

Susquehanna Smash volleyball tournament grows to 355 teams

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Wimbledon and the U.S. Open have their center courts.

So too does the Susquehanna Smash.

And for those who advanced to the finals in the popular third annual local grass volleyball tournament last Saturday and Sunday, it was a thrill in their own right.

Players in multiple men's and women's divisions — from pro to juniors to B — brought their best serves and spikes to Warwick's Linear Park, all in the name of fun, winning some prizes and raising money for the American Cancer Society.

"Our goal is to get every division's finals on our center court, so that way they can get that event feel and be able to say, 'I played on center court. That was pretty cool,'" said Craig Dietrich, co-director with Brad Glouner. "People were watching, we had music playing, and we had an announcer that's calling play-by-play. It was a great day, a great family event and we hope to make it even bigger and better next year."

Given the size of this year's tournament, that would be a tremendous feat. Volunteers and event organizers put up 60 volleyball nets to accommodate 355 total teams for the two-day tournament. While Saturday's action consisted of 2-on-2 play, Sunday's slate featured teams of four battling each other.

"Each day, we had about 400 people playing," Dietrich said. "We had an excellent turnout for our tournament. It was close to a hundred (more teams from 2010), which is a huge growth. If you think about those in numbers, it's very significant."

Among those that competed were teams from at least eight or nine different states, including Florida and Oregon. Even the Lancaster-Lebanon boys and girls volleyball leagues were well-represented, with current and alumni players from six or seven schools on hand for the event.

"Our event is really kinda centered around the big metropolitan areas, and when you put up some money for first place like we do for men's open, it really draws people in," Dietrich said. "They come in and say, 'That's a pretty good payday splitting \$1,500 if we can do that over two days.' It's very competitive."

The \$1,500 cash prize for first place went to Jason Peifer (Mt. Joy) and Derick Smith (Harrisburg), who claimed top honors out of 30 men's open teams. The winners in the women's open division took home \$275.

One of the biggest divisions was the men's A division, in which Warwick boys' volleyball coach Nate Gajecki, 33, and his brother Ryan, 37, competed. The two Warwick grads fell in the quarter-finals, but finished tied for fifth place out of roughly 45 teams.

"It's just a good time," Nate said. "It's a great event to come out and play. There's no pressure. You just go out and enjoy yourself and it's as much of a social event as it is a competition to get to see everybody again."

Ryan, in fact, bumped into a former teammate at Slippery Rock who he hadn't seen since their college days.

"It was kinda neat to see the interaction," Nate said. "(The event) was a great success."

In the boys 18-U junior division, the final match had a strong Manheim Central connection, as current Barons' players Austin Good and Brayden Fahnstock defeated MC alumnists Aaron Swarr and Joel Harnly.

"To be honest with you, it was a very busy day for both Brad and I," said Dietrich, the head boys' volleyball coach at Manheim Central, "but it was pretty neat to see them on center court to be able to battle that out. It makes you feel proud because the kids have really been working hard. There's only two guys on the court, so it's a lot different than playing (six at a time), and the kids really enjoyed playing."

Dietrich, though, had to be careful about how he reacted during the match.

"You see one guy take a swing and put a ball away, and you're like, 'Wow, that looks good,' and then you realize that it's against two other kids that you coached," Dietrich laughed, "and you can't celebrate too much or show any favoritism. It's really kinda cool and unique."

Division winners received quality Rudy sunglasses, from the Rudy Project line of products, in addition to long sleeve shirts featuring the tournament's logo. Those who finished third place or higher also took home a tournament T-shirt.

The big winner from the tournament, though, was the American Cancer Society. In the two years that the Susquehanna Smash has been donating proceeds to the ACS, they have now raised more than \$2,400.

"I think everybody knows somebody who has cancer," Dietrich said. "and anything they can do to donate to the cause, they do."

Perhaps the most popular way that people contributed was by purchasing tickets for a serving contest. Prizes were spread out on the court across from the net, and if a person's serve hit a prize, they won that particular item. Local businesses, including Woodstream, Sturgis Pretzels and Cat's Meow, donated prizes. People also purchased tickets for a raffle drawing which is held concurrently.

"Our Motto with that is 'Smash Away Cancer,'" Dietrich said. "Now that people know we do it, we usually get a pretty big crowd around our center court for it. It's really grown in popularity. People that don't even play volleyball will actually do the serving contest. We have people that come out just for that."

Numerous food vendors came out also, including Papa John's, Cat's Meow and Tropical Smoothie.

"We sponsored two Lancaster City police officers going to the World Police Olympics and they've got to qualify in order to do it," Dietrich said. "They ran this Tropical Smoothie stand to supplement their money to take the trip, so that was really cool."

Another thing that was cool was the support that event organizers received from numerous volunteers. Both Dietrich and Glouner couldn't say enough about the efforts of Lititz Borough, Warwick Township and its Business Manager Dan Zimmerman and Warwick Regional Parks and Recreation Director Curt Strasheim.

"They really bent over backwards to help accommodate us with (Linear Park)," Dietrich remarked. "It's a beautiful park. The grass was perfect — the township did a great job preparing the field. Even though we were in a drought, we had really, really green grass."

Countless other volunteers also stepped up to make the event a big success. With Dietrich at the helm of the Barons' volleyball team and Glouner coaching the Warwick JV boys volleyball squad, they have a lot of connections which pays dividends with the tournament.

"I'd say it wildly exceeded our expectations," Dietrich said. "Brad and I have such a good rapport with the volleyball community that really helps and we couldn't do it without volunteers."

They couldn't have done it without a little bit of help from Mother Nature as well.

"We were extremely lucky," Dietrich said. "Harrisburg got pounded, Lebanon got pounded and we got drizzled on a little bit for no more than 10 or 15 minutes. So it was really a great event."