

Games On

Organizers of State Games competitions battle through the worst of the economic downturn.

By Nicholas Brown

March 2010



STRATEGIC SLASHING

To keep the Bay State Summer Games afloat in Massachusetts, organizers have had to cut annual expenses of all kinds, including opening ceremonies.

April 3, 2009, was a gloomy day for the Empire State Games. It was then that the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, citing an unprecedented "financial crisis" of the state budget, officially pulled the plug on the 2009 Summer Games. That ended months of speculation as well as a continuous 30-year run of Olympics-style competition for youth athletes, the longest of its kind in the nation.

Considering some 30,000 athletes and their families, state employees, politicians, sponsors, host communities and venues were affected by the announcement, Empire State Games director Fred Smith says he heard every imaginable reaction. "It's been more than three decades that these Games have been a part of this state," says Smith. "Sometimes the feedback was nasty, sometimes it was reasonable, and sometimes it was just, 'What a shame.' But everybody seemed to be pretty vocal about what they thought we should have done differently, or what the state should have done differently."

Fact is, there wasn't much that could have been done. Since 1978, the state Legislature had fully funded an appropriation in the state parks budget designed to cover virtually all of the Games' operational expenses, which held steady in recent years at just over \$3 million. And it wasn't until last April that Smith and his staff discovered that the appropriation had been cut entirely. As Smith puts it, "We knew we were going to have to tighten our belts last year, but we didn't know we'd be losing our belts entirely — and our pants, too."

Belt-tightening has been a common theme among the 40 organizations currently operating State Games, according to Barclay Kruse, president of the National Congress of State Games, the nonprofit organization affiliated with the U.S. Olympic Committee that supports State Games organizers. But despite the economy and the blows it's been dealing to youth sports programs such as New York's, Kruse is one of many organizers throughout the country who remain upbeat. (For the record, the Empire State Games are back in full for 2010, with help from partially restored state funding and more aggressive sponsorship and fundraising plans.)

"I believe that as a group we are among the most creative and innovative organizers out there in programming our events," says Kruse, who also acts as director of Minnesota's Star of the North State Games. "In some ways, we're positioned pretty well to ride out a tough economy. At our national

symposium last fall, there was actually quite a bit of optimism. People were generally happy with the programs they ran and the numbers were pretty good."

The situation in New York was extreme, in large part because the Empire State Games have benefited from a funding model in which the state has covered the lion's share of operational costs. A small handful of other State Games organizations — the Bay State Games (Massachusetts) and the Keystone State Games (Pennsylvania) among them — receive some direct state funding, yet most get no financial help whatsoever from their respective Legislatures.



TIME TRIALS

The 2009 Empire State Games were canceled after New York officials announced a lack of funding mere months before the games were scheduled to begin.

"State funding may have been the model early on in the movement, but most states have long since moved away from it," explains Kruse. "Most State Games are now stand-alone nonprofit corporations that aren't at any risk of losing state money because they aren't receiving any." But, Kruse adds, "The economy is an entirely different animal," one he says has had a dramatic impact on State Games organizations.

Kruse contends the youth sports marketplace has become so crowded — regardless of the recession — that it has forced State Games organizers to refine their operations in recent years. "Our numbers in Minnesota last year were down a little bit, but I don't know how much that had to do with the economy," Kruse says. "I think you'll see this trend reflected nationally: Some of our biggest sports have suffered some fragmentation because of different programs popping up that have divided the market a lot. If you go back 12 years, we were by far the biggest summer basketball tournament in Minnesota. Then AAU took off, as did programs that were mimicking those models, and now there are probably seven or eight major basketball programs each summer. The pie is divided a lot more."

Still, Kruse did witness some direct negative effects of 2009's economic conditions on Minnesota's Summer Games, particularly in track-and-field participation. "Many of those kids come from inner-city clubs in Minneapolis and St. Paul, where there is an active bunch of people doing some great programming," he says. "Unfortunately, they didn't have enough money last year to rent the buses required to bring those kids to the meet, which was about 80 miles away. They just couldn't afford it."

