



Skyhawks teaches life skills through sports

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Looking back on the past 30 years, Skyhawks CEO Dave Berto says he always knew the company would be successful, but he never imagined it would become so big.

"Yes, I actually always envisioned this," Berto said. "I always saw what it would be today just not what it would become tomorrow. Now our goal is to just keep growing."

The main goal of Skyhawks, the nation's largest provider of sports programs, is "to teach children and young adults life lessons through athletics."

While this summer will be Skyhawks' 30th year, it is not until September when they will begin their campaign to promote their 30th season for the summer of 2009.

When the company began back in the late 1970s it covered three states: Washington, Montana and Idaho, but since then has expanded to 24 states in the U.S. and plans to expand into Canada and possibly China in the future.

A cornerstone of the organization is the fact that every camp around the country is operated the same way.

"It is important for all our camps to be the same," said Todd White, the Inland Northwest Area Manager. "The coaches go through all the same things and that's what makes it so successful."

The camps give every child an opportunity in a non-competitive atmosphere.

"It's not just for elite kids," White said. "It's for everyone and it helps kids create a love for sport and to help them learn basic fundamentals."

The staff of Skyhawks, a company that puts on sports camps for kids across the United States, stands outside their offices in the Mount Spokane area Mar. 27. From left, they are Patty Shelley, CEO and President Dave Berto, Lois Tipple, Teryn Clement, Phil Champlin, Pam Trull, Erika Skar, Jarred Perona and Tracy Umbrell.

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(JESSE TINSLEY The Spokesman-Review)

Skyhawks lets parents know that their kids will be in trusted hands and will be taught valuable lessons.

"Kids will learn how to compete," Berto said. "It gives them a chance to learn lessons they can take with them forever. Preparation, attitude and commitment to finish."

Another reason for the success of Skyhawks has been their ability to keep both campers and coaches always coming back.

"They usually start here as campers and then move up from there," Berto said. "Five of the top corporate positions are filled with people who started from the bottom."

Phil Champlin, Skyhawks vice president of operations, is one example of a person who worked his way to the top and has enjoyed every minute of his opportunity to teach kids.

"I started about 10 years ago as area manager, but I've worked my way up and got the opportunity to prove myself and show what I can do," Champlin said. "I have always had a passion for teaching kids life skills. I get jazzed and excited to give kids the opportunity to come out and play sports and to leave with a higher self esteem."

An encouraging statistic for the Skyhawks camps has been the feedback they get from both participants and parents. About 98 percent of feedback they get is positive.

"One of my favorite things to do at the camps is to sit down with the parents," Champlin said. "Parents would just tell me stories of how much their kids enjoyed the camp."

Skyhawks, in the process of expansion, now has 69 company-owned franchises, an interactive technology professional group and a new online store.

While Skyhawks is predominantly focused on summer camps, year-round programs may be around the corner as they are in talks with the After School All-Stars of Los Angeles.

"We are teamed with the L.A. chapter to pilot programs in middle schools," Berto said. "It offers daily programs after school to kids so they can stay productive in school homework and after-school activities and sports."

With almost 30 years in the books and more than a million kids reached through the program, there's no telling where Skyhawks will soar to next.