

Wisely Use That Window Unit

No central air conditioning? No problem! Your window or room air conditioner doesn't have to be an energy hog. Follow these energy tips when using your window unit, and say goodbye to higher bills.

Purchase an Energy Star model. Energy Star room air conditioners cost at least 10 percent less to operate than conventional models.

Use a timer. Set the plug-in timer to turn off the air conditioner when you leave home and to turn it on just before you return.

Purchase a unit with varying fan speeds. Use a room air conditioner with fan speed control. This allows faster cooling when needed and quieter, more efficient operation at other times.

Keep the unit centrally located. To allow better air circulation, install your room air conditioner in the window or area of the wall that is nearest to the middle of the space being cooled.

Seal the unit. Once a room air conditioner is in place, seal the space around it to prevent warm outside air from leaking in.

Don't set the thermostat at high initially. When you first turn on your room air conditioner, set the thermostat at normal or medium. Setting it any colder won't cool the room any faster.

Keep the unit out of the sun. Locate your room air conditioner on the shady side of your home. It will operate more efficiently in a cooler location.

Close the fresh-air vent. Make sure the fresh-air vent is closed when the room air conditioner is operating so you aren't cooling outside air. Open the vent when the outside air is cooler to let in fresh air.

Remove the unit at the end of the cooling season. Take your room air conditioner out of the window when the cooling season is over. If you must leave the unit in place, cover the outside of the unit with a weatherproof cover and fill any cracks around the unit with removable caulk.



May Is Electrical Safety Month

Folks who work with electricity are acutely aware of the need for safety at all times, but the general public may not have that same level of awareness. That is the impetus behind May being Electrical Safety Month.

Wood County Electric Cooperative urges you to be aware of the dangers of electricity and to use the greatest care and safety when working with or near electricity.

- ▶ When trimming trees or working on your home, we all need to know where the electric wires and equipment are and how we can work safely around them. Don't take unnecessary risks. If necessary, call a licensed contractor or electrician.

- ▶ Teach children to stay away from such electric facilities as substations, transmission towers and transformers.

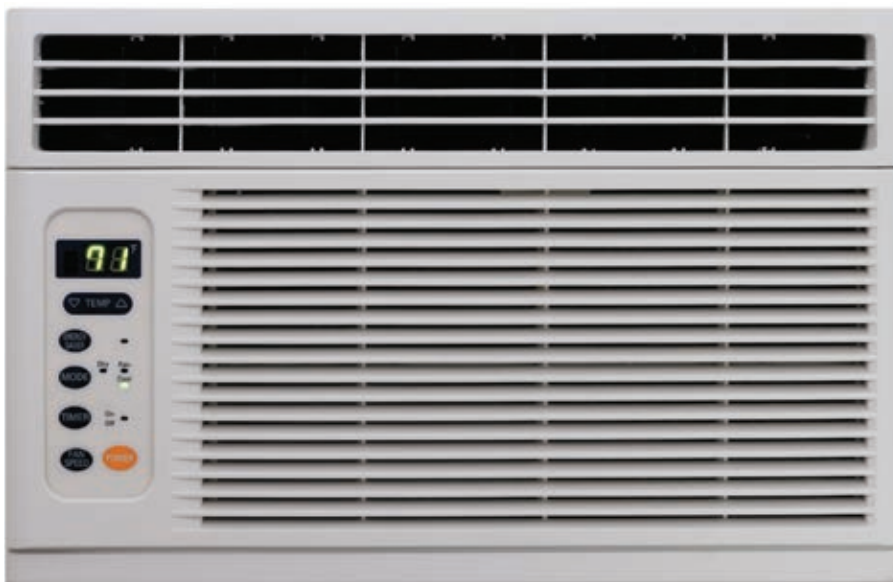
- ▶ Remember that electricity can move through conductive materials, i.e., water, metal, wood, aluminum, string and plastics.

- ▶ Put childproof covers on all outlets that children or pets can reach. Any outlets located outdoors, or in moisture-containing areas such as the kitchen, bathroom or garage, should have ground-fault circuit interrupters.

- ▶ Check extension cords for wear and tear and replace any that are cut or frayed. Use extension cords that are rated for the type of work you will be doing. (You can rub extension cords with a bar of soap to prevent pets from chewing on them.)

May is National Electrical Safety Month, but the focus on electrical safety should continue year-round.

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Buying an Energy Star window air conditioner will save you money on your energy bill each month.



Switch the direction of your ceiling fan with the change of the seasons to improve airflow.

Ways To Be More Energy Wise

Make sure all exhaust fans in your home are working properly and are dust-free. Regularly wash or replace filters. Consider installing a timer switch on your bathroom fan so that it runs only as long as it is required.

