

PLAYGROUND PARADISE

Private partnership making difference at Poway's prized sports park

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POWAY — The fields are immaculate. The action is heavy. The operation is smooth. And the reviews are sparkling.

The Poway Sportsplex is on the cutting edge of community recreational sports facilities. Its success could make it a model for other Southern California cities to follow.

What makes the Poway Sportsplex (renamed this month from Poway Sportspark) such a unique facility is its successful partnership of a private company and a city government.

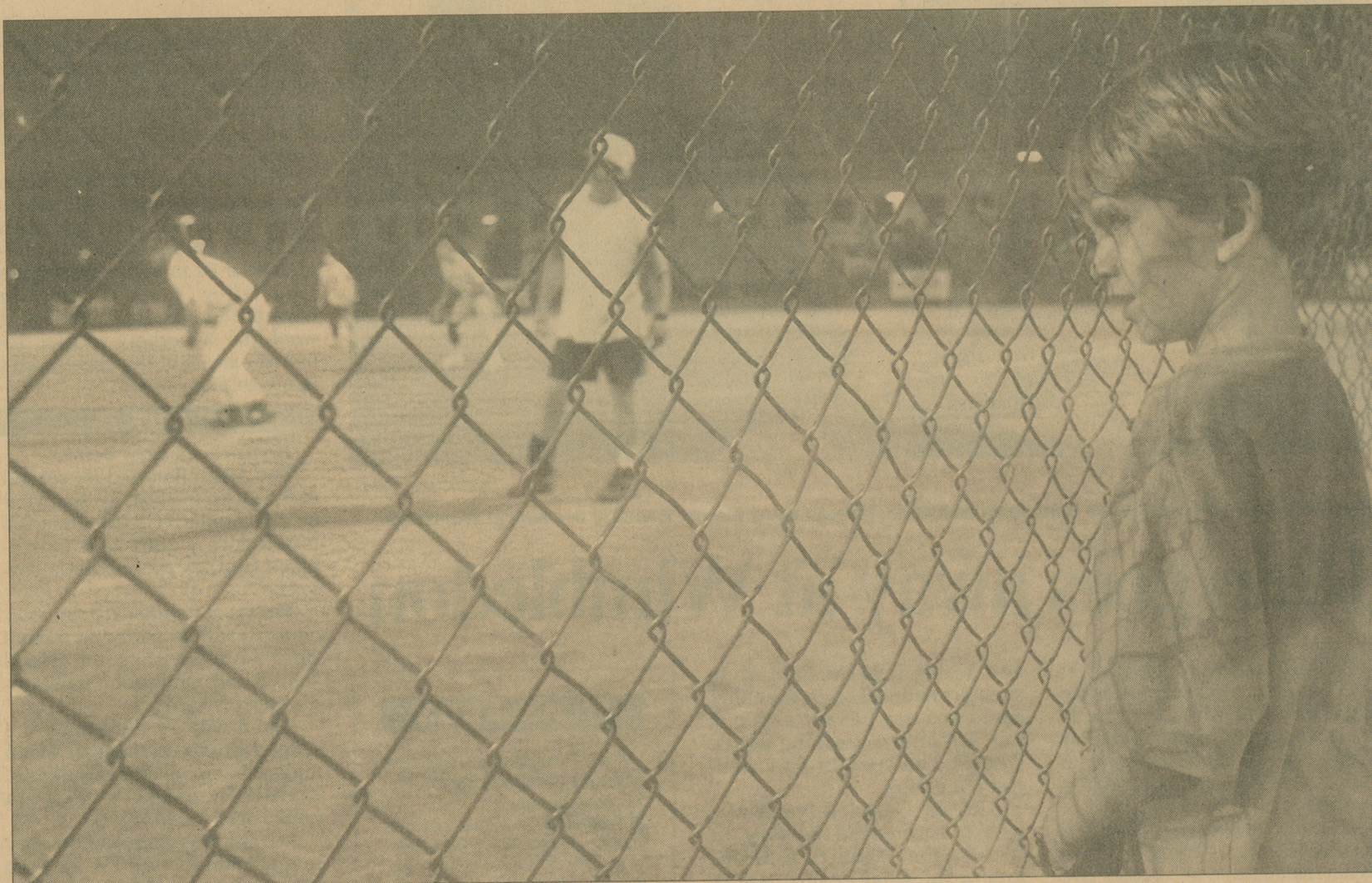
The City of Poway spent \$3 million to build the facility on city land in the hills south of Poway Road. On the property are three of the best softball fields you can find anywhere. There are basketball courts, sand volleyball courts, four slow-pitch batting cages and a children's playground. All are built around a central hub of offices, a concession stand and sports pub.

