

Strong local contingent



DAVID BARNES | The Times

Team USA hopefuls paddle during practice in Gainesville, Saturday, July 21, 2018, on Lake Lanier. Team USA will be selecting athletes to compete in the ICF Dragon Boat World Championships, which will be held at the lake in September.

29 of 112 paddlers picked by Team USA for Dragon Boat Championships from LCKC

BY LAYNE SALIBA

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After hours of watching video, reviewing notes and deliberating amongst each other, coaches with the United States National Dragon Boat Team have decided who will compete in this year's International Canoe Federation Dragon Boat World Championships for Team USA.

The competition, in its first time in the Americas, will be held at Lake Lanier Olympic Park in Gainesville.

Paddlers from across the U.S. spent the weekend trying out for the team that will take place Sept. 12-16. Out of 125 paddlers, 112 made the cut with 29 coming from Lanier Canoe and Kayak Club.

Team USA will compete against other countries like Germany, Russia, Canada and Hong Kong.

"It's been quite a process," said Jim O'Dell, coach with Team USA.

He said it's the first time they've done a team selection camp. In the past, they've done regional trials and done them much earlier.

With so much time between trials and the actual competition, O'Dell said "about half the team got very, very complacent."

"There were a lot of people that were out of shape," O'Dell said. "So that's the reason we did it like this this time. To keep people hungry, to keep people edgy so they came here knowing, 'I'm not on the team yet.'"

O'Dell was part of the group selecting the team and said it was a lot of pressure. They debated for a few hours on just two paddlers.

"We want to make sure that we are absolutely putting our

best foot forward and that we are showing extremely well here at home," O'Dell said.

Adding even more pressure, O'Dell will be taking part in the world championship himself. He'll be competing in the masters division and said this will most likely be his last time. He's been to three others in Hungary, Poland and Russia.

Apart from the masters division, the Dragon Boat World Championship will be broken down into junior and senior divisions, each divided even further into men's, women's and mixed categories.

Team USA doesn't have enough women to compete in that category, but will be taking part in men's and mixed.

As the more than 900 athletes visit Gainesville with their coaches and supporters, O'Dell is looking forward to the way it impacts the city.

Along with those athletes, some 10,000 spectators are expected to visit throughout the weekend, too.

"These athletes all eat in the neighborhood of 4,500 to 6,000 calories each day," O'Dell said. "So they're going to be absolutely clearing out the store shelves, restaurants. It's going to be great for the community."

O'Dell said he's happy to be a part of hosting an event of this scale. While it's "hectic" at times, he said when he sits back and looks at what is around him, he has trouble finding the right words.

"It's nonstop, which is cool," O'Dell said. "I know that everything that we're doing here is for the betterment of the event, for the betterment of Team USA and for the betterment of our club and Lake Lanier Olympic Park. And it goes beyond words. It's such a huge endeavor to do this . . . and I find myself just being very grateful that we have a lot of great people helping out."

Food Truck Friday

When: 5-8 p.m. Aug. 17

Where: Lake Lanier Olympic Park, 3105 Clarks Bridge Road, Gainesville

How much: Free

More info: 770-535-0397, Robyn@lakelanierolympicvenue.org 7-26-18

Touch a Truck

What: Explore an assortment of big trucks

When: 10 a.m. Aug. 4

Where: Gainesville's City Park, 830 Green St., Gainesville

More info: 770-531-2680, www.gainesville.org/fm/events/detail/id/2229/ 7-26-18

Big wheels bring kid-friendly crowds to City Park



ERIN O. SMITH | The Times

Hudson Adams, 3, plays on a John Deere tractor during the 2015 Touch A Truck at City Park in Gainesville. The free event gives Gainesville residents the chance to see and touch their favorite big machines up close.

Touch-A-Truck

When: 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 4

Where: City Park, 898 Longstreet Circle, Gainesville

How much: Free

More info: 770-531-2680 or gainesville.org/fm/events/detail/id/2229

Touch-A-Truck shows off all types of vehicles

BY LAYNE SALIBA

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There's something about big trucks that brings families back to Gainesville's City Park every year.

Gainesville Parks and Recreation's annual Touch-A-Truck is set for 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 4. The free event gives children a chance to look at, climb on and get inside vehicles of all types and sizes and interact with the people who drive them.

"The big thing that we always have going on is all the police and fire department vehicles," said Michael Waters, recreation program coordinator for Gainesville Parks and Rec. "All the big firetrucks and the flashing lights and everything the kids like to play with will be there."

Many workers with the city and local businesses offer time with kids and the trucks. Gainesville Solid Waste will have a street

sweeper, Mansfield Oil will have a tanker truck on display and Jackson EMC is bringing a bucket truck. There will be tractors and a school bus, too.

"That's one of my favorite parts of the event," Waters said. "Just how nice and generous people are with their time. They are coming out on a Saturday when they could be working and producing income, but instead they hear that it's a kid-friendly event, they're coming out to look at the trucks, and they jump all over it."

