Blue Rays Ultimate Frisbee Development Program

Amount allocated: Rs. 1,31,000

Abstract:
This project aims to engage with youth in and around Auroville through Ultimate Frisbee, developing the life skills that come with practice of the sport. Ultimate is a demanding sport that has low entry barriers and places emphasis on gender equity. It is one of the few sports in the world where men and women compete together on a level playing field. Ultimate is also a demanding self-refereed sport that teaches important values such as personal integrity, sportsmanship, mutual respect, non-violence and trust. This project will support and expand the opportunities for youth to develop themselves through this sport, by offering trainings and regular practice.

Q2 report (July – September 2017):
In this quarter, we organized the following activities in the interests of athlete development:

On-field:
- Blue Rays Ultimate Frisbee on-field training sessions were held thrice a week at Certitude field (evening from 5:00 PM to 6:30 PM on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays). Our on-field sessions focus on physical, technical and mental practice.
- On 22nd and 23rd July, we took ten athletes from our team to attend regional tryouts in Chennai for the India U24 mixed team (male and female athletes who will represent India at the World Under-24 Ultimate Championships). One of our athletes was selected to attend the final national tryouts at Surat. He attended this selection camp but did not make it to the final team of 24 athletes picked to represent India.
- On 28th September, we selected five of our athletes (based on merit, attendance and sincerity) to attend a player clinic in Chennai. At this clinic, they joined fifteen other young athletes and were taught by experienced coaches from FlyWild, a top team in Chennai.
- On 29th, 30th September and 1st October, these five athletes participated in a national level tournament: Chennai Heat. They not only performed appreciably on the field (one of the players received feedback from a member of the opposition team that he clearly has the potential to play at the international level!) but also conducted themselves well off it. They learnt to navigate their way in the city, from the home of their host to the fields and back, using public transport. They made new friends and made memories with these new friends. They were given allowances for meals and transport and asked to keep accounts and stay within budget. As managers, it was rewarding for us to hear from these five athletes that it was indeed an inspiring experience for them to play alongside some of India’s best, and that they were now prepared to work harder than before. They also told us that they learnt a lot from interacting with these athletes both about their own training and also from the way they conduct themselves on and off the field with professionalism.

Off-field:
- Since 1st July 2017, we have had three off-field (indoor) sessions. In these sessions, we reviewed and learnt from video footage – both our own and footage of top international players. We also used these sessions to communicate our expectations from each other
and to reinforce our values as we pursued our team goals. We spent a significant amount of time brainstorming ideas on how we can give back to the Auroville community. Ideas that were brainstormed included volunteering at Matrimandir gardens, participating in clean-up initiatives, running a recreational league open to all from the bioregion (described below), running a national level tournament in the Under-20 age category, etc. One other important conversation was about recruiting more women to join our program (so we can have gender equity), and how we can make women feel more comfortable and welcome at our training sessions. We as a team wholeheartedly agreed to constantly strive to provide opportunities for this underrepresented group.

- Twenty-two of our athletes set both Frisbee and TOTIWBEA (‘The Other Thing I Want to Be Excellent At’) goals for themselves on a fortnightly basis. Both of these goals are set in SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound) goal format. Along with the coach, we help athletes set and monitor these goals and track progress every fortnight. This exercise lets the players experience that they have the power to achieve their dreams by working towards them.

Community outreach activities:

- We run weekly frisbee sessions at Udavi School for the children of New Colors, an after-school program in Edayananchavady village for under-privileged children. For the first few weeks, the sessions were led by our coach, Abhinav, while select players from our team learnt the basics of coaching under his tutelage. Thereafter, the sessions were led by two of our athletes (one studying 10th standard!). These sessions are much looked forward to by the kids of New Colors and by their new coaches. These sessions involve small games played with a flying disc that not only provide physical activity to burn off their excess energy, but also teach important values such as sportsmanship, gender equity and mutual respect.

- During the month of September, we ran a four-week recreational league at Certitude field. The league was open to players of all ages, experience and skill levels. Participation was completely free. We had 58 participants in all, including athletes from Blue Rays Ultimate Frisbee and Spinergy Ultimate Frisbee teams, adults and kids from the Auroville bioregion.

