



Redefining the weekend warrior

Get Active At Midwest Outdoor Experience

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The Subaru Ultimate Air Dogs entertain attendees during Midwest Outdoor Experience in 2012; Photo: Bill Franz

There's something happening this weekend. Something big. A convention, a reunion, a festival, a weekend of play. It's an outreach, an invitation from outdoor junkies to the uninitiated adventurer.

It started in 2006 with a Five Rivers MetroParks campaign to launch an outdoor recreation initiative for the Dayton area. The first several years were called GearFest, a street party next to

the 2nd Street Market where people came to buy, sell and swap outdoor gear. There were exhibitors and musicians, a rock wall for climbers and a pool for kayakers.

But as the event progressed and gained interest, GearFest outgrew its downtown venue.

“It was really fun downtown, but we were getting limited with space and we also had a shift in strategy,” said Tom Helbig, outdoor recreation department special events coordinator for Five Rivers MetroParks. “We wanted to get people hands-on with as many outdoor activities as possible, which is hard to do on city streets.”

So, in 2010 Gearfest ditched downtown for the scenic sprawl of Eastwood MetroPark, where exhibitors and outdoor adventurers could roam free over acres of lakes and trails. Last year, GearFest became Midwest Outdoor Experience (Presented by Subaru), a name change that reflects the shifting focus of the now-massive two-day event.

“We kept going back to the fact that we wanted people to have an outdoor experience,” Helbig said, “whether it was watching professional athletes do tricks, or camping for the weekend or chatting with exhibitors. It became less and less about the gear and more about the things you could experience with it.”

There are as many as 20 different things to experience this year, including biking, disc golf, canoeing, slack lining, snow skiing, yoga and paddleboarding. There are competitions, exhibitions, demonstrations and a good, old-fashioned beer tent.

But it takes a lot more than gumption and a good idea to pull off an event like this.

“It’s such a special event to the Dayton area, and we’re so fortunate to have it right here in Dayton,” said Andy Niekamp, a faithful volunteer for Midwest Outdoor Experience. “It takes all kinds to make it work: Five Rivers MetroParks, volunteers, sponsors, exhibitors. I wanted to do my part to help with this great event, and to keep it great.”

In the weeks leading up to the event, Niekamp will volunteer about 125 hours – three days a week, six hours a day, for five weeks. And those days will only get longer as they near the big weekend.

Not surprisingly, Niekamp is a long-time member of the so-called society of outdoor enthusiasts. He’s a long-distance hiker, having recently completed a 500-mile hike from Denver to Durango on the Colorado Trail. He’s the organizer for Dayton’s largest outdoor recreation group, the Dayton Hikers (motto: “live to hike ... hike to live”). He also owns a small company called Outdoor Adventure Connection, which specializes in backcountry adventures.

For Niekamp, Midwest Outdoor Experience is a labor of love.

“I have developed a deep appreciation for all the hard work that the folks at Five Rivers do to make this happen,” he said. “When you work on the inside of a large special event like this, you see all the details and planning and thinking that goes into it. ... Tom and his staff work hard to be creative to think of new ideas.”

Something for everybody

At first glance, Midwest Outdoor Experience may sound a little intimidating for those of us who are a bit more couch-inclined. Something like an exclusive gathering of Spider-Man rock climbers and water-thrashing adrenaline junkies. But fear not! You don't have to have the outdoor expertise of Helbig and Niekamp to enjoy Midwest Outdoor Experience. You only need (maybe a fraction of) their energy.

"That intimidation factor is something we don't want in the mix," Helbig said. "We want people to be comfortable sitting outside, being active. So we put on Midwest Outdoor Experience because you can do all these things at no cost ... they're safe, they're fun, they're with other people and that eliminates all the barriers. You just come and play for the weekend."

The folks at Five Rivers have designed the weekend around the idea that there's something for everyone to experience. The spectrum ranges from a six-hole disc golf course to a 12-hour endurance run. There's orienteering, geocaching, skateboarding and backpacking.

Beginners might try their hand – rather, their feet – at slack lining, presented and staffed by True Heights Equipment Outfitters. It's a balance sport that features webbing secured between two trees or poles.

"It's like a two inch-wide trampoline," explained Brandon Riggins, another one of those outdoor gurus, who owns True Heights with his dad John.

Both Brandon and John are seasoned adventurers.

"My first experience was in Colorado," Riggins said. "I was standing on top of a mountain at 10,000 feet and I fell in love and decided I didn't want to do anything else for the rest of my life."

So, after discussing business plans during a hike down the Appalachian Trail, the father-son duo decided it was time to open an outfitter.

The fledgling Beaver Creek outfit only opened its doors the first weekend in September, but John and Brandon have been involved with Midwest Outdoor Experience since the beginning.

"We had been going as loyal patrons for years on end back on 2nd Street," Riggins said. "We had known it was here and when we started opening, we contacted Tom [Helbig] and Five Rivers MetroPark to see how we could help them out. What's better than getting to sit around and talk about the outdoors all day long?"

And that's exactly where you'll find Brandon – in the True Heights Outfitters Slackline Park, showing beginners the ropes. While the pros perch themselves high between two trees, amateurs can teeter with confidence, knowing that terra firma is only a foot away.

Introducing newbies to novel experiences is a standard part of the Five Rivers protocol, even outside of this adventure-filled weekend.

