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GROUND-BREAKING CAMP

Skyhawks program benefiting campers, communities

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Mike Atkins had no idea a summer roller hockey camp could be so successful.

But when more than 30 area youngsters showed up June 11 for the Rockwall YMCA's first summer roller hockey program, Atkins knew such a camp probably wouldn't have happened without the help of Spokane, Wash.-based Skyhawks Sports Academy, Inc.

"You don't necessarily associate the Rockwall area with youth hockey, so when that many kids showed up in our parking lot for the camp, we knew things wouldn't have been possible without the Skyhawks group," said Atkins, Rockwall County YMCA athletic coordinator. "It was amazing to see what they offered."

Providing year-round athletic programs to children and teens for more than 20 years nationwide, and for five years in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Skyhawks sports camps have forged relationships with community-based organizations.

According to Skyhawks Dallas-area director Greg Dobbs, Skyhawks programs have been developed and polished over the years to improve individual skills and are tailored to each sport offered, such as basketball, golf, roller hockey and flag football.

"We're really there to give young athletes the opportunity to enrich their sports skills in a safe, positive and noncompetitive environment," Dobbs said. "Skyhawks programs really work to foster the dreams of young athletes while building fundamental skills."

One of the main reasons Skyhawks camps seem to have succeeded is their partnerships with local organizations such as the YMCA and city parks and recreation departments. By making local fields, courts and gymnasiums available to Skyhawks coaches and staff, community organizations are able to attract more athletes for more camps than they would without the assistance and reputation Skyhawks coaches bring.

"We're still a relatively small department," Rowlett Parks and Recreation director Juanita Ocanas said. "We're able to get some local volunteers, but the Skyhawks groups gives us the ability for variety in the camps we can offer."

For example, in an area such as Rockwall that is known more for its youth golf, baseball or softball programs than it is for youth hockey, Skyhawks is effective because it is able to recruit coaches from a large pool of qualified instructors outside the immediate area. Its flexibility opens more doors and offers more comprehensive instruction than might be found in a local pool of coaches.

"There is no way we could keep the number of full-time coaches on staff that are needed for these summer camps," said Rockwall Parks and Recreation athletic director Bill Wallace. "They can go out and bring in good coaches from all over the area that allow us to offer more classes to the public."

While Skyhawks camps are offered all year, the summer months account for the largest number of interested athletes. The most popular Skyhawks camps, according to Dobbs, are the Mini-hawk camps for children ages 4-7.

Mini-hawk camps allow children to explore soccer, baseball and basketball in a single, week-long camp.

The player-to-coach ratio is 8:1.

"Mini-hawk camps offer young children the chance to play three sports in a controlled noncompetitive atmosphere," Dobbs said. "For three hours a day in one-week increments, Mini-hawk camps are by far the most popular camps we offer in the Dallas-Fort Worth area."

The true popularity of Skyhawks camps, however, is found in the organization's mission statement to teach children the fundamentals and manners of athletics in a relaxed environment.

"We realize we're dealing with children who have attention spans of all lengths, so taking it easy and stressing fun above all else is probably why so many parents enroll their kids in our camps," Dobbs said. "Getting kids interested in a positive athletic environment early really helps them as they mature."

Mini-hawk camps are under way in Rockwall, and July 9-13 Skyhawks-sponsored camps include ones for flag football in Rockwall and soccer in Rowlett.

Each camp has openings, and interested individuals can call Rowlett Parks and Recreation at 972-412-6173 or Rockwall Parks and Recreation at 972-771-7740.