- On 23rd September we organized an open training session where every member of the team could bring family and friends to join the practice and receive a free introduction to the sport.

- In the run-up to our athletes participating in the national tournament in Chennai, we organized a few training sessions at Quiet Beach, Auroville. When we found that the beach was trashed, we mobilized an impromptu clean-up drive on 24th September and cleared part of the beach (in and around our playing field) of all the litter.

External coaching activity:

- We have partnered with Subbu’s Cricket Academy based in Palmyra Cricket Ground to use Ultimate Frisbee as a cross-training fitness activity for fifty cricket players. These intense physical training sessions consist of lots of running and catching drills. Our sessions on Saturday and Sunday mornings have had a positive response from players of all ages and levels as they now have a tremendous amount of fun whilst getting their physical training done. This is a niche coaching opportunity in which we hope to build expertise. Sessions are led by Abhinav and are attended by 4-6 of our athletes who play the role of assistant coaches.

Home visits:

- Our coach has met the parents/guardians/families of eight of our athletes to appreciate and understand their backgrounds. These visits also proved to be crucial in removing
some of the parental anxiety and giving comfort to the parents that their sons and daughters were being looked after. These home visits are usually planned based on the availability of our coach and the families, and hence expected to be spaced out over the duration of the project.

Reflections:

• We feel that athletes have been responding well to our program. We come to this conclusion not only from observing the change in their attitude to hard work, verbal and non-verbal communication, etc., but also from the direct feedback they have shared with us during our informal discussions.

• It takes a lot of effort on our part to meet with parents/families and get their buy-in for our program, but we recognize the importance of doing it. We feel that there is an overwhelming emphasis on perfectionism and achievement culture, and it seems common for parents to demand ‘greatness’ out of their children, rather than raising them with the goal of just being good people. Understanding the faults in achievement culture can help parents and teachers better understand the pressures today's young people face.

• Our challenges include recruiting and retaining women. We have had many young women from the bioregion, especially those studying in neighboring schools, come to our training but we have had difficulty in retaining the majority of them. As per our understanding, they have trouble with transport (especially getting back home post-training), obtaining parental consent to play a mixed-gender sport, etc.

• Our young athletes need to be taught to look after themselves as athletes. Our athletes, especially ones that have previously pursued an alternate sport, rather surprisingly, seem to find it hard to treat themselves as athletes and to put their long term well-being in front of their eagerness to play. For e.g. there seems to be no concept of a warm-up, cool down or rest (recovery) or refraining from playing when injured or when in pain, etc. Even understanding of basic concepts such as hydration is often lacking. We are working on these things together.

Q3 report (October – December 2017):

In this quarter, we organized the following activities in the interests of athlete development:

On-field:

• Blue Rays Ultimate Frisbee on-field training sessions were increased from 3 to 4 sessions per week based on requests received from athletes. Trainings are held 5:00 PM to 6:30 PM on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays and 8:30 AM to 10:00 AM on Sunday mornings. As always we use our on-field sessions to work on technical skills, build up athleticism and refine mental skills.

• In October 2017, two guest coaches (Jagan and Ganesh) from a Chennai team were invited to coach the team for three sessions. These coaches shared the technical nuances of playing the sport at a high level and also told their own inspiring stories: from being children of fisher-folk to having travelled around the world to play at the World Championships. The players benefitted from the hands-on sessions as they enthusiastically interacted with the coaches.

• In October 2017, the team participated in a small tournament organized in Auroville. The experience was crucial in highlighting our strengths and weaknesses, as playing against different styles and levels of opposition let us benchmark our abilities. The experience also helped us ‘grow’ as a team, as we were put under pressure and had to work together. We also shot video footage from the tournament for analysis and learning. We concluded the tournament with a team circle where we shared learning and good
memories.

• Two guest coaches (Balaji and Sangeetha) have been invited to run a one-day training camp on December 24th.

