

# Finding Fun

*Using creative scoring systems to motivate campers*

*We love ties for cabin of the week. This means more memories for more campers.*



by James Rock

I was on my second day as an official program guy in 1993 when the director brought me into his office to offer me some advice. One topic he addressed that I will never forget was scoring.

“Don’t use 100s of points; use 10,000s of points,” the director said. “The more points you give out, the more impressive and grandiose the scores will be, and, in turn, the more motivated campers will be. They want to see big numbers next to their team names!”

He was right. Big numbers worked

like a charm back then. Today, however, big-number scoring has lost its appeal because the percentage of competitive campers has decreased, and because of the prevalence of video games.

More than a decade ago, campers played Mario Brothers on their Nintendos, spending hours trying to get a high score. Each time they lost, they had to start over at level one.

Back then, 80 percent of campers desperately wanted to win cabin of the week. Even if a cabin was behind, the kids did their best to win that last game Friday night—just because they were the cabin of Birch, and they knew Birch was the greatest cabin ever.

Today, young people play Star Wars Episode III on their Xboxes. As they complete each level, they save the game so if they lose they can go back to their most recent save and start again. They’re never really out of the running.

In a cabin, maybe 50 percent of the campers are competitive, depending on whether they like the game. And if they are out of the points race on Wednesday, they figure they might as well give up because there is no way they can win anyway.

I might be exaggerating a bit, but it’s clear that our campers have different expectations today about points and winning. We need to update our big numbers systems.

This requires creativity and out-of-the-Xbox thinking. We need to find ways to make the scoring interesting,



Index Open

going beyond numbers, while keeping the scoring as close as possible. We need to create the illusion that every cabin is still “in the running,” even if they are not.

So what do we do?

- ▶ **Have fun:** Repeat this phrase: “I don’t care who wins!” Campers having fun is more important than which cabin actually wins. Don’t worry about what’s fair or ethical in the world of sports.
- ▶ **Use creativity:** Show campers scores using physical means; try not to use numbers. Fill jars with water or treasure chests with sand, display PowerPoint graphs, or even make an eight-foot tall chutes and ladders-style game board.
- ▶ **Create mystery:** Never show your counselors the real numbers. Any scoring system will have some form of numbers as a basis, but don’t reveal these formulas or actual numbers.
- ▶ **Make it close:** Shrink the gap between first and last place. It’s not fair, but if first place gets 10 ounces of water, the last places should get no less than 6 or 7. And keep the scoring tight at all costs. We love ties for cabin of the week. This means more memories for more campers.
- ▶ **Display it:** Show off your system in a central part of camp. Give the campers an opportunity to debate which cabin appears to have the most water in its jar.

Points are no longer the great motivator. Creative games, fun scoring systems, and pumped-up staff are the motivation. Work the system and keep it interesting. Halfway through the week, find an excuse to reset the system if you have to. Whatever you do, lose the numbers and find the fun. ■

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