The only thing missing this year is a helicopter that had been on hand in recent years, as the company that provides the helicopter had to cut back on some events.

For children who don't care much for trucks, there still is plenty to do: inflatable bounce houses, face painting, temporary tattoos, plus an ice cream truck and shaved ice treats to keep things cool.

Waters said one of the favorites each year are firetrucks, because of their size and flashing lights.

"All the children look up to

the firemen and are happy to see them," he said, making it a fun event for the fire department crews as well.

"The goal, and probably the mission, is just to create a fun, family-filled day," Waters said. "The kids get to sit in their car and watch a firetruck go by, but they never get to get up close to it. So this is just something to create that memory that they walked inside a firetruck or got their picture in a police car."

Another goal is to make first responders more accessible and give children a chance to interact with them so they feel more comfortable when they encounter them.

"It's almost like a trust factor they're creating," Waters said. "The kids are coming around them and they're being super friendly and nice and getting to show them around. It just kind of creates this bond almost between the two, so when they see them out in public, they remember they saw them before and they're really nice, so it makes them more friendly to go up and speak with." 7-26-18

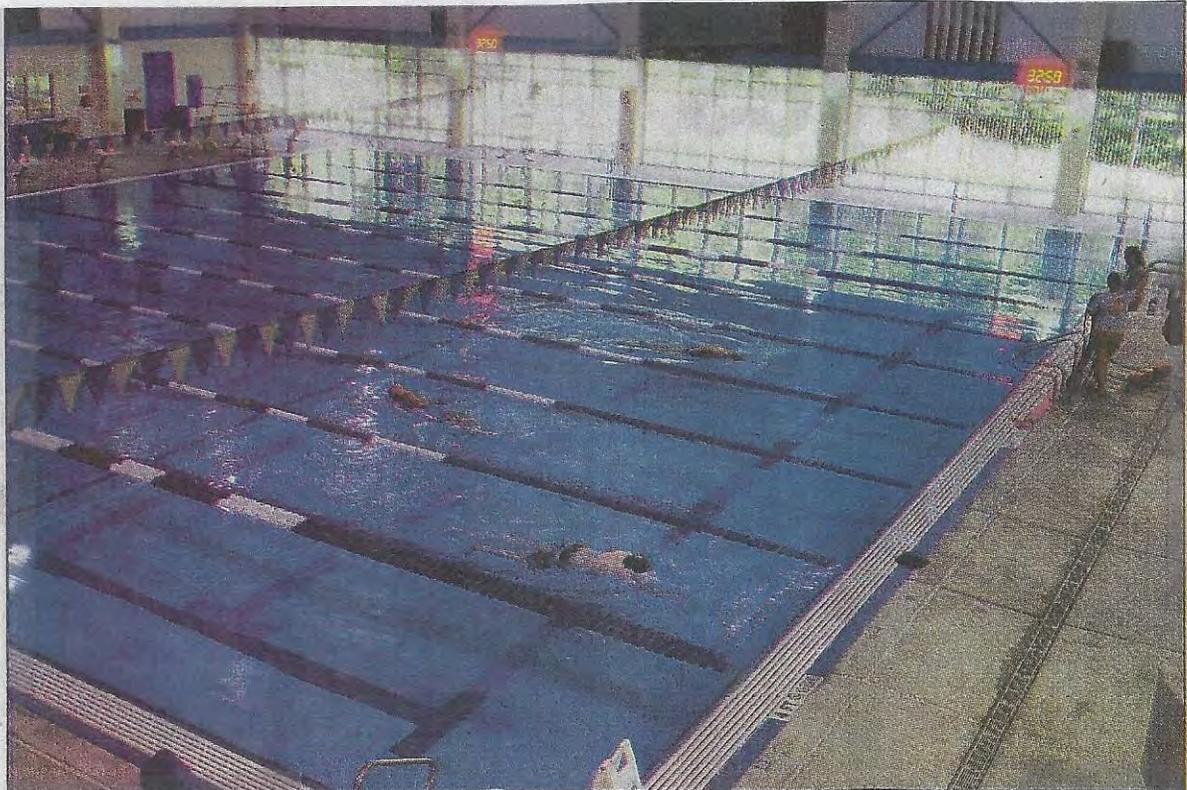
Aquatic center hits milestone



Photos by **SCOTT ROGERS** | The Times

The Frances Meadows Aquatic Center is celebrating 10 years with a party Aug. 1 in the Splash Zone, which features 34,000 square feet of swimming area that includes a pair of three-story tall winding water slides, a swirl pool, lazy river, play structure with water buckets, spray fountains and zero-depth entry.

7-31-18



Photos by **SCOTT ROGERS** | The Times

The Frances Meadows Aquatic Center in Gainesville offers swim lessons and provides space for high school swim teams to train.

7-31-18

Facility ready to celebrate 10-year anniversary with splash

BY MEGAN REED
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Zandrea Stephens, division manager for Frances Meadows Aquatic Center in Gainesville, remembers when the complex opened in August 2008.

