

Fun, free and fabulous

Fair: Leaders share their favorite activities

Sponsors, spectators help keep the fair admission-free

By Colleen Jurkiewicz

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OZAUKEE COUNTY — It's no small job keeping the Ozaukee County Fair free.

The key to ensuring zero admission charges, say organizers, is twofold: the generosity of fair sponsors on all levels, and a healthy turnout for the grandstand events.

"I know that's cliché to say 'thank you to our sponsors' – but that is the actual reason why our fair is still a freegate admission," said Natalie Salkowski, a member of the Fair Board of Directors. "If it wasn't for people even being a friend of the fair and giving just what they can, as well as big businesses sponsoring a stage, we wouldn't be able to do anything. We would have had to build a fence and have admission a long time ago."

According to the fair's official history, attendees actually were charged admission for close to a century, though in 1934 the gate fee was reduced to 25 cents from 50 cents in deference to the many families struggling to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Admission fees were done away with altogether in 1942, a move inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's insistence that nationally beloved sports and amusements endure amidst the spectre of war.

The flipside of securing sponsorship, said board member Holly Wilger, is a commitment to bringing quality entertainment that will do credit to those sponsors, and providing activities that will draw a wide variety of attendees from Ozaukee County and beyond.

"We try to keep it free so that families can come and enjoy the little things – like the kid shows that we have," she said. "We hope that the families can come into the fairgrounds with their small children and spend the day (without paying for admission), and maybe spend some money on parking, or for a grandstand show later on."

After sponsorship, the fair gets its revenue from avenues that include parking fees, beer sales and grandstand tickets, so the Fair Board aims to keep an action-packed grandstand lineup that will draw crowds each evening.

This year's grandstand offerings start off Wednesday with the 46th annual truck and tractor pulls at 6 p.m., creating one event from what was, in previous years, two separate attractions. Tickets are \$8 for

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Clockwise from top left, rabbits, along with poultry, are shown in a barn on the north side of the fairgrounds; 4-H livestock auctioneer Cassie Hanson hears bids from the crowd; the demolition derby, a crowd favorite, is held at 6 p.m. Saturday at the grandstand; Peyton Rychtik is pictured with her 2015 champion in dairy beef.

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adults and \$4 for children. The truck and tractor pulls are followed by fireworks at dusk, which organizers say routinely attract attendees from far beyond Ozaukee County.

Thursday evening's grandstand activities consist of the firemen's water fights at 6:30 p.m., in homage to the Cedarburg Fire Department's 150th anniversary. The premise is simple: a beer barrel is attached to a swivel on a pulley and suspended 12 feet in the air, and two rival fire departments have to push the barrel with the stream of their hoses. More than 10 local fire departments will participate in this free event, where goodwill donations will be accepted to benefit summer camps for burn-injured youth.

Saturday and Sunday will bring the return of the demolition derby, an annual favorite, at 6 p.m. and 2 p.m. respectively. Tickets are \$12 for adults and \$6 for children. Organizers recommend purchasing tickets in advance at ozaukeecountyfair.com for the always-popular demo derby, where up to 100

cars, mini vans and school buses compete.

Another way for fair fans to support the mission of the free fair is by signing up for the second annual Barnyard 5k Walk/Run on Sunday at 8 a.m. Last year's inaugural run/walk drew more than 100 participants, said Salkowski.

Though Ozaukee's isn't the last free fair in the state, it is one of a small number. In the summer of 2009 as the Wisconsin State Fairest of the Fair, Salkowski visited the majority of other counties' offerings.

"Of all the fairs that I went to, usually all of the ones that are free are very small, more agricultural-based fairs. They usually come from smaller counties," she said. "I think for the socioeconomic status of our county, for what this county has to offer, having a free fair is an extremely rare value in a place where people could potentially afford to pay. That makes it really, really special because we can bring in people from outside and show what a little hidden gem our county is."

"At last year's fair, someone came up to me and said, 'We drove all the way from Pennsylvania for this fair just because it's free!'" said 2016 Fairest of the Fair Annalise Jasinski.

"We always try to have something for every age group," Wilger said. "Whether you're 3 years old and you're intrigued by magic or you're 70 years old and you want to come watch Charlie Daniels, and there's something for everybody in between."

Longtime fair organizers and volunteers share their "fair favorites:" Jody Brzezinski, Ozaukee County Fair Board of Directors: "Coming from a 4-H background, I always get excited about the livestock judging. That's just a personal favorite for me. I've been a part of it for well over 30 years. However, this year, I am super-excited about the Charlie Daniels Band – I am over the moon that we have him at our fair! I'm also a big fan of the free stages. I'm proud that we have a good lineup of local bands that we can feature at our fair. It's free entertainment."

Jan Dommer, leader, Knellsville 4-H Club: "I'm a dairy leader, so I gravitate toward the dairy club part of it. Working with the kids and the animals down in the dairy barn – that's what I look forward to. It goes back to my youth – I grew up on a dairy farm in Saukville so I've always been interested in animals, and I feel that the animal groups have a very good camaraderie. There are a lot of families, and the kids have a good time. A lot of the kids there were in my 4-H club when I grew up, they've continued on to be leaders. You see them all at the fair, you share memories of things that you've done over the years."

Diane Ohmdahl, Ozaukee County Fair Board of Directors: "I love the family aspect of the fair. This will be my 58th Ozaukee County Fair, and both my grandsons are in 4-H and they love the fair – neither of them have ever missed a year."

Diane Pfaffenroth, co-treasurer, Ozaukee County 4-H Leaders Association: "My favorite thing about the fair is reliving the memories of childhood and the wonderful friendships made through 4-H and the fair. The exhibits, animals, children activities, Tiny Tot Showmanship, dairy judging, Kettle Korn, Nutty Nut Ice Cream Bars, barn duties – the list goes on and on. Ozaukee County Fair is not just centered around 4-H, although my love of the fair stems from that. There is literally something for everyone of every age."

Joe Roden, president of 4-H Livestock Association: "My favorite thing is seeing the excitement on the faces of all the 4-H kids when they get to show off their projects at judging. (It was recently) the culmination of all their hard work and all they've put into it year-round. 4-H is really like a second family."

Holly Wilger, secretary, Ozaukee County Agricultural Society: “My favorite thing to do at the fair is watch the 4-H Dairy Show. As I grew up, we had a dairy farm, and I showed dairy. It brings back good memories – a lot of my friends are there, and their kids are now in 4-H and showing. We talk about the fun we had, the water fights we had behind the barn that no one was supposed to know about! That was a very big part of my 4-H career and my 4-H heart.”