Make sure you change the direction of airflow on your ceiling fan. In the winter, let the fan run clockwise to push warm air toward the floor. In summer, switch the direction to draw air upward, cooling the room and ensuring constant airflow.

In preparing for the summer, consider investing in some insulated, thermal-backed drapes for your windows. They'll help keep your home cool in summer and warm in winter.

Before buying an air-conditioning unit or system, find out its energy-efficiency ratio. Calculate the EER by dividing the unit's cooling capacity (Btu/hour) by its energy requirement (watts). An EER of 10 or more is very good, and 6 or 7 is fair. Remember to buy the smallest capacity unit or system that will meet your needs.

Have you ever thought about installing an attic ventilator? An attic ventilating system draws cool air up through the house and can provide the same level of comfort as an air conditioner at a much lower cost. Pump in cool air during summer evenings then seal your home during the day. Attic ventilation can help lower winter heating bills, too.

Have a look at your foundation walls. If you have an unfinished basement or crawlspace, check for air leaks by looking for spiderwebs. If there's a web, there's a draft. A large amount of heat is also lost from an uninsulated basement.

Does your home have a sliding glass door? Make sure to keep its track clean. A dirty track can ruin the door's seal and create gaps where heat or cold air can escape.

When dust and pet hair build up on your refrigerator's condenser coils, the motor works harder and uses more electricity. As part of your cleaning routine, make sure the coils are cleaned and air can circulate freely.

Don't forget to check the seals on your refrigerator door to make sure they are clean and tight. Your refrigerator accounts for up to 11 percent of your household's total energy use, which can have a major effect on your energy bill.

If you're thinking about purchasing a new appliance, always look for the Energy Star label on new appliances. These products are more energy efficient and can help reduce your energy costs.



Wood County Electric Cooperative

501 S. Main St. • P.O. Box 1827
Quitman, TX 75783

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Contact Us

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(903) 763-2203

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Sharon and Gary Fain, standing, and their son Bryan work year-round to provide wonderful opportunities for the Challenger League members.

Out in RIGHT Field

On a field of green in East Texas, the rules are loose and free. It's not the "majors," but the Challenger League is as American as baseball gets. It's about a bunch of folks coming together to enjoy athletic events in a supportive and fun environment. Van Zandt County resident Johnny Freelen established the league in 1994 in support of his special-needs grandson, Dustin. The current organizers, Sharon and Gary Fain and their son Bryan, along with Lisa Stephens, stepped into the organizer role in 2008 when the league's beloved founder passed away.

As designed by Freelen, the league was meant as an outlet and growth opportunity for Dustin and others like him. He wanted them to experience the thrill of baseball, as well as other sports—but especially baseball. In the end, the league has become an activity group for the region's physically and mentally handicapped. It's open to children as young as 3 and adults into their 60s. And in keeping with Freelen's dream, there's never a cost to participate.

Since Freelen founded it, the Challenger League has become an established extracurricular activity focused on helping the players be an active part of a community that emphasizes abilities and not limitations. In 1997, Sharon and Gary happened to see an advertisement in the newspaper about the league. They were relatively new to the area, having

moved from Dayton to Canton with their three boys, Benjamin, Baylor and Bryan, for Gary's coaching job and a teaching job for Sharon. Upon learning about Challenger League, the Fains felt it would be a great activity for then-9-year-old Bryan. So they signed him up. He played that year and has been actively involved ever since.

Consequently, the Fains have taken on increasingly active roles with the league. Gary, with his coaching expertise, oversees the ball games, works with the equipment and takes pictures, and over the years, Sharon has worked in the dugout and in any other area needed. When Freelen died, the league had become such an integral and important part of their lives that the Fains stepped in to help keep it going.

For baseball season to start in May, the first thing that has to happen is readying the equipment. Over the past several years, that job has been assumed by Bryan, the de facto equipment manager, and is overseen by Gary. The equipment is stored in the Fains' garage. Almost as soon as Christmas is over, Sharon says, Bryan is raring to ready everything so that the baseball season can begin. Then, as spring moves in, the Youth League in Grand Saline preps the field. "All I do is send out a letter," Sharon said of her organizer role. "When you say it is baseball time, then everybody just does their job. It is pretty amazing how it all comes together. Everybody just starts



Garret Thorn



Kelly Sims



Carlos Plata

working, and we meet in May.”

“Everybody” includes a host of people and organizations that step forward when the time comes. From the beginning, the Grand Saline Masonic Lodge No. 1269, of which Freelen was a member, has been a cornerstone of the program. The lodge not only helps support the league financially, but also volunteer Masons attend every game to help with pitching, catching, coaching or whatever else is needed on game days. The Van Zandt County Detention Center’s Juvenile Probation Program also takes on an active role, organizing youth probationers who are assigned community service to act as one-on-one buddies. The main job of these teens is to be on the field and help keep

the players safe, but also to keep them focused. Happily, this volunteerism has a way of benefiting the teens as much as the players. Some other invaluable supporters are East Texas Cable, Legend Trailers and even “Dan, the Coke Man,” Dan Howard, who volunteers with the Masons and also spends his own money ensuring each player has a cold soft drink waiting after every game. This year, the Salt Shakers Auto Club of Grand Saline is also holding a fundraiser to benefit the league.