Kruse maintains that such examples have, thankfully, been few and far between. In fact, he and other State Games organizers agree that the relative proximity of State Games competitions to their athletes is

what has helped many Games stay afloat, as other tournament organizers attempting to draw from a nationwide talent pool have suffered.

"I know a lot of states adopted marketing campaigns that said, 'Stay local. Play local,'" says Bay State Games director Kevin Cummings, who had to deal last year with the loss of approximately 35 percent of his organization's operating budget, including a \$400,000 cut in state funding through 2009 and 2010. "We tried to promote to people that we are offering opportunities locally that provide media exposure and exposure to college scouts. These are mantras we've been promoting for years, but I think they seemed to have hit home with people more this year than they have in the past."

Evidence that the "stay local" message reverberated among Bay Staters is that participation increased from 2008 to 2009 in 21 of the 25 Summer Games sports, in some instances dramatically. Cummings believes the numbers in Massachusetts and at other State Games last summer also suggest that youth sports are remaining a priority for discretionary spending among families. "People talk about how they need to focus on the essentials in this economy and cut back on the frivolous things," Cummings says. "It appears, based on what we're seeing, that kids' participation in sports is still making that top-tier list. People may just be more economical in making the decisions about where their kids compete."

State Games, as nonprofit entities, have also benefitted from the fact that they can maintain relatively affordable participation fees, something organizers have underscored in their marketing messages during the downturn. Most organizations even run some form of scholarship program for aspiring athletes who are economically disadvantaged.



INSIDE GAME

Restoring New Yorkers' faith in the financial security of the Empire State Games has been one of the organizers' biggest challenges.

In Minnesota, where Kruse says revenue is more heavily reliant on participation fees than it is on corporate sponsorships — a strategy that he believes creates a more stable revenue stream in the long term — fees remain comparable to or somewhat lower than those charged by competing youth sports tournament organizers. "There is no uniform strategy or national policy for fees in this economy. It's very much up to each individual state," Kruse says. "But my take is that State Games have, historically, been affordable. I know it's a competitive market, but we don't want cost to ever be the issue that makes or breaks the decision to participate."

The problem arises, however, when corporate sponsorships dwindle, a reality that virtually all State Games have faced over the past two years. "Corporate dollars are just so hard to go after in this type of

economy," says Cummings. "They're not rebounding, so far, so we're trying to be realistic in our approach. We're looking for any benefit. If there's not a cash contribution, any in-kind contribution that can get rid of a bottom-line expense is just as good for us."

In the meantime, organizers are finding ways to trim costs — from canceling opening ceremonies to not providing as many uniforms to discontinuing free T-shirt giveaways. "We knew we were going to have to cut back on a few things that made the Games special," Cummings says. "As we explored those decisions, we considered the questions, 'Does this diminish the athlete experience?' and 'Does it cause people to not want to be a part of our event?' We agonized for a long time over those."

For Cummings, that economy-induced agony provided two helpful revelations. First, "we learned that there's a big difference between what we as an organization thought was important to the athletes and what the athletes themselves considered to be important," he says. "When we cut our opening ceremonies, we thought, 'Uh-oh, this is the most important thing to people about the Games.' But we found out that it wasn't. You have to survey your participants and find out what the key elements are that make the Games important. Don't assume that you already know what they are."

Cummings' second revelation was that this type of economy breeds a certain compassion among everyone when cuts are required. "People understood our decisions, because the economy isn't just affecting us, it's affecting them," he says. "Everyone is feeling the pain. There was almost a sense of appreciation that we were going forward with the event at all."

Even though New York had to cancel its Summer Games last year, Smith notes that the Empire State Games moved forward with the Winter Games, Senior Games and Games for disabled populations. While Summer Games do tend to grab the most participants and the most media attention, organizers at Games throughout the country tend to credit a year-round diversity of program offerings with building a given Games' brand and positioning it for sustained success.



DEFENSIVE POSITIONING

Convincing state Legislatures of the positive economic impact created by State Games is an ongoing process in states such as New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.

