



LET THE TRADITION BEGIN...

Introducing the first annual
Excellence in Youth Sports award winners.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of America's youths participate in community sports programs. While many of these children's experiences are filled with education, inspiration and fun, not all organizations offer the same caliber of programming — or make youth sports the priority they should.

Those that do, however, deserve to be rewarded for emphasizing a commitment to kids and proper training of parents, volunteer coaches and youth league administrators. Organizations meeting a certain set of criteria were invited to enter the first-ever Excellence in Youth Sports awards competition earlier this year. Developed by the National Alliance For Youth Sports and *Athletic Business*, the awards recognize outstanding organizations that conduct multifaceted youth sports programs with a focus on providing positive and safe experiences for all participants.

This year's winners were culled from a field of 46 entries from the United States, Germany and Japan, more than half of which came from military installations. A panel of judges reviewed each application.

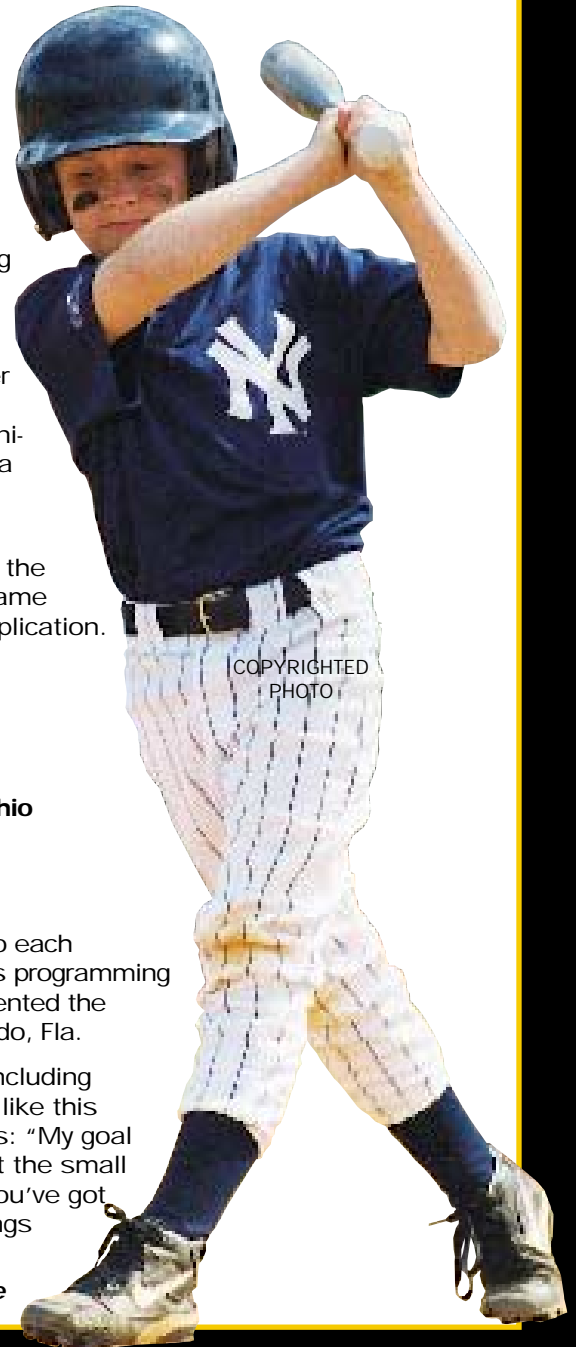
The winners, in alphabetical order:

- **City of Greenacres (Fla.) Leisure Services Department**
- **Hanscom Air Force Base (Mass.) Youth Programs**
- **National Trail Parks and Recreation District, Springfield, Ohio**
- **Patrick Air Force Base (Fla.) Youth Programs**
- **City of Tulsa (Okla.) Parks**

Internet sign-up provider iSignUpNow.com contributed \$5,000 to each winner, money that will go toward further enhancing youth sports programming in these communities. NFL Hall of Fame Coach Don Shula presented the awards at the Athletic Business Conference last month in Orlando, Fla.

The following pages feature brief profiles of the five winners, including details about what makes their programs so effective. Details like this one, offered by an employee from one of the winning programs: "My goal is to sweat the little things. I know people tell you not to sweat the small stuff, but when you're running a recreation program for kids, you've got to sweat the little things — because those usually are the things that make the difference."

— *Michael Popke*



CITY OF GREENACRES LEISURE SERVICES DEPARTMENT

Greenacres, Fla.

"We renamed our 'tryouts' to 'player evaluations' in order to reduce the perceived pressure on children to perform at a certain level. Everyone makes a team, and everyone plays an equivalent amount of time."

