

Put me in, coach: Centerfield is ready to play

Written by Karen Mracek, Arizona Daily Star
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Ricky Scruggs, owner of Centerfield Baseball Academy, teaches hitting and pitching. But he also teaches teamwork and integrity. Consultant Steve Marr offers him tips on how to market both types of services.

Profile

- The business: Centerfield Baseball Academy, 1861 W. Grant Road, 440-HITS (4487), www.centerfieldbaseball.com
- The owner: Ricky Scruggs
- The services: Indoor batting cages and player development center

The Story

Scruggs wants to teach kids about baseball and how to be the best players they can be. But for Scruggs, who has three children, being the best player he can be on the field means being the best person he can be off the field. "I want my daughters to have more good husbands to choose from," he said.

His drive for excellence on and off the diamond resonates with young baseball players during individual and group coaching and hitting clinics, and pitching lessons.

The mission statement for the business includes the acronym HITS: honor, integrity, teamwork and service. "My goal is to create leaders in Tucson and help them to be better all-around people," he said.

In December, Scruggs opened an 18,000-square-foot indoor training academy for baseball and softball fanatics.

Here, future major-leaguers can hit against an Iron Mike pitching machine or in a Fenway batting cage - which is four times the size of a regular batting cage. Batting cages are open to the public and attract people of all ages, but kids ages 10 to 14 make up the academy's target audience, Scruggs said. The center also offers strength and conditioning classes for older players.

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Another important component of the academy is goal-setting classes, something Scruggs believes is a key to achieving success.

"If I can do this," he said, waving at the complex, "anyone can do what they want to do." Scruggs, from Farmington, N.M., has lived in the Tucson for the past seven years. He was a first-team All Big West selection for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, before playing minor-league baseball for three years.

"I miss the camaraderie," he said. "That's the kind of thing that I am trying to teach kids."

Scruggs hopes to add another full-time employee to his three-member staff.

He's looking for someone who can uphold the ideals he has for the company. "I want to make sure that everyone gets the same level of service that they would get from me one-on-one," he said.

Scruggs wants to focus more of his time on his passion - teaching kids about baseball - instead of on the business part of Centerfield Baseball Academy. "One of the downsides of owning your own business is keeping the books straight," he said. So far, Scruggs has relied on word-of-mouth to promote his business. He wants to make the academy grow, but he needed some help in defining the best way to market it.

The advice

The business is on target with the original plan, but more is needed for long-term growth, said business consultant Steve Marr. "With a limited marketing budget, coaches in Little League through high school should be specifically targeted," Marr said.

He suggests Scruggs offer free coaching clinics with the idea of obtaining referrals. The academy has three competitive advantages that should be stressed to prospective customers.

First, the indoor setup allows for practice and coaching regardless of rain or summer heat. Specialized equipment also sets the academy apart. The Fenway batting cage is four times the size of a regular cage, letting the hitter see where hits would land.

The pitching machines are placed at regulation distance and on a 10-inch platform, to simulate the angle of a pitcher's release. This adds to the realism, Marr said.

The academy also offers extensive coaching experience. Scruggs played professionally, and employee Jim Murphy was a coach with the Texas Rangers and an Olympic team, and has a master's degree in coaching science.

Each client is evaluated, and goals are set for improvement- throwing, hitting, catching and running skills are taught, Marr said. "This should be marketed more," he said. Also worth marketing is the academy's radar gun, which tracks improvement in running, batting and throwing speed. "The academy's focus on teaching values sets it apart," Marr said. "The mental game is a big part of their program."

Self-esteem is built by setting goals and building confidence. Students also talk about how to handle adversity. "All of these are selling points to customers," Marr said. "The character-building aspect should be stressed in marketing."

Marr also suggests collecting information from the 500 customers who use the academy each month - including names and contact information, especially e-mail addresses. After a database is developed, an e-mail newsletter could be sent to customers one to four times a month, Marr suggests. As the mailing list grows, special offers could become a regular e-mail feature. "This would minimize workload and cost, and maximize effectiveness," Marr said. Revenue is now equally divided between use of the batting cages and individual instruction.

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"Cross-selling can be developed by marketing private instruction to those using the facility only for practice, while encouraging those already in private instruction to return for practice sessions," Marr said. "This, naturally, would increase income."

Steve Marr, Your Christian Business Coach

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