"Every year we're adding new things for people to try, bringing in new sponsors to manage those activities and making sure there's something for everybody," Helbig said.

And that invitation extends to our furry friends as well, so there's no need to look for a dogsitter. Dogs can run free in Zuke's Bark Zone, and enjoy a "yappy hour" that includes treats, drinks and other surprises. There's a 5k for owners to complete with their dogs, as well as paddling, backcountry adventures and REI schools all designed with canines in mind. Not to mention two troupes of professional disc-catching pooches, Team Zoom fueled by Zukes, and Subaru Ultimate Air Dogs.

"We put this together strategically, because there's something for everybody, no matter your age, your abilities or whether you're a dog," Helbig said.

That something-for-everybody mentality includes programming for persons with disabilities, Helbig said. Adaptive cycling, kayaking and snow-ski demonstrations are just some of the options offered.

With no shortage of things to do, simply getting around the monster two-day event will probably leave you a bit winded. Helbig says the best way to do Midwest Outdoor Experience is to stay overnight.

"If you want to capture everything that's going on and absorb the weekend, you have to camp," Helbig said. "If you come for a couple of hours, you just miss so much."

The Outdoor Adventure Capital of the Midwest

"We joked about it when we launched this outdoor recreation initiative in 2006," Helbig said of the rather ambitious moniker. "We joked about it with staff, saying 'We're going to make Dayton the outdoor adventure capital of the Midwest.'"

But then they started to list all the outdoor amenities Dayton has to offer: like the 30 miles of mountain bike trails within 15 minutes of Dayton. There are backpacking trails, nine disc golf courses and plans for two whitewater parks. Dayton was recently designated as bronze level bike friendly community, with 330 miles of trails, and new connections happening every year.

So perhaps it isn't so ludicrous that Five Rivers MetroParks has embarked on a mission to establish Dayton as the Outdoor Adventure Capital of the Midwest.

"I am absolutely a firm believer in that," Niekamp said of the campaign. "When you look at everything Dayton has to offer for outdoor recreation, we aren't matched by anyone in the Midwest. And Midwest Outdoor Experience is a key component of that. We are the Outdoor Adventure Capital of the Midwest."

Dayton lies within a two-and-a-half hour drive of 14 million people, from Columbus and Cincinnati, Lexington and Louisville, Indianapolis, Toledo and Huntington, W. Va. It's just a matter of letting them know where to go.

"Dayton is becoming a destination for the Midwest," Helbig said. "So Midwest Outdoor Experience is a way for us to put on all those activities and promote the culture and the community that's growing in Dayton – in one place in one weekend."

Directing potential adventurers to Dayton is a responsibility Niekamp takes seriously.

“We all need to have a hand in making and keeping this the Outdoor Adventure Capital of the Midwest,” Niekamp said. “Even the smallest club in Dayton has a part in making this happen. Everybody pitches in to make this happen.”

It’s evident that an event like Midwest Outdoor Experience wouldn’t be possible without passionate individuals like Niekamp, who are not only in love with their craft, but convinced that Dayton is, without a doubt, the Outdoor Adventure Capital of the Midwest. Niekamp says Midwest Outdoor Experience has also become a reunion of sorts, where he can reconnect with others in the outdoor community, share stories and swap new ideas.

Dayton’s standing in the outdoor community has already been recognized by sponsors, some of whom are literally moving mountains for Midwest Outdoor Experience.

Mad River Mountain, Ohio’s largest ski and snow tubing resort, is bringing a semi-truck full of snow to the event to facilitate a short tubing run as well as a rail jam area for snowboarders.

Good news for the lawn chair enthusiast

If, perhaps, you are still tentative about your abilities to climb, jump, balance and paddle, there’s still good news. In true something-for-everybody spirit, Midwest Outdoor Experience features an activity we can all get behind: a beer garden sponsored by Great Lakes Brewing Company and two nights of live music.

“Midwest Outdoor Experience has the things every other festival has, too – beer, music and food – but we just have a bunch of other cool stuff going on,” Helbig said.

You’ll find two bands Friday night, sponsored by WYSO, and eight bands Saturday, as part of the Dayton Music Fest.

“So if you’re looking for the traditional festival experience, you can have that,” Helbig said. “But between bands you can watch some white water kayaker do tricks.”

And thanks to big name sponsors including Subaru, REI and Eddie Bauer – the complete list of sponsors can be found on the event’s website – beer and food might be the only things you end up paying for. There are no entrance fees, no camping fees and no need to bring any of your own equipment.

“You could show up without any gear, and climb a rock wall, play some disc golf, take a fly fishing lesson and go kayaking,” Helbig said. “If you come to this event and you’re bored, we’ll have to check your pulse.”

The next-to-nothing investment might be the biggest selling point for the out-of-doors uninitiated. The event brings in about 15,000 people over the weekend – a healthy mix of old pros and complete novices, all ages and multiple species. After two days, they’ll leave the park; no doubt a little dirty, a little tired and a little more experienced.

Midwest Outdoor Experience takes place Friday, Oct. 4 and Saturday, Oct. 5 at Eastwood MetroPark, 1385 Harshman Rd. The events begin 6 p.m. Friday, but campers can set up as early as noon. The campground will close at noon on Sunday. Admission, camping and parking are

free. For more information, go to metroparks.org/outdoorx, and look under the “Get Active” tab for a list of available activities.

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