

SMALL BIZ PROFILE: Indianapolis Sports Park

BATTER UP—along with attendance Local sports park sees volume rise as competitors cash in on land

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More than 20 years ago, in the suburban hinterlands of Indianapolis' southwest side, Patrick and Helga Scaringe built a sports park and people came—thousands of them—to play ball. In the first season, about 76 softball teams took to the Scaringes' fields of dream. Today, Indianapolis Sports Park is home to at least 720 teams of adults and children who play slow- or fast-pitch softball, baseball, volleyball, flag football, soccer, corn hole, kickball and a few other games.

It is the largest family-owned recreational sports venue in the state and the site of dozens of tournaments each year, said former player Richard Foltz, Indiana director of the National Softball Association.

"Private parks usually have better upkeep" than publicly owned facilities, said Foltz, owner of Cross Print Wear, an Indianapolis printing and embroidery company.



The grounds are mowed regularly and the playing fields are well groomed, he said. Private parks usually have other amenities, too: enclosed dugouts, covered ball racks and bleachers for fans of both teams, for example. Some—including Indianapolis Sports Park—even offer lounges, restaurants or bars for adults.

Indianapolis Sports Park's only local competitor is the privately owned Midwest Sports Complex on the northwest side. That property, which sold recently, is being leased back to a sports facility until the new owner is ready to develop the land. Another facility on Indianapolis' northeast side closed in the last few years.

The closure of one competitor and the long-term uncertainty of the other bode well for Indianapolis Sports Park since the changes are due to the growing value of their land, not a waning interest in recreational sports.

Indeed, "this year was better than last" in terms of teams playing, Helga Scaringe said.

Although there is some concern that the economic downturn will affect business, she and the others think the demand for the facility will stay strong as people redirect their recreational resources closer to home.

The Scaringes, who were sweethearts at Warren Central High School, do a lot of the work themselves or with help from their three adult children. Recently retired from General Motors Corp., Patrick, 55, is a licensed electrician who handled most of the park construction. Former ATA Airlines attorney Helga, also 55, did much of the legal work—including battling the city's zoning commission for nearly three years before the park opened.

Undeterred, the couple developed a business plan for the property and landed a \$475,000 SBA loan to launch the venture.

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Indianapolis Sports Park (continued)

"We had to learn to do accounting for the business plan, things you never think about, like unemployment taxes, tallying daily income, banking, basic office administration," Helga recalled.

Over the years, the facility has grown to include three lighted sand volleyball courts, a flag football and soccer field and six lighted ball diamonds; it also features electronic scoreboards and clocks. For a while, IUPUI's baseball team called the sports park home. The NCAA diamond certification still stands.

Indianapolis Sports Park has a liquor license, so it can serve adults in an airconditioned lounge. Park guests also can order from two concessions stands that serve standard stadium fare. Teams pay to join leagues at the park, and admission fees—a modest \$1—are another important part of the revenue mix.

"That let us survive," Helga said.



Helga Scaringe

The park's location, close to lodging and the interstate highway system, also has been an advantage.

Interest in these sports "is as strong as it has ever been," said former player Doug Maupin, who has managed the park for more than 17 years and is an umpire.

Among the challenges of the park's growth and development, however, are increased property taxes, which have risen from \$6,000 a year to \$67,000. Also, as the founders reach retirement, they wonder about a succession plan for the family business or what other options they may have.

Although they have no plans to sell the park, handing over the reins would mean someone else figuring out how to navigate the challenges of a seasonal business.

That was a struggle for the Scaringes in the early days, said Marty Armbruster, a CPA with Greenwood financial services firm Sherman & Armbruster. He has been working with the Indianapolis Sports Park owners since the beginning.

"But the more experience they gained in the business, the better their understanding" of cash flow and other factors, he said.

Looking to the future, he said the couple will need to figure out what to do about the property as its value—and property taxes—continue to rise.

"Their main asset is the real estate and as it continues to appreciate in a way most business assets don't," he said, "it becomes a question of whether to cash in the chips ... and be out of the business or just keep operating the park and making a small profit." •