"There's been a lot of energy invested in moving away from putting all our eggs in one basket — that one or two weeks during the summer," says Kruse. "People are inventing new tournaments and festivals, and creating other revenue sources that can help mitigate financial losses that may be happening in one area."

Citing programs that focus on non-sports issues such as childhood obesity, weight loss, tobacco use prevention, sportsmanship, youth leadership and sports medicine, among others, Cummings says State Games everywhere have "fought a battle for many years to try to not be known only as a sporting event."

"It's important for the state, as well as the grant suppliers and sponsors, that you be well-rounded," Cummings says. "Sure, the sporting events bring thousands of people to the table every year, but then we can interlay a program on sportsmanship or on youth fitness. That broadens your base and allows you to reach a much larger audience, both in terms of participants and supporters."

Especially in this economy — in which host venues, sponsors and politicians tend to be wary of financial commitments — public relations is indeed a big part of any State Games organizer's job. New York's Smith, for one, has stayed busy just convincing interested parties that the Empire State Summer Games are, indeed, a go this year.

"Because the Games were pulled out from under us so late last year, there is some trepidation out there," Smith says. "This is a very pivotal year for us. We have to announce that we're back and we're running a very good program, and we have to make sure that everybody up and down the line understands that — from the athletes and coaches to the sponsors to the host cities and even potential host cities. All of the programs are secure for this year, so now we're trying to build on that and make sure that future Games are secure."

And no matter how well positioned a State Games may be within the youth tournament marketplace, such security may be hard to come by for anybody in this economy. Smith, who's spent more than two decades helping run the Empire State Games, including 15 years as director, offers a broad perspective, despite the very real challenges facing him and his staff this year.

"People are reading the newspapers and they see that money may not be there for education, for health and human services, for basic transportation needs," Smith says. "As much as I personally love the Games, I do understand that there are more important things in the world. But, I believe we should always find a way to run a program that is not only near and dear to New Yorkers, but that is also providing a positive economic impact to local communities. We feel like we're a bargain, not a drain."



Hurricanes' run ends

By The Berkshire Eagle, Pittsfield, Mass.

Mar. 7--AMHERST -- Hoosac Valley was going to need to bring its "A" game to the Curry Hicks Cage Saturday afternoon. For all but nine minutes, the Hurricanes did just that.

But what a nine-minute stretch it was.

Top-seeded Sabis outscored Hoosac 21-0 in that nine minutes that spanned the first and second quarters. The Hurricanes, however, scored the final 11 points of the second quarter to make it a game.

They just couldn't get over the hump as last year's Western Massachusetts Division III champion beat last year's Division II champion 70-57 in the D-II final.

It was Robbie Burke's last game in a Hoosac uniform and the Colby-Sawyer-bound senior forward made it a memorable one. Burke scored 19 of his game-high 33 points in the second half and also pulled down a game-high 19 rebounds.

"It's been a magical run" the last two years, Burke said after the game. "It started with Dalton [Larabee], he passed it on to us to play with a lot of heart. That's what we do. We're not nearly as athletic as the team we played today and we hung with them -- because we're just hard-nosed players. It was a magical run, and I'm sorry it has to end."

Hoosac cut into Sabis' lead and got the margin down to three points three different times in the third quarter. Each time, the Bulldogs showed their mettle and answered.

"We're not into moral victories,"

Hoosac coach Bill Robinson said. "We've been at the top. We've been to the state title game. We just thought we had a chance to win this game. We're disappointed we didn't."

Late arrivals to the Cage had to wonder what game they stumbled in on. The teams traded shots early on and Hoosac led 8-7 when Burke made a pair of free throws. Those were Hoosac's last points until the 2:44 mark of the second quarter. The Hurricanes went 0 for 15 while the Bulldogs went on a scoring spree. And when Jahson Hollet caught a pass from Carlos Camacho and scored, it was 28-8 and the rout appeared on.

"We knew how good of a team Hoosac is and how good Robbie Burke is. We knew at that point we were going to have to continue to play hard and play well," Sabis coach Jim Mack said. "Hoosac is too good of a team and too talented to just lie down at that point."