Off-field:

• This quarter we had two off-field (indoor) sessions. In these sessions, we reviewed and learnt from video footage. We also revisited our recruitment strategy and brainstormed ideas to get more women to train with us.

• Twenty of our athletes pursue both the Frisbee and TOTIWBEA (‘The Other Thing I Want to Be Excellent At’) goals on a fortnightly basis. They set goals in SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound) format. The managers and coach help athletes set and monitor these goals and track progress every fortnight.

Community outreach activities:

• We continued to run our weekly sessions at Udavi School for New Colours (an after-school program in Edayanchavady Village for under-privileged children). These sessions involve small games played with a flying disc that not only provide physical activity to burn off their excess energy, but also teach important values such as sportsmanship, gender equity and mutual respect.

External coaching activity:

• We continued leading sessions in partnership with Subbu’s Cricket Academy which use Ultimate Frisbee as a cross-training fitness activity for fifty cricket players. Sessions are led by Abhinav and are attended by four to six of our athletes who play the role of assistant coaches.

Meetings with parents:

• Meetings with parents are now happening on a need basis when parents want to talk about their children or when they have concerns or questions.

Reflections and challenges:

• Many of the athletes’ parents are extremely supportive and appreciate the value of playing team sports. They always stop to have conversations with our coach when they happen to meet.

• It has been challenging to work with parents who want to control their children’s sporting choices. For example one of the parents told their son that he should focus on his archery (an individual sport) and spend less time pursuing Ultimate (a team sport) so he can win medals.

• Many of the parents seem to believe that playing a sport 3 hours a week during exams is detrimental to their son’s/daughter’s grades. Hence we have had requests to excuse athletes from sessions during exam week. We do not agree with this belief, and there is good amount of scientific research that proves that just the opposite is true. However, we have abided by their request and canceled sessions during exams.

• Even though these young men and women play a sport several hours a week, it seems they do not know how to take care of their bodies. This is in spite of playing outdoor sports from a very young age and working with multiple coaches. It has been challenging to educate these young athletes how to take care of themselves on what one would consider to be common sense: hydration, nutrition, sleep, stretching, exercise form, etc.

Q4 report (January – March 2018):

In this quarter, we organized the following activities in the interests of athlete development:
**On-field:** Blue Rays Ultimate Frisbee on-field training sessions were increased from 3 to 4 sessions per week based on requests received from athletes. Trainings are held 5.00 PM to 6.30 PM on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays and 8.30 AM to 10.00 AM on Sunday mornings. As in the past, we used our on-field sessions to work on technical skills, build up athleticism and refine mental skills.

**Off-field:** We organized indoor off-field sessions in which we discussed internal issues, resolved conflicts and revisited our goals. We also used the indoor sessions to watch, analyse and review videos.

**Special training/team sessions:**
- **Weekly beach sessions** – The players were encouraged to organize their own training (without the presence of the coach) so they could have a session where they just played. The players now go play/train at the beach by themselves, once a week.
- **Logo and disc design** – The players in the team were encouraged to design a logo for themselves. Initially, the players tended to copy logos that were already around but soon started drawing their own images. We picked the best and put them to a democratic vote in our group. We eventually picked the one logo that received maximum votes and used that for our disc design.
- **We organized team dinners where we could meet and get to know each other better.** The players appreciated the opportunity to spend time together in a non-frisbee setting as it let us come closer together as a group.
- **Auroville Hat Tournament, February 2018** – 20 players from Blue Rays Ultimate participated in Auroville Hat Tournament 2018. At this tournament, they were slotted into different teams, alongside players of varying skill levels – some more experienced (for example with national team experience) and others with lesser experience. The overall feedback received from different teams and players was very positive. There were several players from Blue Rays who received praise for their work ethic on the field and their positive attitude and not just for their athleticism.
- **We slowed down in the run-up to Board exams, reducing the number of training sessions and eventually not having any during exams.** At the request of the athletes, we suspended off-field goal setting for this quarter.
- **Recruiting more athletes** – At our most recent training session we had a turnout of more than 20 players, including 5 women! This is attributable to the goal that the team set earlier in terms of recruiting more members to join the team. Many players in the team, spent time planning and putting in place the mechanism to make this a reality.
- **March training session with Coach Balaji from Chennai** – This training session focused on playing defense: positioning, footwork, mental make-up and playing intense but legal defense without fouling an opponent.
- **March training session attended by Suneel Shanker from Chennai** – Suneel is a rower and fitness enthusiast who recently started playing Ultimate with the Chennai community. We invited him to be a part of our training session as he had evinced interest in watching and learning from our coach. His participation had a positive effect on the players and that was reflected in a high-quality training session.
- **March** – Two of the young athletes, who had evinced interest in learning coaching, were taken on Sundays to Boodheri, to coach at EcoPro’s project – Sanitation Education in Boodheri. There they ran sessions over several Sundays, for the local village kids.
- **April** – two of our players went on a short holiday to the nearby town of Neyveli, where they coached local kids, who were attracted to them throwing a Frisbee. What started out with them just throwing in a nearby field, turned into 3 sessions coaching a group of 6 kids over 2
days!