— BILL GOLSON, RECREATION SPECIALIST FOR ATHLETICS

Any park and recreation department can claim to have specific policies and procedures in place for youth sports administrators, coaches, parents and players to follow. But getting department staff and volunteer coaches to adhere to them isn't always easy — especially when you need to find a coach on short notice and consider forgoing a state background check. That's why officials at the City of Greenacres Leisure Services Department decided to better police themselves by developing a formal policies and procedures manual. Implemented a year ago, the written policy's three sections detail acceptable and proper conduct, the steps taken to ensure conduct codes are not breached and discipline procedures to follow when they are. "Obviously, every league is going to have its share of controversy, but we're trying to communicate with everybody before they even step on the field," says Bill Golson, Greenacres' recreation specialist for athletics.

What's more, coaches are encouraged to voice any concerns about activities, parents or children in private with other coaches and department personnel. "Sometimes, it's all just a matter of listening to coaches and letting them vent their frustrations," Golson says, adding that Greenacres has a strong retention rate with coaches, especially those involved in activities for older youths. "We want to make sure they retain their sense of decorum on the field, because whatever they do, the children will probably follow suit. We really stress all the time that they're representing the program."

Greenacres (population: 28,000) also has a local version of the Start Smart Sports Development Program for 3- to 6-year-olds. Created by the National Alliance For Youth Sports, the parent-child program teaches kids fundamental motor skills such as throwing, catching, kicking and batting. Using age-appropriate equipment to conduct fun exercises, they learn basic skills that will help them



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succeed and excel once they enter Greenacres' youth sports programs. "We train the trainers, meaning the parents," Golson says. "Six hours worth of training is not going to make a kid ready to play sports, so parents have to keep their children interested."

That interest should continue as children evolve into playing more organized sports. "Parents have to be involved," he says. "They can't just drop off their kids at practice and expect them to get a lot out of the program."

Nor can parents, coaches and participants get much out of a program that doesn't follow proper training procedures, provide valuable instruction or emphasize the recreational aspects of its activities. "It really justifies why we do certain things," Golson says about being recognized by the department's peers around the country. "There is a need for the type of programming we have for children — and if you're going to do it, you might as well do it right." ■



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Number of Youths Served: 1,198

Minimum Age for Participation: 7

Programs	Participants	Teams
Baseball (Fall)	216	18
Baseball (Spring)	312	26
Basketball	245	26
Cheerleading	85	10
Flag Football	175	16
Start Smart	15	N/A
Summer Sports Camps	150	N/A

HANSCOM AIR FORCE BASE YOUTH PROGRAMS

Hanscom AFB, Mass.

"It is one thing to have budgets and programs. It's another thing to have the people to implement them."

— TERRY SHAW, FAMILY MEMBER SUPPORT FLIGHT CHIEF

Overseeing a youth sports program for participants who rotate in and out of that program on a regular basis is no easy task. It's the greatest challenge facing Terry Shaw, family member support flight chief at Hanscom AFB and the civilian who oversees youth sports programs on the base. Prior to her decade in the U.S. Air Force ranks, Shaw ran youth park and recreation programs in Arkansas and Tennessee. "The biggest difference is that here, we have to remember that there are kids who have never been on a pair of ice skates," Shaw says. "And when they play hockey in their school's physical education class, they need to know what they're doing so they can keep up with children who've been skating for several years."

In an effort to introduce indigenous activities to the children of active Air Force personnel, Shaw and youth center director Scott Craver gather as much knowledge as they can to offer such activities as lacrosse classes and archery camps (29 would-be Robin Hoods took the week-long session in 2000).

Another popular activity, in-line hockey, has become so big in surrounding communities that Shaw spent two years trying to convince Hanscom officials to invest \$50,000 in a new poured gymnasium floor that will be resilient enough to accommodate the sport. Plans call for making the sport the base's fifth full-time activity, and Shaw expects the new program will draw up to 100 additional kids who don't participate in fall or spring soccer, basketball or baseball programs offered. Prior to the new floor, which was installed in late 2000, a patched and unused tennis court near the youth fields served as a makeshift in-line hockey rink — a development Shaw says she didn't feel comfort-



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able with because of the inherent safety risks associated with skating on concrete.

Other highlights of Hanscom's program include a new developmental basketball program for 5- and 6-year-olds. In cooperation with Hoop Specialists, a group of retired NBA players living in the nearby Boston area, Shaw and Craver host clinics and weeklong camps. A similar daylong session brings in members of the American Hockey League's Lowell (Mass.) Lock Monsters.

