As the game grows at all levels, many rugby programs struggle to recruit and retain a consistent number of players. The lack of athletes makes development difficult as there are never enough players at practice to work on certain aspects of the game. At best it is an inconvenience, at worst it can lead to unsafe players taking the field.

This guide is designed to help everyone recruit and retain players to grow their teams. It is a collection of best practice from coaches that have found ways to grow the game. There are no magic bullets, but there are approaches anyone can take that will increase the number of players on their team.

Recruiting vs. Retention
Rugby is a growing sport in the USA, and as such, has barriers that we must overcome. However many problems that rugby teams encounter are actually of their own accord. With the growth of the game at high school and college level, recruiting is often not the issue. Over the course of a season many rugby teams have plenty of players come out to try the sport. However, for some reason, they do not commit to the game. Retention is often the issue, and not recruitment.

Retention is absolutely within the program’s control. A coach should reflect on early season practices and make sure that a new player will have a great experience that will encourage them to return to the next practice. So what is a brand new player looking for at practice? Here is a suggested list, but everyone should develop their own:

- Organized – many athletes come to rugby because they are looking for another sport to play. They may be familiar with varsity level practices. Early season practices need to be the best run of the year.
- Learning – Players want to feel like they have learned and improved during a practice. This is true for all players, but especially those that are new to the game.
- Context – Most of the athletes that attend their first practice have never seen a rugby ball before. Using skill drills only fails to provide context. Try to come up with competitive games similar to rugby match situations to help players understand why they need to learn certain skills.
- Active – All players want to feel like their practice was physically challenging. If you have a large group of new players, make sure you have multiple stations-grids to avoid inactivity.
- Successful – This is probably the most difficult achievement for new players because we tend to mix them in with experienced players which can be intimidating (see rookie day below). Early in the season it may be more important to focus on new players than those who already grasp an understanding of the game.
- Attention – Assistant coaches serve as the best retention tool any team can have. Players that are given focused attention by coaches will feel valued and will learn at an accelerated pace.

If a coach has a team that struggles with numbers, the coach should reflect on what takes place at practice and ask if the objectives are aimed at retaining players to the next practice.
Other tips for retention include:

- **Dues** - Give players a grace period before dues must be paid. This can be a significant financial barrier.
- **Mentoring** – pair up a new player with an experienced player. The experienced player’s job is to make sure the recruit comes back and commits to the sport. You can even offer reduced dues when their recruit pays dues.
- **Names** – Learn player’s names. It makes a huge difference to new players for everyone to call them by their name.
- **Parents** – Catching the interest of parents is critical to new player commitment. Check out the Parent Network Guide on the USA Rugby website for more information.

**Recruiting**

Your best recruiters are your current players. They play rugby for many reasons which should be shared with others in a positive and respectful manner. One of the most difficult challenges we have is the brand that rugby often has within the general community. It takes a lot of work for a rugby program to create a positive image of the sport, but the payoff is immeasurable. Often this image forms a brand identity, and creating a good rugby brand on campus is an important part of recruiting.

Tips on improving the rugby brand:

- **Player behavior** – Rugby is on constant probation because of past negative branding, most of which is due to poor behavior from former players. Current players must take on the role of rugby ambassadors. They must behave better than other athletes on campus.
- **Positive clothing** – A branding expert once said that the best thing rugby could do would be to take every negative t-shirt (ex. “give blood, play rugby”) and burn them. Require your players to wear clothing featuring positive, team branded rugby slogans and images.
- **Posters and Brochures** – Using professional posters and brochures gains recognition for rugby as an attractive option in the world of sport choices. USA Rugby has professional print quality posters and spectator guides available for download and use towards gaining new players and fans.

Generally, you want the rugby program’s interactions with community members to inspire an interest in supporting the game as a whole.

One way to look at how to improve your recruiting is to try and identify the barriers that prevent athletes from participating. Rugby players always say “I wish I would have started playing earlier” and the rugby community needs to address why they did not. A common example of a barrier is the unknown nature of the sport. Often athletes hesitate to try something new for fear they will not understand and nor have the right skills. One way to overcome that is to host a “Rookie Day” and make it for players that have never played before. It will be less intimidating for a new player to learn about the game with others in the same position. You should introduce enough information so each new player feels comfortable. Check out the appendix for a suggested schedule.

**Selling Rugby**

The best way to get an athlete to try rugby is to have current players sell the game. Telling their rugby story personalizes the approach and helps attract new players. It is often best for everyone to develop their own sales pitch script, although one is included in the appendix as a guide.

To help current players understand how to talk to athletes about rugby have them answer three questions:

1. What does a regular student think of when you say the word “rugby”? These should create positive and negative terms and can be a good starting point. How do we enhance the positives and reduce the impact of the negatives?
2. Why do you play rugby? These become the key talking points for the players when they sell the game to their fellow students.
3. What prevents someone from trying rugby? This will bring up tough questions that students will ask and you can discuss appropriate answers.
Once you have this information you can even have team members role play as current players and potential recruits. The experience should enable the player to be more comfortable talking to other students about the game.

Preparing to Play
Once you have the new players out at practice it is important in terms of retention to think about how you are going to prepare them to play. This is always a tough balance because players are likely to commit to the sport if they have an opportunity to play the game. This is also where players learn the most; however, first priority is the player’s safety, which has two components:

1. The player’s physical capacity to participate
2. The player’s skills

New player’s physical capacity is always up to the coach’s discretion. Is the player fit and strong enough to participate safely in a game? USA Rugby recommends that all players meet the Center for Disease Control’s fitness standards as a basic requirement for participation in a game. Those standards are:

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<th>Above Average</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Min. Sit Up</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>50 Yard Sprint</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.5-8.4</td>
<td>8.5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Mile Run</td>
<td>&lt;12:30</td>
<td>14:30</td>
<td>16:55+</td>
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Fitness Standards for High School Girls

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<th>Above Average</th>
<th>Average</th>
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<td>12:11+</td>
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Fitness Standards for High School Boys

As for the player’s skill, it is vital that a player has experience in the contact aspects of the game including the tackle (tackling and being tackled), continuity, and scrums/lineouts. USA Rugby recommends that a player be allowed to play in a game when they have completed the following sessions in practice:

- Two technical tackle sessions
- Two full-contact games (not necessarily full sided games)
- Two live scrum sessions

All requirements can be completed in four practice sessions. A sample program is included the appendix.

Philosophy
An old South African coaching manual states that the coach’s role in rugby is to recruit and retain players to the sport. The competitive aspect of the game is important for our players, but all coaches must understand that how they coach their team has a dramatic effect on the growth and development of rugby in the US.