- April – We had coach Siva Raman from Chennai come in to work with the team. The team was excited to meet the athlete often spoken about as India’s best player. Three more guest coaches from Chennai joined in on Sunday and we focused on basic offense skills such as throwing and catching to more advanced plays. The guest coach also ran an indoor session in which he pointed out nuances using video footage of elite athletes.

- April – We picked 4 players from Blue Rays to travel to Kodaikanal and have a 3 day ‘camp’ by being part of different teams. The goal was to give them the exposure of being part of a competitive team, watch, analyze and learn from competitive matches, and spending time with national team athletes. Each of the four players, were asked to submit a written summary of their learning from the weekend.

Community outreach activities:

- Our weekly sessions at Udavi School for children of New Colors (an after-school program in Edayanchavady Village for underprivileged children) will restart after the summer holidays.

- External coaching activity: We have partnered with Subbu’s Cricket Academy based in Palmyra Cricket Ground to use Ultimate Frisbee as a cross-training fitness activity for fifty cricket players. Sessions are twice a week and are led by coach Abhinav and are attended by four to six of our athletes who play the role of assistant coaches.

- Meeting with Parents: Meetings with parents are now happening on a need basis when parents want to talk about their athletes or when they have any concerns or questions.

Outcomes:

All the athletes who train with us have not just picked up some sport-specific skills but also skills transferable to other sports and to other facets of their lives off the field.

Examples of these skills transferable to other sports include: how to warm up and get prepared to play, how to cool down and stretch for optimum recovery, nutrition, hydration, using mental imagery (visualization), how to give and receive physical contact, footwork – for example how to turn, how to come to a stop from a sprint, running form, etc.

Examples of skills transferable off the field: sportsmanship and fair play, goal-setting and diligent hard work in pursuit of the goals, conflict resolution, communication, empathy for the other gender, mental toughness, self-reflection, etc.

Reflections:

- Having a leadership group works much better than having just one leader, especially in a setup where individuals are volunteering their time and have other responsibilities during the day.

- Compensating the guest coaches (even if it is a small token) has meant that we were able to attract the kind of coaches that we needed: high quality coaches who spent time dedicatedly preparing for training sessions.

- Bringing in women coaches has worked well for us. The male athletes get to watch the level at which their own teammates (who are women) can play at if given the opportunities. This has led to them being supportive and respectful of the women.

- There is immense desire from the side of the athletes to participate and go to tournaments. We feel that this is a natural process that this group needs to go through to make progress: playing against better-quality opposition and then reflecting on areas of improvement.

Conclusion:

We are grateful for the support that we have received and for the opportunity to run this
program. We intend to continue running this program going forward, regardless of financial support received.

One key area for the administrators of the team to work on will be to send this group to compete at tournaments. Being in these stressful situations (tournaments) helps the team grow its on-field skills, and brings the group together as they come out on the other side. At tournaments, players have to work together as a unit on the field but more importantly off the field – to ensure they handle meals, logistics accommodation etc. (Auroville has only one other Ultimate team, which is not enough variety and quality in terms of opposition to consistently challenge the team.)