The league’s first bat crack takes place on the first weekend of May annually, and every weekend after for a total of five weeks. What’s so special about these games, scheduled from 9:30 to 11 a.m., and from 11 a.m. until 12:30 p.m., is that the

players interact with the volunteers and each other. An overarching goal is for parents and caretakers to be able to sit in the stands and enjoy watching the games. In addition to lots of fun and games for five weekends, every player gets a baseball cap and a T-shirt. Each player also receives a trophy presented at a celebratory end-of-the-season party. All of the aforementioned volunteer groups help with the party.

Somewhere along the way, Freelen's "Field of Dreams" has also morphed into a court and an alley. Now, when the gloves and bats have been stowed, the league hosts other activities so that the period between fun times with friends is not so long. On four weekends in February, players fill the basketball court in the Canton Elementary School gymnasium. Another cadre of volunteers, including the National Honor Society from Canton High School and Boy Scouts from Troop 378, act as the one-on-one buddies to help with shooting and dribbling and passing. Gary said of the volunteers, "I tell them they are the players' own personal cheerleaders." The basketball season, like baseball, culminates in an awards ceremony and a pizza party, where they are joined by the East Texas Stampede Rodeo Drill Team, whose members assist with the party setup and help serve pizza.

As money and time permit, the league also hosts bowling get-togethers, which happen about every six weeks at Gateway Lanes in Mineola.

Sharon says anyone of any age and functional limitation is welcome to join the league. There are members who have been with the program since its inception, starting as young children and teens and now they are in their late 20s and even early 30s. The players have different and wide-ranging diagnoses or disabilities, and absolutely none of that matters in the Challenger League. "They get out and have an activity just for them," Sharon said. They enjoy it, and they look forward to it. Afterward, some of the athletes will even wear their medals every day."

The activities, along with those T-shirts, hats, trophies, parties and medals, can get expensive. "The program is at the mercy of whoever wants to give," said Sharon, who emphasized that "nobody joining the league has to pay for anything."

Beyond that, Sharon and Gary don't have much more to say about themselves and their own devotion of countless hours. Gary very humbly and quietly said, "We are doers and not talkers." And, Sharon summed it up: "It is very rewarding. A huge blessing."





Lacey Williams



Justin Smith

The league, and the members it serves, grows every year. And so, too, do the bills. There are now “Challengers” from Winnsboro, Mineola, Wills Point, Ben Wheeler, Grand Saline, Canton, Mabank and even Mesquite, and all points in between.

When Johnny Freelen established the Challenger League, he used Psalm 118:24 as a guiding principle: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Each time the bat swings, the ball is dunked or a pin is knocked down, you can bet that a “Challenger” is rejoicing in time well spent with good friends. There are little moments of glory. There are snatches of heaven on earth. That is the league that Johnny Freelen built, and the multitudes have come to sustain. And they are glad.

To help the league continue to serve and prosper, all donations of time, materials and money are gratefully accepted. Checks can be made payable to Challenger League, 1102 Big Rock, Canton, TX 75103. Sharon and Gary Fain can be reached at (903) 567-6630. Co-organizer Lisa Stephens also puts information on the league’s Facebook page, which can be found by searching for “Challenger League.”



Energy Star appliances are exempt from sales taxes on Memorial Day weekend.

Tax Holiday

If you’ve had your eye on an energy-efficient appliance, Memorial Day weekend might be the time to buy. That weekend, shoppers in Texas will not pay sales tax on certain Energy Star-rated appliances.

The tax holiday, created by the Legislature in 2007, runs from May 24-26 this year.

Items exempt from taxes that weekend include any of these products that are Energy Star-rated:

- ▶ Air conditioners priced at \$6,000 or less
- ▶ Ceiling fans
- ▶ Clothes washers
- ▶ Dehumidifiers
- ▶ Dishwashers
- ▶ Incandescent and fluorescent lightbulbs
- ▶ Programmable thermostats
- ▶ Refrigerators priced at \$2,000 or less

Clothes dryers are not rated by Energy Star and are not included. Water heaters are also excluded, even those rated by Energy Star.

The holiday covers Internet, catalog and layaway sales of qualifying products as well. In addition to the purchase price, the tax holiday extends to shipping, delivery and installation charges if the purchased item becomes a permanent part of a home, such as a ceiling fan or a plumbed-in dishwasher.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHALLENGER LEAGUE