Growing game will pivot on volunteer push

The biggest event in the handball world, the 2009 World Handball Championships, simply could not have taken place without literally thousands of hours of volunteer work.

The epicenter of this magnificent event was the Multnomah Athletic Club in Portland, Ore., and much of the volunteer staff came from its membership, whether handballers or not.

As your president, I tried to be as supportive as possible of the effort. Believe me, though, when I say that my contributions in the overall picture were minuscule.

The volunteer structure, with 22 separate committees, took care of virtually every small detail — and did it cheerfully.

In recent weeks, I've made an effort with my USHA board colleagues to learn about the strengths in their various regions and their hopes for the future of handball. I hope to bring these insights into the process of creating a new business plan for the USHA.

Many very good insights came back to my queries. Two items in particular stood out:

■ Board members consistently referenced the quality of the local volunteer cadre.

■ They mentioned a distinct tendency to tie the future of the game to the development of collegiate handball programs.

This latter point lines up with the many comments that Tom Sove gathered a few years ago as he traveled far and wide to conduct important fundraising efforts for the Share the Passion campaign.

Make no mistake — it is no accident:

■ The world tournament relied heavily on volunteers to accommodate the needs of the 980 players who were in Portland.

■ Board members recognize the value of the volunteers across the country.

As we look forward to the process of establishing a workable business plan to advance the game, we have to take into full consideration not only the wishes of our members — in this case the desire to grow the collegiate game — but also the realities of the institutional and social pressures that surround us.

Here are just some of the factors that we encounter in this desired growth area:

■ A lack of qualified instructors for colleges (here's where the volunteers will be a crucial factor).

Steele speaks at the junior nationals as a volunteer helps belay a climber on Lattof Y's indoor wall.

■ Other programs such as Pilates taking up court space and registrants.

■ A limit of participants in a handball class based on how many students can play in the available courts — unlike, for instance, a yoga class.

■ Many other well-known possibilities for college-age people.

We are obviously in a highly competitive environment when it comes to leisure or recreational opportunities.

But the college-age group is not the only one that we should target. There are even larger demographic groups out there: the tens of millions of school-age children and the 78 million baby boomers. Each group presents an opportunity, but each also has specific issues attached.

With young children, the issue is how we can best reach adults who are in a position to bring the game to them. This basically means teachers, specifically physical educators.

The scope of the problem is that there are many tens of thousands of schools across the country. We do not have enough staff to begin to scratch the surface. We need to take advantage of every opportunity to bring the game to the right people so we can make inroads with this demographic group.

Coming up with the right set of approaches and tactics, and the necessary resources, is a task the board will be tackling in the weeks and months ahead.

Youngsters have not yet established lifelong recreation habits. They are still open to new possibilities. College students have all the distractions and obligations of young adults, but they have shown that they will give the game a try under the right circumstances.

The other major demographic group — baby boomers — has time on its hands, disposable income and an interest in developing or maintaining healthy lifestyle choices. The problem is that they are also pretty well set in their behavior patterns.

As our marketing consultant tells us, with people who have already established their interests, if they are to add handball to their daily or weekly menu, they must eliminate an activity that they had previously chosen.

How willing are they to do this? What kind of opportunities will even bring the choice to their attention?

The obvious growth industry in handball is the big-ball game. It can be played indoors or outdoors and requires even less equipment than four-wall or one-wall small ball. It appeals to all age groups and skill levels.

Right now, the big-ball game is not as highly structured with rules and USHA oversight as other versions of the game, although we will become more involved as this game continues to expand.

I am sharing this with you so you'll have some sense of the various factors that must be considered as the USHA board comes to grips in the near future with establishing the kind of business plan that will ensure the future of the game.

We will establish a feedback loop for your use on our Web site so you can share your insights, opinions and good ideas.

I cannot emphasize enough, however, the crucial significance for any effort to have sufficient volunteer help to make the effort succeed.