"For me, to have an aquatic center in Gainesville, Georgia, and to see that many people come out, I knew that we were amidst something that was going to be great," Stephens, a Gainesville native, said. "That first day in August, we were so packed. I'll never forget."

The center will mark its 10th anniversary in August, and to reflect and celebrate, Gainesville Parks and Recreation is throwing a birthday party Wednesday, Aug. 1.

Stephens started at Frances Meadows working at the front desk, then became a senior secretary, then recreation program manager and now division manager.

"It has been absolutely amazing. I wouldn't trade this for anything," Stephens said.

The aquatic center sees about 200,000 visitors each year, according to Gainesville Parks and Recreation Director Melvin Cooper.

Cooper said the most recent fiscal year, which ended June 30, was the first year the center broke \$1 million in revenue. Operating costs annually are about \$1.4 million, he said, so about 70 percent of



Frances Meadows Aquatic Center lifeguard Delaney Smith catches 5-year-old Cooper Wyatt as he uses a water slide Friday, July 27. The aquatic center is celebrating 10 years with a party Aug. 1 in the Splash Zone.

costs are covered. The rest is funded by the city's parks and recreation tax.

Cooper said the aquatic center is one of the largest projects the parks and recreation department has taken on in his 46 years there.

"I was out on the deck the day that we opened up the pool, and it was kind of like me watching a baby being born and how proud I was of it and how proud this community was of it and what

it's meant to the community since then," Cooper said.



Meadows

10th birthday celebration

When: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Wednesday, Aug. 1

Where: Frances Meadows Aquatic Center,
1545 Community Way,
Gainesville

How much: \$4 plus tax, free for members

Shortly after the facility was opened, it was dedicated to Frances Jenkins Meadows, Hall County's first black commissioner, who died

■ Please see **AQUATIC, 8A**

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AQUATIC

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of leukemia in 2002.

The facility has indoor competition and instructional pools, an outdoor splash zone play area and two waterslides three stories tall. In 2014, some meeting space in the building was converted into a land fitness center where patrons can take a variety of courses, including Zumba and yoga.

The center has also joined the Silver-Sneakers program, which allows seniors to access the fitness center for free as a benefit of many participating health plans.

The fitness programs, particularly for seniors, have helped the facility gain regular patrons even in the colder months when the outdoor splash zone pool is closed. Stephens said she has enjoyed seeing the center become part of the patrons' lives.

"If they haven't been here in a while, we're like, 'Where have you been? I haven't seen you in a while,'" Stephens said. "... When they need something, we jump right on it because they're here almost every single day."

Larry Bussler of Flowery Branch is one of those regular patrons. He comes to the aquatic center for two water aerobics classes every week and credits the classes with helping him regain mobility in his hand. He sustained nerve damage during heart surgery and lost the use of a part of his hand and arm.

"When I first started coming here, I could not move these fingers at all," Bussler said, while motioning with his hands. "These were damaged during the surgery but they can't be repaired. These here are getting stronger now." He's been taking classes for about a year and a half, but he's also a volunteer — he works with Special Olympics athletes there on Saturdays.

"It helps me in two ways: physically and it's a chance for me to give back as well," Bussler said.

Jan Nance, a water aerobics instructor who started working at the center in February 2009, said she has seen people improve their lives and make connections by coming to the aquatic center.

"I call it the church of the water," said Nance, who teaches 14 classes a week. "It has nothing to do with religion. It has to do with the fact that we care about one another, we become families, we actually check up on the health of each other."

Nance said some people may hesitate to try water aerobics if they don't feel that they are a strong swimmer, but they shouldn't worry — the classes are a "no wet head zone," and they are held in the shallow end of the pool.



Steve Noble swims laps Friday, July 27, in an indoor pool at the Frances Meadows Aquatic Center in Gainesville. The Center is celebrating 10 years with an event on August 1.

However, people can learn to swim at Frances Meadows, and the facility's staff have even partnered with nearby Gainesville Middle School to offer swim classes for sixth-graders as part of the school's physical education curriculum.

Julie Butler Colombini, marketing and communications manager for Gainesville Parks and Recreation, said Gainesville's proximity to water makes it essential for children to learn to swim.

"When we got them in the pool the first day and 80 percent of the sixth-grade class could not float, we knew we were doing the right thing," she said.

About 200 swimmers also come to the aquatic center each week for training for local high school swim teams.

Butler Colombini said the aquatic center stays busy, and

parks and recreation staff are always looking for new things to offer.

"We program to the max, to the amount of space that we have, and we continually change our offerings for what our participants want," she said. "We ask them and they tell us and we do everything we can."

The center serves a diverse population with varying needs, she said.

"It reaches across ages, demographics, people with special needs, seniors who need to recover from surgery, children learning to swim — the health component alone at this facility makes it invaluable to this community," she said.

The aquatic center's 10th birthday celebration will be 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 1, and feature giveaways, music and games.

