer should be, "of course it is."

CONNECT CREATIVELY

Are we saying there aren't some extreme circumstances in which we are forced to cancel? Certainly not. Even in the era of global pandemics, though, we've found more creative ways to connect when physical presence isn't possible. Getting people of any age to commit to our outdoor program is like getting ourselves to build a new habit. We have to build our streak, and any breaks in that wreak havoc to patterning new behavior.

So maybe a blizzard or thunderstorm is keeping people from showing up in person, but could you still do a skill or movement session virtually? Think of ways to hold space for your program so people build their streak of attendance. *Let people choose not to come, but don't make the choice for them by not sticking to your promised schedule.*





3. GET FEEDBACK

A great community outdoor program isn't a magic trick. It evolves over time through trial and error. Part of the process is asking for feedback from the participants you serve (and in the case of youth, their parents and guardians).

It's easier than ever to use online tools to solicit people's comments and ideas. The bad news is that it's also easier than ever for people to ignore your requests. A little forethought and planning goes a long way. Think about key times you can ask people for feedback. Common examples include –

- **At registration** This is a great time to ask people why they signed up, what they hope to get out of the experience, and how they heard about it in the first place.
- **At the start of your last session** This is a good time to ask people to reflect on what they liked most about the program, what they might change, or if they'd participate again.

Ask for Feedback from Everyone Involved. This includes staff, volunteers, land managers, and anyone else connected to the program that wasn't a participant. And if you ask for feedback, be ready to listen to it and make changes.

SURVEY TIPS

You don't have to be an evaluation expert or data specialist to get some meaningful feedback by survey. Just keep in mind these three tips –

- **Keep surveys short.** Focus on a few key questions. Be clear about what type of info you're trying to gather.
- **Make it easy for people.** Online survey tools have helped tremendously when people are home, or have access to a device, but when you're at the event having a paper survey may be easier than digital. Plan when you'll ask and choose the easiest options.
- **Make it immediate.** Generally the more distance (both physically and chronologically) between your program and your ask for feedback, the lower your response rate. If you're going to use a tool like Survey Monkey with a shareable link, you'll get a better response if you text it to everyone's phone at the start of a session and allow 5 minutes for them to complete it, rather than emailing it after the program has ended.



4. WRITE IT DOWN

We'll say this again - a great program isn't a magic trick. It evolves over time through trial and error. If feedback is one half of this process, documentation is the other. Write down what you plan to do, then after the fact write down what you actually did.

Document things that were challenges, pleasant surprises, and ideas that came up for future iterations of the program. Save all this somewhere that you can refer back to each season.



SHARE & REVIEW

Share your written plans and adjustments with anyone involved in helping you run the program. Not only will it help keep you accountable for the things you want to accomplish, it will also build buy-in and trust amongst even your very occasional volunteers.

Build in a practice of documenting, and reviewing your plans, notes, and surveys before and after each season you're offering programming. The amount of innovation, creativity, and energy that naturally grows in your efforts will surprise you.





5. LESS IS MORE

When it comes to designing the length of our programs - number of weeks, number of sessions, and the length of each session - it's easy to make things longer than they need to be. A successful adult trail running program, or family paddling program, doesn't have to be months long. As is often the case, less is more here.

It's easy to get excited when offering something new, only to over commit and burn ourselves out. Instead start small, make something a little shorter than you think it needs to be, and let it grow as needed.

**SIGN UP
HERE**
[OUTDOORSI.ORG](https://www.outdoorsi.org)



REMEMBER

Don't fill every day of your peak season with a program. Leave time for people to go enjoy the outdoors on their own.

Likewise no one session of your program needs to accomplish five things. Think about each gathering being focused on one thing. And leave the majority of time for people to play and practice, rather than listen to instruction. It's always better to leave people wanting more, rather than fading away because they get tired of the experience you've gone through so much trouble to create.

Being consistent, being creative, seeking continuous improvement, and leaving time for people to explore on their own will help you create that environment, and find more success in engaging your community in sustainable, lifelong outdoor participation.

For more ideas, resources, and a network of support **join the OSI Community for free!**