While most community parks start out sparkling new and degrade because city budgets can't maintain them to the quality they deserve, that isn't the case here.

From the day it opened — Jan. 8, 1994 — a private operating company, now under the name Sportsplex USA, has leased the facility. It can run it far more efficiently and cost effectively than the city ever could.

It has been a win-win situation for everybody.

"By us assuming the responsibilities the city doesn't have any liability," said Sportsplex USA general manager and co-owner Bill Berghoff. "We have to insure the fields, the facilities and all participants out there. We don't have to pay our maintenance guys triple time to come in here at three in the morning after Friday night league games to get it



HAYNE PALMOUR / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Nine-year-old Andrew Swint of Poway watches his father, Tom, play during a recreational softball game at the Poway Sportsplex.

ready for Saturday tournaments. The city also doesn't have to worry about the headaches of running an adult recreational program. We've taken that burden off of their shoulders."

A burden Poway is glad to have lifted.

Says Bob Thomas, Community Services Director for Poway: "Originally the city used to operate adult softball leagues at Community Park. This move has enabled us to free those fields for the Pony Leagues to use and still meet the demand for softball

leagues. Back then the city was basically subsidizing adult softball. Quite frankly, we're not in the business of running softball leagues. This gets rid of those headaches."

Freeing fields for other uses and still meeting the demand for adult softball aren't the only benefits Poway gets out of the arrangement.

Sportsplex USA pays a fixed monthly rent of \$2,500 to the city. If revenue exceeds \$250,000 for the year the city receives a share.

The operating company makes its money in a number of ways. Entrance fees for teams are only a small part of it. The real profit comes from concessions and opening the park for corporate outings and tournament play.

These tournaments and outings bring people to Poway from all over the country. Visitors, of course, spend money at area restaurants and stay in local hotels.

"It's a first-class facility, we're proud of that," said Thomas. "It's a sign of the quality of life for the town the same way our school

system is."

Because concessions are run by a private company, a liquor license has been obtained, creating more revenue and an environment the participants have found inviting.

"We're the only softball facility in Southern California with a liquor license," said Berghoff. "Our whole concept is why go to a sports bar after your game when we have our own sports bar here. Why not just stick around and watch Monday Night Football at our place?"

A bunch of rowdy softball players sitting around chugging beers? Not so, claims Berghoff.

"We're striving for a good family atmosphere where mom can come and watch her husband play ball and bring the kids," he said. "You don't have to worry about hearing foul language and fights from a bunch of drunk athletes."

For security reasons, the park has just one entrance and is completely enclosed. Those entering the facility must pay \$2 (which can be used as a credit at the concession stand). The players have no objection to that setup or the strict rules against rude behavior.

"It really keeps the riffraff out by charging \$2," said Poway's Tim Webber, who is both a player and umpire at the facility.

The fields are immaculate. Not only do you get true hops in the infield, but each field has fences, state of the art lighting, a scoreboard and warning tracks.

"The advantage of being here is you have the best lighted softball fields in San Diego County," said the 40-year-old Webber, who's been playing all over the county for the last 22 years.

"As far as fields are concerned, you can't find any better around. The players really enjoy playing here."

The numbers bear that out. More than 170 teams play here 50 weeks a year.

The operating company not only keeps the fields in great shape, it organizes and markets the leagues, handles scheduling and provides umpires.

"We've had a real good public-private partnership for the past three years," said Thomas. "This is a trend I think you'll see more and more of in the future. The key is to have a capable firm and a good quality facility. We've got that."

Sportsplex USA has spoken with many other communities, including Carlsbad. Poway's model may soon be duplicated.