Nick Bourdon missed a 3-point shot and Andrew Harmon scored on the rebound with 2:44 to play in the second quarter. Robinson said it wasn't that his team was playing badly, they just were missing shots.

That didn't continue.

In fact, the Hurricanes got on a roll, scoring the final 11 points of the quarter. Nick Aitken drained a trey with 30 seconds left and after a Sabis turnover, Burke went coast-to-coast for a layup that made it 28-19 at the break.

"That wasn't the way we wanted to come out," Hoosac's Zach Ziemba said. "We expected a lot closer game to start off. I think that's what definitely killed us in the long run."

"We cut it down to nine and we said we just have to keep on playing," Robinson said. "We just had to make some shots. Just play loose, just leave it on the floor, that's what we said."

And the Hurricanes do tend to listen to Robinson, because that's exactly what they did.

After trading points early in the third quarter, Hoosac went on an 8-0 run, cutting a 11-point lead to three. The 5-foot-8 Aitken blocked the shot of Sabis' 5-7 Xavier Garcia. Burke got the rebound and fed Aitken, who drained a 3-pointer. Then Burke rebounded a miss by Hollet, but Slayter Aubin was called for a charge on a drive to the hoop.

That turned out to be the story of the second half. Every time the Hurricanes got close, the Bulldogs answered.

King scored 16 of his team-high 26 points in the second half, 14 of them coming in the fourth quarter. He hit four 3-point shots in the final eight minutes, and each one was bigger than the next. Twice he answered 3-balls by the Hurricanes -- one from Burke and one from Aitken.

"I've played with Andre for a couple of years now and when he gets hot like that, there's nothing you can do," Burke said. "Garcia was hot too. Every time we cut the lead and we think we had it, Andre or Garcia would hit a three, and it just took the wind out of us. We didn't give up, and I'm proud of our guys for that."

Aitken was the other Hoosac player to score in double digits. He had 11 points. Three Bulldogs had double-figure scoring games.

Kamali Bey scored 16 and Hollett came off the bench to score nine of his 11 points in the second half.

"We played in the Bay State Games and in AAU, and I know [Burke] real well and I know he's a fantastic player," said King. "I know he doesn't have as much help. I guess me and Kamali were too much for him today, and the rest of our team."

Burke's 33 and 19 were the single-best performance on the floor of the Cage this Saturday afternoon, and it will put him in the conversation for the Lahovich Award, given to the best boys' basketball player in Western Massachusetts.

"He scores 24 points a game and 17 rebounds and he leads our team. He's the best," Robinson said. "He can't maybe shoot with the rest of these guys. He plays all around. He's the best."



Globe West Sports Notebook Local women earn college swim honors

**By Marvin Pave
March 7, 2010**

Skating club Challenge set

The Colonial Figure Skating Club will hold its Adult Winter Challenge, featuring more than 100 competitors from seven states, on Saturday at the Nashoba Valley Olympia in Boxborough. Admission is free for the event, which will run from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and is a prelude to the 2010 US Adult (age 21 and over) National Championships April 13-17 in Bloomington, Minn. Colonial members who have entered include Karen Ingwersen of Belmont, a silver medalist at the 2009 nationals; Lisa Sussman of Southborough, a silver medalist at the 2009 Bay State Games; Suzie Weaver of Carlisle, a bronze medalist at the 2009 Bay State Games; Cheryl Morrison of Milford, a past Adult Nationals competitor; Marie Sheridan of Arlington; and Chloe Vilain of Carlisle.



Youth league set to host 40th Spring Fling Tournament

**By Neil Benjamin Jr.
Friday March 12, 2010**

NORTH ADAMS -- The Northern Berkshire Youth Hockey League's Spring Fling turns over the hill today at 4 p.m.

The 40th annual tournament will begin at the Peter W. Foote Vietnam Veterans Memorial Skating Rink, and it appears to be as strong as it ever has been. More than 330 players will come from out of town to compete in the Fling, which spans two consecutive weekends. League officials expect about 1,200 people in total -- including the players' family and friends -- to descend upon North Adams.

