

Olympic Festival Legacies Endure

Barry Jacobs' feature on the 1987 U.S. Olympic Festival, held in the Triangle and at the Greensboro Coliseum, touched on several of the legacy aspects of that event including the Triangle's first regional transportation system, first area-wide fiber optic communications system, expedited completion of I-40 and RDU Terminal 2, unprecedented regional coordination, and the roadway flowers across our state. From the beginning, Festival leaders recognized the opportunity of such a massive event and planned strategically to use it wherever possible as a transformational catalyst for extensive area-wide cooperation and expedited improvements for the region. Improvements which might otherwise take a generation to implement, would be compressed into a 2.5-year period.

These advancements are still being felt today in the form of Olympic Festival legacies, more than three decades after the conclusion of the event. These legacies can be found in sports, economic development, and the arts.

The Local Organizing Committee (LOC) established to host the U.S. Olympic Festival was North Carolina Amateur Sports (NCAS), a non-profit, charitable organization. NCAS, which has its headquarters in Durham, is in its fourth decade today and operates the State Games of North Carolina, our state's largest annual sports event, and Cycle North Carolina. These events draw participants to North Carolina from around the U.S. and even foreign countries and generate significant positive economic impacts in the numerous communities across our state that host them each year. The Triangle Sports Commission (TSC), an NCAS affiliate organization started by NCAS' founder, and USA Baseball, recruited to the area by the TSC – and the positive community benefits they bring – could also be said to be progeny of NCAS.

Here in the Triangle, the Olympic Festival stimulated the area's first regional approaches to economic and business development. The LOC recruited every Chamber of Commerce from Smithfield to Greensboro to come together on a monthly basis to discuss and plan how the Festival could be leveraged business-wise for their respective communities and constituents. It was the first time in history the various Chambers had convened regularly on matters of common interest. As an extension of the Chamber sessions, the Festival also created the first-ever region-wide Chambers of Commerce Business After Hours networking social event. Local chambers regularly get together today and even the region-wide Business After Hours has returned periodically through the years.

The Festival underscored the need for development of more public venues to continue the sports tourism momentum generated by the event. Triangle Central Park, featured in Jacob's article, was a post-event strategy by Festival leaders to help address this need. WakeMed Soccer Park, the USA Baseball National Training Complex, and even Durham Bulls Athletic Park (DBAP) owe their existence to the Triangle Central Park initiative. The DBAP, of course, led to Jim Goodmon's redevelopment of the American Tobacco Complex which was the tipping point for Downtown Durham's revival. Thus, an Ancestry.com-style family tree tracing the lineage of Durham's current renaissance would show a direct line of descent from U.S. Olympic Festival-'87.

It has been said that the two biggest unifying forces on the planet are music and sports. U.S. Olympic Festival-'87, while falling squarely in the latter category, also included the largest arts festival ever held in North Carolina, which was broadly inclusive of virtually every art form, ranging from sculpture, to painting, to live music, and more. Those today who take in the annual Bull Durham Blues Festival, or who enjoy the Wolf's Ears sculpture near DH Hill Library at NC State, can thank the U.S. Olympic Festival-'87 Arts Festival for both.

There is one additional Festival legacy worth touching on. Because of the success, magnitude, and lasting impacts of the 1987 U.S. Olympic Festival, organizers have kept the spirit of the event alive with an Anniversary Celebration every five years. This year is a major milestone, marking the 30th Anniversary of North Carolina's largest-ever event. The commemoration takes place the evening of Friday, September 22 from 6-9pm with an Anniversary Celebration Reception & Banquet at the Embassy Suites Cary. Olympic Gold Medalist Nancy Hogshead-Makar, a Duke graduate and Women's

Sports Champion, will serve as keynote speaker. She will be joined by Olympians from across North Carolina. The public is invited to attend and join in this special occasion. Information on the event can be found at www.trianglesportscommission.com/usof30

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