



Athletic Eugene

KIDSPORTS AND LANE UNITED TEAM UP

What is today's best use for the 10.2 prime acres of land including the historic stadium in the center of Eugene?

And how do we pay for it?

Our community has grappled with those civic questions for decades, going back as far as the mid-1930s depth of the Great Depression, when citizens of Eugene voted for a bond measure to buy the property and build a grandstand.

More than 80 years later, the 2015 Eugene City Council soon will respond to citizen proposals for today's best use. *EW* writers Camilla Mortensen and Amy Schneider interview Bev Smith, executive director of Kidsports, and Dave Galas, managing director of Lane United Football Club (soccer), two leaders of today's citizen efforts.

Q&A

BEV SMITH ON KIDSPORTS AT CIVIC SITE

by Camilla Mortensen

Kidsports Executive Director Bev Smith is originally from Canada, where she played twice on the Canadian Olympic basketball team in 1984 and 1996. She led Canada to a silver medal in the 1999 Pan American games and coached the Canadian women's team at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney.

In Eugene, Smith is perhaps better known as a standout player for the Ducks, where, according to GoDucks.com, she established school records for points scored in a single game (38), season (632) and career (2,063). She then went on to coach the Oregon women's team for eight seasons before switching to youth sports which, she tells *EW*, "I find very compelling."

What drew you to Kidsports?

I believe that number one, activity is very important for children. Personal experience always weighs in heavily, and it was very important for my upbringing and probably saved my parents a lot of grief in terms of they knew where I was and what I was doing. You seem to perform better when you are physically active at school and at home.

And fitness is important — we are human beings, and as a result we have mind, body and spirit. Even without organized sports it was important for me to be out on the playgrounds, just playing, running, jumping, having fun, socializing with the neighbors, all of those aspects we don't always consider as aspects of team sports. I really felt my childhood was special because of that.

I have watched youth sports change drastically over the last 40 years, since I was child, and certainly in the last

20 years. In the 21st century, youth sports have come a long way, and at the same time there are some elements we should avoid. I felt I could help by giving back and making it a positive, productive element for children.

Tell me a little more about Kidsports.

Kidsports is a nonprofit organization, a 501(c)(3), that for 61 years this year has developed and delivered team sport opportunities for children kindergarten through eighth grade. The mission is "all kids play," which is a double entendre as we do have minimum playing times, because we feel it's important that children do sign up so they can play in games. Secondly, the mission is "all kids play" in the sense that we find a way for all kids to play, even if they financially can't afford the registration fees.

The scholarship program works on the federal free-lunch program: If your child is eligible for free lunch, then you are given a 66-percent reduction in registration fees. Last year we had almost 13,000 registrants in district [4J, Bethel and Springfield], of which about 4,000 had some type of scholarship assistance.

With 13,000 registrants, if you miss out on those 4,000, not only do those deserving children miss a chance but it also reduces the viable leagues we can have.

The eight core sports we offer are flag football, tackle football, soccer, volleyball, basketball, lacrosse, softball, baseball and T-ball.

Kidsports has partnered with city of Eugene and school districts, and we've been very fortunate. I think it's been a mutually beneficial association for all. In the late '70s, 4J actually asked Kidsports to take over the middle school athletic programs because of budget cuts. Since that time Kidsports has provided after-school team sports opportunities for the community.

What are some of the challenges Kidsports faces that have led it to pursue getting a fieldhouse?

We don't necessarily own any facilities, but our partners have really good rates to use the schools and city fields. But we have found there are limitations to the number of facilities we have. There's a real crunch on not only the number of facilities we have in the city of Eugene, but also on access to facilities. Because of budget cuts to schools, a lot of the access hours have been cut due to janitorial budget cuts.

For example, we had almost 200 some-odd basketball coaches at a meeting Tuesday night to begin the basketball season, and we can't actually fit all of our teams into the gyms we have available here in 4J, so there's a lot of sharing. Coaches [sharing space on the courts] certainly can empathize with teachers over what it's like to have 37 students in one classroom.

Part of the plan is to build a fieldhouse at the Civic Stadium site. What is a fieldhouse, anyway, and what would this entail?

There are different definitions, but what we have been looking for in the last two or three years as an organization is an opportunity to construct a fieldhouse that would hold four full-size basketball courts that you could then convert to nine to 12 volleyball courts. The real crunch for us is when the rain and the darkness of winter season begins, everyone goes inside and therefore we don't have the facilities that can accommodate all of the activities and all of the programs that we have.

Having the equivalent of four new school gyms in one place would certainly provide some extra activity space that we feel would really enhance programs and allow us to facilitate our programs.

We wouldn't change the core program; we would still go and use the school facilities in the neighborhoods where the children live and where the coaches live. That's a very important aspect of this whole idea. But having four full-size courts would then allow us to hold tournaments and to allow our regular-season games to run in a facility which is operated and run by us. Currently we rent out space for our volleyball and basketball programs at the Lane County Fairgrounds and at Willamalane in Springfield. Without those courts we would not be able to run a lot of our programs.

If there is a fieldhouse built in south Eugene, would that mean someday Kidsports would have facilities in other areas of town?

That really is our goal; we do feel there is a need. We have people who travel all over the place — 4J people who travel over to Willamalane for our volleyball programs, people who travel up to Meadowview and Prairie Mountain, and then we have the older kids who live up there who come down to 4J where we can fit in the appropriate age groups for the facilities and equipment they need.