All proceeds from the event will go back into the league. This weekend, the Pee wee and Squirt divisions will compete, while next weekend features the Bantams and Midgets.

On Saturday morning, Mayor Richard Alcombright will drop the ceremonial first puck to start the day's events, which will feature 10 games between 8 a.m. and 11 p.m. There are five games on the schedule today. On Sunday, two championship games will be held.

But the point of the league isn't to build winners. Friendships are made and kept, while kids learn life skills. Maybe most importantly, though, is that the children learn the basic skills of hockey.

"The team aspect of the league builds character," Alcombright said. "There are tremendous people involved, and some great coaches. This league has provided North Adams with high-quality hockey for years."

An all-volunteer staff will work the event, which features a large Chinese Auction raffle, healthy food and snacks, and professional skate sharpening services. There is no charge for admission for the longest running fundraising hockey event in Western Massachusetts.

Guy Cariddi, president of the league, has been involved since he was a player in the inaugural year of 1969. The league's motto is, "To keep kids on the ice and out of hot water," and Cariddi said that has been successful.

Though sports usually feature a winner and a loser, Cariddi said the best part about the league is that none of that matters. Sure, it's always fun to win a game, but getting kids experience on the ice is very important.

"For instance, I have 16 kids on my team," he said. "We have three goalies. Each kid will play at least one game. If we get to the championship, well then the oldest of the goalies will be in the net.

"But the most fun part is developing team spirit and watching the kids progress."

The Squirt division is for kids 10 years old and under, while the Peewee division is for 11 and 12 year olds. Bantam features 13 and 14 year olds, while the Midgets allow anyone up to 18.

Alcombright said the Spring Fling is great for North Adams not only because of the sense of community it brings, but because hosting the event will aid the local economy.

Because it spans two weekends, teams from New Hampshire, Vermont and New York will have to stay at local hotels and many will check out restaurants and businesses. It gives local shop owners a chance to showcase what they have to offer to people who do not live in the area.

"When the Bay State Games were here, I noticed that the Freight Yard Pub was packed," Alcombright said. "Just asking around I noticed that most of the people were from out of the area. Things like this definitely help out the area's economy."

No matter what this event provides to the community, it is still focused on the kids. The NBYHL has games every Saturday morning and even sponsors a travel team, which features a more competitive style of hockey.

Cariddi shared a story which explained why he loves being a part of the league.

"When the season starts, these players really don't know each other. As [the season] grows longer, they start making friends with each other. If someone misses a practice, the team wants to know, 'where is Joey?' Then, after a game, win or lose, the focus immediately shifts to where the team is going after, whether it be McDonald's or wherever.

"There is a great sense of camaraderie, and that's what we were aiming for."

TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

Annual Taunton ice show April 10 and 11

Mar 16, 2010

Taunton — The Skating Club of Southern New England celebrates its 25th anniversary ice show at the Aleixo Arena in Taunton on Saturday, April 10 at 7 p.m. and Sunday, April 11 at 2 p.m.

This year's silver anniversary skaters hail from Brockton, Taunton, Raynham, Fall River, Easton, Middleboro, Lakeville, Stoughton, New Bedford and Rhode Island.

Many of the participants won medals at the State Games of America held last July in Colorado. The club also recently competed in an anniversary program at the Bay State Winter Games in Williamstown.

Three featured skaters are graduating seniors from Taunton-area high schools, including Marci Costa of South Easton, Grace Gormley of Dartmouth and Amanda Kirshkain of East Bridgewater.

For tickets call 508-801-2405. They can also be purchased at the door on the day of the show.

In memory of Coach O Santana running Boston Marathon for former Central coach



CARL RUSSO/Staff photo

Anthony Santana reflected on his late coach from years ago and that inspired him to run the Boston Marathon.

By Dave Dyer
ddyer@eagletribune.com

Former Central Catholic coach Peter O'Sullivan, who died from a heart attack in 2006, had a subtle way of prodding his runners, and knowing which buttons to push.

