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Nifty at 50

Lakewood earns *Sports Illustrated* Sportstown honor for the Golden State

By Andrew Schulman



Like *Sports Illustrated*, Lakewood, Calif., is celebrating its 50th Anniversary this year. So it seems as if the city was destined to be named SI's Sportstown for the Golden State. The award was given to Lakewood in recognition of its community sports programs.

Born out of the Great Depression and developed during a post-World War II housing boom, Lakewood, located less than 10 miles to the northeast of Long Beach, was a model for other municipalities in the area as city developers left ample room for parks and schools and left space for future growth. Today, the city has grown by leaps and bounds -- its population now exceeds 80,000 -- but recreation is still a focus.

"From the beginning, recreation and quality parks and facilities were priorities for the city council," said Mayor Todd Rogers. "The result is a town full of parks placed all throughout the city that are accessible to our residents, and a populace that really enjoys taking advantage of the outdoors."

And while Lakewood's parks and facilities have served the community well, the work done by the Recreation and Community Services Department is what sets the city apart.

In addition to maintaining Lakewood's 10 major parks -- nine of which have fields -- two community swimming pools and two community centers, the Department is also responsible for both youth and adult recreation programming.

For the youth, the city offers leagues in a variety of sports and age divisions with a focus on participation and sportsmanship. For that reason, all youth leagues are free of charge and all registrants are placed on teams -- every child who wants to participate can. And in addition to the leagues it offers, the Department also works with 12 independent youth sports organizations to provide additional opportunities.

Lakewood's adults also have a full range of recreation options open to them -- everything from basketball to slo- and fast-pitch softball to tennis to volleyball.

And in addition to its parks, facilities and programming, by just about any measure Lakewood's sports also enjoy tremendous community support:

- More than 13,000 participants take part in Lakewood's sports programs annually.
- Each year, between 300 and 350 volunteers devote their time as coaches or in other capacities.
- More than 400 people come out to the city's annual Lakewood Youth Hall of Fame event, where players and coaches are honored and later permanently enshrined in the gallery at a local McDonald's.

All of these numbers add up to support that cannot be matched elsewhere in California.

"This community sees the value in and comes out for its sports," said Joan Biegel, Director of Lakewood's Recreation and Community Services. "Any way you look at it, Lakewood has been a sportstown from the beginning."

Now it has the award to prove it.

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