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NSA kicks off with parade

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VALPARAISO — The Center Grove Crush 10U girls softball team from Greenwood, Ind., hit Central Park Plaza Monday and spotted the park's most obvious feature.

"Water! Water!" the girls cheered as they headed into the splash pad to cool off in the heavy heat.

The team is one of about 250 from across the country participating in the National Softball Association's 2012 Girls Fast Pitch "B" World Series, which had its kick-off parade and opening ceremonies Monday evening in downtown Valparaiso.

Team coach Tom John Belden, one of the estimated 7,500 people in the region for the tournament, which has games in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties through Saturday, said some of his team is staying in Hebron, and the rest are camping at Indiana Dunes State Park.

"It's nice. It's our first time up here," he said.

Visitors came from near and far for the opening ceremonies, which followed a day of fun competitions and festivities at Old Fairgrounds Park. It's the one day much of the crowd would be concentrated in one spot.

The region hosted the tournament in 2007 and in 2009, when Crown Point held the opening ceremonies. The tournament, brought in by the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority, will return to the area in two years.

"I see quite a lot of smiles and I hear lots of cash registers ringing," said Speros Batistatos, president and chief executive officer for the SSCVA, as he walked along Lincolnway, which was jammed with visitors.

Many of the folks visiting the area for the first time planned to see the dunes but left the rest of their schedules open, depending on how their teams do in the tournament.

"We're probably going up to the lake. We've heard it's pretty nice. Other than that, it's softball and softball, and hopefully, more softball," said Jim Sewester of St. Louis, whose daughter is on a 14U team.

David Anderson of Indianapolis sported blue hair for the parade. His daughter is playing on the 10U Indiana Diamond Batz team.

“Our team colors are black and blue. I said something and the next thing I know, I have 11 girls spraying on me,” he said, adding it was the family’s first trip to Northwest Indiana, and they hoped to hit the Porter County Museum and the dunes.

Dee Dee Horneman didn’t have to travel far for her daughter’s games. They live in Schererville; Raven, 13, is on a 14U team and has been playing ball since she was 5. Her first game is Tuesday at Hidden Lake in Merrillville.

“Despite the heat, this is a perfect place to have it because of the old-time feel,” she said of the parade and ceremonies downtown. “The businesses are accommodating and seem very prepared.”

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