When Anthony Santana was a senior cross country runner for the Raiders back in 2003, O'Sullivan pushed his buttons in a way that has still had an impact.

"One day at practice, he wanted us to run to Butternut Hill, which was a tough run and one I didn't like," said Santana, who ran for the coach in cross country, indoor track and outdoor track. "I told him I'd rather run the Boston Marathon, that's how much I didn't want to do it.

"He said if I ran it (Boston), he'd come see me do it. He doubted that I'd do it because, even though I ran cross country, I didn't like the long distances. I was more of a middle distance runner."

O'Sullivan's comment struck a nerve. Santana had already speculated about running a marathon one day, but that gave him an "I'll show him" perspective.

Six years later, Santana is following through on his resolve, training for the April 19 Boston Marathon.

His weekly long training runs have gone well and, back in late January, he ran a very respectable time of 2:07 at the hilly and rugged Derry Boston Prep 16-Miler.

"That (Derry) was really tough, but I'm feeling stronger every week," said the 24-year-old Santana. "I definitely understand now what kind of dedication it takes to run a marathon."

Whenever he's discouraged or feeling less than energetic, of course, Santana reflects on why he's running Boston.

"I might have done it anyway, but I'm definitely doing it for Coach O'Sullivan," said Santana. "He's the push behind me. I'm going to have his name on my shirt when I run."

"He was a great coach. He was hard, but you knew what to expect from him and he got you to do what was needed. He definitely had an impact on my life, and it hit me when I heard he had passed away."

As for his goals at Boston, Santana's first objective is "just to finish," but he'd like to break 3:30 if at all possible. If O'Sullivan were still alive, he'd certainly encourage him to shoot for as low a time as he would think possible.

"If he were alive, I know he'd be there cheering me on," said Santana.

Choosing a charity

Santana is competing as part of the Bay State Games Marathon Team, one of the many charity groups that are in the field.

Santana decided last year that he would shoot for Boston in 2010, so he started getting in better shape. He ran the Newburyport 10-Miler in July and began looking for a charity organization on which to run.

"I had already started training, but I started applying to charity programs in October," said Santana, who is a junior at Wentworth majoring in construction management. "I applied to three, but the Bay State Games team was the main one and I was accepted."

Santana had competed in the Bay State Games twice, finishing second in the mile the year before and after his senior campaign at Central, and had enjoyed the experience. Plus, he realizes that the prestige of the Bay State Games has diminished in recent years and that the organization is strapped for funds.

Thus, over the last few months, Santana has been training with the Bay State Games team, while raising the funds required (\$3,250 minimum) of anyone competing in the Boston Marathon charity program.

With a month to go, Santana is doing well on both fronts.

Hurley coaching six teams

Susan Hurley of North Andover saw a need and she decided to fill it herself.

With so many charity organizations entering teams in the Boston Marathon to raise funds, Hurley could see that many first-time runners needed coaching.

So Hurley, with vast experience in fitness and running, offered her services, beginning last year. For the 2009 Boston Marathon, she coached two teams (Lazarus House of Lawrence and the University of Massachusetts Go Kids Boston). This year she's overseeing six teams, consisting of 95 runners, including Santana's Bay State Games team.

Hurley keeps in constant contact with all of her runners and organizes group runs on Tuesdays (often the hills of Newton) and Saturday. Thus far, she's been impressed with Santana.

"I think he'll do better than he thinks," said Hurley. "When I run with him, I have to hold him back. He ran an eight-minute pace at Derry and, on that course, that's really good. He's also a good fundraiser.

To give

Anyone who wants to assist Santana's cause should visit his link at firstgiving.com/AnthonySantana.

Santana at Central Catholic

— Three-year runner in cross country. Named all-Merrimack Valley Conference as a senior and was named Central's Most Improved Runner

— Two-year runner in both indoor and outdoor track, running the 1,000, 800 and mile. Had best times of 1:59 in the 800, 4:35 in the mile

— Member of school record 4x800 relay team that was clocked in 7:55.52, which ranks second all-time in the region