To ensure that the participants in these programs are in good hands, national background checks are performed on all volunteer coaches, who also must submit to screening by a certified mental health professional. Coaches — many of them single and without children — are thoroughly trained in all aspects of the games and in the psychological, physical and social needs of children. They carry that training with them as they move from base to base, and often are asked to coach at a higher level during their next assignment.

Because of this hands-on approach to sports, education and fun, Hanscom's youth programs reported no major injuries or incidents of child abuse this year, Shaw says. ■



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Number of Youths Served: 675

Minimum Age for Participation: 5

Programs	Participants	Teams
Baseball	153	12
Basketball	151	16
Soccer (Fall)	187	12
Soccer (Spring)	184	13

NATIONAL TRAIL PARKS AND RECREATION DISTRICT

Springfield, Ohio

"We worry about the physical and emotional well-being of the young people more than the wins and losses."

— MARK MILLER, MARKETING AND SPECIAL PROJECTS MANAGER

A year ago, the National Trail Parks and Recreation District (NTPRD) didn't even exist. Today, its youth program is lauded by peers as one of the nation's strongest. One reason for the fast track to success is that, unlike other first-year organizations, the NTPRD has more than 50 years of experience in youth sports programming. The district was formed in 1999 by consolidating the Clark County Recreation Department and the Springfield Department of Parks and Recreation, a move that took effect Jan. 1, 2000, and not only combined the resources of both entities but nearly doubled the number of district-wide participants. "It's been quite a challenge," says Mark Miller, the district's marketing and special projects manager, who was brought over from the county's recreation department. "Rather than have two people run two soccer programs, as before, we have one person running one large soccer program. That's one of the growing pains we're experiencing."

But officials have tried to ease the transition as much as possible by creating minimal changes in service and explaining to constituents that a larger department ultimately serves them better. Although parents in Springfield (population: 70,000) must now travel to county facilities for some activities — which can mean an extra 15 minutes in the family vehicle — their children also have more programs from which to choose, because the county (population: 147,000) used to offer activities the city did not. The same holds true for young county residents who did not have access to various city programs. Hence, enrollment for programs like in-line hockey and volleyball is expected to double soon — or already has, Miller says.

How successful these programs become will be determined not by wins and losses, Miller explains, but by how many kids from a winless season return the following year for another try. "If one team goes undefeated, but only 25 percent of the players sign up again, maybe that team's not as good as the coach thought," he says. "When people keep coming back and having positive experiences, that's what sets your program apart and makes you successful."

Number of Youths Served: 3,948

Minimum Age for Participation: Varies by sport

Programs	Participants	Teams
Baseball (Fall)	64	4
Baseball (Spring)	334	23
Basketball	500	32
Golf	183	N/A
Roller Hockey	83	11
Soccer (Fall)	1,356	90
Soccer (Spring)	320	24
Softball (Fast-Pitch)	102	8
Volleyball	206	18
Youth Sports Camps	800	N/A



Another key ingredient in that mix is parent education. Last spring, the NTPRD initiated a local chapter of the Parents Association For Youth Sports, a program developed by the National Alliance For Youth Sports. The PAYS program is a 30-minute training session designed to bring parents together before their children start a sports season. Parents met with coaches, viewed a video, received a handbook and buttons that promote sportsmanship, and signed a code of ethics. After making parental participation voluntary for spring soccer, the district is mandating attendance for future sports.

As favorable as all this sounds, Miller says the NTPRD's work is never done. "It's quite a job to mesh everything together," he says. ■

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE YOUTH PROGRAMS

Patrick AFB, Fla.

"The key to any kind of youth sports program is your volunteers."

— RANDY DETWILER, YOUTH SPORTS DIRECTOR

Recognized as one of the top youth sports programs in the U.S. Air Force Space Command, Patrick AFB already is held to a high standard, says Randy Detwiler, the civilian youth sports director who has headed Patrick's program for 15 years. Charged with administering activities for youths and coaches who may not even be housed on base long enough to complete the season or return for the next season, Detwiler says his programs have about a 50 percent turnover rate in participants and volunteers every year. That said, Patrick's youth programs still draw 300 volunteers a year in the form of coaches, assistants and involved parents. "Coaches and administrators don't need to put everything on their own shoulders," Detwiler says.

Because of the fluctuating number of participants, Detwiler must sometimes look beyond the base and schedule competition with various park and recreation teams in the area. Tackle football (which now requires players to be at least 11 years old, rather than 8) and baseball for 13- to 16-year-olds are the programs that most commonly require participants to travel into neighboring communities. The older the kids get, Detwiler contends, the less they tend to participate in Patrick's programs, and there are too few football and baseball teams at the base around which to foster a real sense of competition.

