

NRPA *in Action*

Fifty States, Thousands of Possibilities

After a year full of designations, local events and national attention, NRPA and *Sports Illustrated* celebrated the grand finale of Sportstown USA at the last state announcement in Oregon on July 17. For the 50 winners, the Sportstown designation brought with it not only exposure in both *Sports Illustrated* and *Parks & Recreation* magazines and a commemorative street sign, but bragging rights as number one in the state. From California to Maine, communities are using their designation to promote tourism, further economic development, and raise awareness for parks and recreation.

Kicking off in Rhode Island in July 2003, Sportstown USA snaked its way across the country announcing communities and spurring local events ranging from presentations in city council chambers to community-wide celebrations specifically designed to rally around the national designation. Creativity abounded with presentation events at half-time of a Pennsylvania State University football game, the start of the Iditarod and a pre-season Major League Baseball game. NRPA trustees, staff and state association leadership represented NRPA at all but two of these events, and *Sports Illustrated* staff traveled the entire United States to attend all celebrations. Overall attendance exceeded expectations with more than 40 mayors, 21 city managers, 164 city council members, 46 state legislators, five Federal legislators, five governors (or representatives), 117 professional athletes, 33 Olympians, 169 celebrities (local and national), more than 870 community organizations, and more than 228,000 citizens—all there to support parks and recreation. If that's not enough,

Sports Illustrated also provided public relations efforts behind each event and garnered unbelievable public visibility for parks and recreation both locally and nationally.

With more than 250 applicants vying for the designation of Sportstown USA, the 50 chosen communities have more than the designation to be proud of—they are communities that foster their youth, cherish their elderly, understand the benefits of healthy lifestyles and physical activity, and the importance of play. They know about planning and community devel-

opment as well as facility management and education. These are model cities that can improve their entire community, county and state by the standards they set.

Sportstown USA may have been an event to celebrate 50 years of sports for *Sports Illustrated*, but it turned out to be more than that—it invoked pride in grassroots sports and participation, and the true spirit that is parks and recreation. To review the entire list of state designations, log on to www.nrpa.org and click on Sportstown USA 50th. —written by Jennifer Hoyer



Recreation In Rockford

Illinois town may be last Sportstown, but definitely not least.

In the movie *A League of Their Own*, the women's professional baseball team, the Rockford Peaches, win the World Series. Although the Peaches aren't a part of Rockford anymore, other minor league teams like the Ice Hogs, Rockford Lightning and Rockford Riverhawks are present-day winners in this town's eyes.

Called the "amateur sports capital" of the Midwest, Rockford has earned a national reputation for providing quality sports facilities and programming. The Rockford Park District has earned the National Gold Medal for Excellence twice (1989, 1995), and is responsible for pumping an estimated \$14.8 million of visitor revenue into the economy. Karen Weis, senior manager of marketing and community relations for Rockford says, "It's the facilities that we offer and the number of tournaments. We can fill up hotels in a 30-minute radius—that has tremendous economic impact for gas stations, stores and local businesses all brought in through recreation."

The town boasts 30 different recreational facilities, including a BMX track, a target practice pistol range, an 18-hole disc golf course, dogparks, as well as the traditional sports complexes and community parks. Several new facilities, such as the BMX track, have been born from Rockford residents' own ideas. The track, now considered by professionals to be one of the top 10 BMX race tracks in the nation, came about because one couple volunteered to make it. "They had a deaf son who was interested in it, and said they'd run it if they could have a location to build it," Weis says. Now, every weekend the track hums with people from all across the country, while the local couple is still running the track. In addition to extreme athletes taking to the



track, Rockford has found that many residents are enjoying more traditional recreation at the city's indoor sports center. After only one full year of operation, the center is brimming with activity, from wheelchair basketball, to soccer to tennis.

"We have a tremendous therapeutic recreation program thriving," says Weis, who also adds that more leagues are forming every day.

The parks and recreation department is also testing some niche markets to see how popular they'll be in the winter months, such as dodgeball and badminton. Weis says that the hockey program for juniors, led by a passionate staff, is also thriving, with boys and girls lining up to join a team. In the next five years, the district plans to add six skateparks, an Olympic ice rink and several sand volleyball courts, just to name a few. Rockford also offers more than 700 different recreational programs and special events throughout the year.

The most popular programming and facilities may be the town's 25 golf courses. More than 500,000 people play golf per year. The National Golf Foundation (NGF) was "astounded" in 1988 when it was asked to undertake a feasibility study for building a fifth public golf course for the Park District. Nowhere else in the United States did so many people play so much golf in such a traditionally "blue collar" town. NGF estimated there were close to 100,000 unused rounds in the community because people could not get on the golf courses to play due to capacity.

In addition, Rockford received first place rankings in *Golf Digest's* Places to Play in 1998, 1999 and 2000, and also earned top ratings in 1998 when *Golf Digest* ranked Rockford as the best mid-sized city for golf, and 12th overall among 309 qualifying cities surveyed in the United States based on quality of courses, holes per capita, and affordable golf fees.

The sport isn't just for adults either—in 2001, Rockford was chosen to host a Tiger Woods Junior Golf clinic. The popularity of the sport continues to grow with kids and teens in the region, with only 200 youth players 20 years ago, to now more than 4,000 today.

But the Rockford Park District couldn't provide nearly all of this if it wasn't for important partnerships it has formed over the past few years. One of those is with the neighboring school districts. In addition to sharing buildings, facilities, equipment and maintenance duties, the two entities also share users. The schools permit the Rockford Park District to use its distribution lists to families, who can then benefit from park programs offered. The park and recreation department also became involved in the Youth Recreation Council, which is made up of students from local schools who make decisions on recreation in parks and in the community.

Weis says, "We think that the Sportstown honor that was bestowed upon us, really affirmed to us what we already knew—that Rockford is a great place to live, work and play."