

Portage Lakes tradition is taking shape

Sand-castle competition, fireworks display lure families back to beach over holiday weekend

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It was hard not to notice that the sand castles taking shape along the edge of Turkeyfoot Beach looked like a homespun community, and that their architects did, too.

For many years, summer holiday weekends at the Portage Lakes State Park swimming beach had been left to the tides, with little formal activity other than the annual boat parade that crosses East Reservoir.



Jimmy Boone, 17 of Akron puts the finishing touches on his group's winning sand kingdom at Portage Lakes State Park in New Franklin on Saturday. (Mike Cardew/Akron Beacon Journal)

But a simple sand-castle contest, which Saturday marked its sixth year, seems to have rebuilt the kind of family connection to the picturesque shoreline park that many Akronites recall from the past, and that state park officials have hoped for.

Jeff Smith watched from the edge of the beach as his 8-year-old daughter Breanna slapped handfuls of wet sand onto the moat-encircled creation she and her friends Kamron Johnson and Alexis Jordan were building.

He remembered years ago when the beach had lifeguards and drew lots of families. Now, with the Portage Lakes Fireworks Association working in tandem with the state park, the beach seems to have regained its old feeling. Smith said for the past few years he has made a point of including the park in his family's Fourth of July plans.

"It's just nice that they did all this," he said, looking down the beach at the clusters of busy sand-castle builders.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of how a new tradition has taken root was that the top three finishers in the contest have all competed in previous years.

And the winners are . . .

The first-place winner, "Castle Rox," named for one of its builders, Rox Boone, was built by a group of friends connected by Ellet Little League baseball who finally broke a curse — they'd finished in second place the previous three years.

"This has become a family tradition, coming out here every year," Tom McKibben said as he looked over the sandy kingdom.



Kamron Johnson, 9 1/2 and Alexis Jordan work on their sand creation during the Sixth annual Sandcastle Building Contest at Portage Lakes State Park on Saturday, July 5, 2008, in Akron, Ohio. (Mike Cardew/Akron Beacon Journal)

The elaborate compound, created by the Boone, Beck and McKibben families, included a large castle structure with a series of outlying shapes that spelled "U-S-A."

As the two-hour time limit ticked away, team member Rob Boone carefully swept the sand surrounding the structure to give it a clean landscape.

"Just rakin' the yard," he said as his fellow builders primped over pieces of reed stuck along the wall and poured water into the moats.

Second place went to a Shrek-themed castle built by the Kosa family. Frank Kosa said he and his kids actually decided on their castle a year ago after failing to claim top prize. A couple of days after Fourth of July last year, he picked up a secondhand set of Shrek and Donkey stuffed dolls, which were set outside the walls, inside of which sat the dragon doll, evoking the animated story.

Third prize went to a castle built by Ricky, Daniel, Sarah, Jacob and Tommy Gardner and Tony Scinta, all under age 18.

Prizes, fireworks

The Portage Lakes Fireworks Association provided prize money — \$75, \$50 and \$25 to the top three finishers — and plastic scoops to aid with the sand construction. The group also hosted a fireworks display Saturday evening.

Amber Kaufmann, a Portage Lakes State Park naturalist, said the contest, which attracted 32 teams of up to six members each, has begun to feel like a tradition.

"I'm very proud that people are coming back year after year," she said. "Each year, we're seeing more families coming to the park. Everything is based on families, and families need to stick together and show support to each other, and that helps to build a better community."

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