Another challenge facing Detwiler and his staff is meeting the stringent requirements of Air Force sports programs, as outlined in the well-thumbed Air Force manual to which Detwiler must adhere. And because Air Force brass conducts many unannounced inspections of non-sports youth programs — sports programs might be next — Detwiler must remain on his toes. Perhaps that's one of the reasons Patrick's programs focus strongly on safety and risk management issues. Among the most precautionary steps is a weather monitor installed at the youth center (which is located in a housing area a few miles from the main base). Close to all outdoor fields and other facilities, the monitor receives up-to-date warnings from nearby Cape Canaveral of approaching bad weather. That information is then immediately forwarded to coaches and parents during practices and games.

Patrick AFB personnel also place a high priority on repairing damaged fields and safety hazards. Inspections regularly cover everything from surfaces and bleachers to fences and sprinkler systems, Detwiler says. ■

Number of Youths Served: 925

Minimum Age for Participation: 4

Program	Participants	Teams
Baseball/Softball	162	13
Basketball (Summer)	120	13
Basketball (Winter)	210	21
Cheerleading	30	3
Football (Tackle)	60	2
Soccer	226	20
Tee-Ball	117	9



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CITY OF TULSA PARKS

Tulsa, Okla.

"We have a very short amount of time to get kids' attention, make an impact and help them develop healthy lifestyles forever."

— LEANN CRAWLEY, YOUTH SPORTS COORDINATOR

Stressing recreation over competition, Tulsa Parks officials encourage their youth coaches and league administrators to not keep score and to adapt the rules to players' skill levels. In tee-ball games, for example, an entire team bats each half-inning, regardless of the number of outs made, and all participants receive equal playing time. The only program in which scores are kept is basketball, simply because each gymnasium has a scoreboard, and kids like to see their team names in lights. "By offering well-rounded and well-organized youth leagues, we can combat the desire youths have to drop out of sports early," says Leann Crawley, youth sports coordinator for Tulsa Parks. "We feel our position as youth sports specialists is to advocate all positive aspects for the participant."

And that includes all participants. Crawley and her staff recently began overseeing a youth wheelchair basketball league. Rerouted from another city agency that wasn't able to meet the group's needs, these children — in November, there were 11 participants ages 8 to 14 — break into different teams each time they play, and they were expected to participate in an out-of-town tournament in December. Tulsa Parks plans to dedicate the Excellence in Youth Sports award prize money to the purchase of adaptive sports equipment for basketball, golf and other activities. "We've got the will and the know-how," Crawley says. "And we want young wheelchair users to call our facilities home. Adaptive youth sports is really the up-and-coming trend. Just because you may not know the particulars about the Americans with Disabilities Act doesn't mean you should be afraid to provide accommodations — or even complete leagues — for participants who use wheelchairs. I think it's great that these youngsters have the same desire to get out and play and have as good a time as all other kids."

To demonstrate its commitment to the residents of Tulsa (population: 367,000) and the spirit of the ADA, Tulsa Parks officials hired a sign-language interpreter to work coach-pitched softball games last season in which a deaf



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child participated. The player's parents signed during practices. "By law, we're required to make reasonable accommodations," Crawley says. "It's our job to come up with a plan and say, 'Here's how we can accommodate you.' That's the bottom line. We want them to be involved."

Tulsa Parks officials want parents involved, too. In spring, the department implemented a local chapter of the Parents Association For Youth Sports, a program developed by the National Alliance For Youth Sports. The PAYS program is a 30-minute training session designed to bring parents together before their children start a sports season. Participation is voluntary right now, Crawley says, adding that requiring attendance at PAYS meetings could backfire and actually hurt the program by forcing busy parents to show up. "Parents recognize there's a need for this kind of education," Crawley says. "But do they always want to give of their time? That's another issue." ■



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Number of Youths Served: 4,694

Minimum Age for Participation: 5

Programs	Participants	Teams
Basketball (Elementary)	808	83
Basketball (Kindergarten/Junior)	360	36
Flag Football (Elementary)	432	27
Flag Football (Pee Wee)	160	10
Golf Challenge League	35	N/A
Golf League (High School)	300	14
Gymnastics	400	N/A
Soccer (Elementary)	140	10
Soccer (Fall)	602	43
Soccer (Kindergarten/Junior)	485	44
Soccer (Spring)	408	34
Tee-Ball/Coach Pitch (Spring/Summer)	564	37