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National Recreation and Park Association

THE HEALTH & WELLNESS ISSUE

Touchdown for Active Kids

NFL initiative brings exciting KidZone play space to Charlotte

By Samantha Bartram

These days, kids have a lot of options when it comes to filling their free hours. Video games, the Internet, television and other screen-based entertainments garner an ever-increasing share of that time, while parents, teachers and health officials fret about how to convince children to choose more active pastimes. Mecklenburg County, North Carolina's Freedom Park now has a tantalizing alternative that has already proved a hit with adults and children alike — the new NFL Play 60 KidZone play space includes the sort of unique, enticing amenities that get children excited about being active outdoors.

Play 60 for Health

The NFL's Play 60 national youth health and fitness campaign has been around since 2007, with the goal of encouraging children to engage in at least 60 minutes of active play every day. Dozens of afterschool and team-based programs, national outreach campaigns, online toolkits and similar initiatives were developed to spice up exercise and sports opportunities with the power and allure of the NFL. To date, more than \$200 million has been dedicated to supporting youth health and wellness through NFL Play 60.

In September 2012, the NFL held a Play 60 social media contest between its teams as part of the "Back to Football" season kickoff initiative. Carolina Panthers fans, known for their high levels of engagement, won the competition and a \$25,000 award to be used to fund a Play 60 project. "There were no specific guidelines for the project, so we had some flexibility to think out of the box," says Riley Fields, director of community relations for the Carolina Panthers. "Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation was enthused about partnering in the effort, and from there it took off. We

quickly saw the opportunity to execute a one-of-a-kind Play 60 project that would provide kids with a next generation-style play space. Ultimately, we came up with a conceptual phrase that drove our creative thinking process — NFL Combine meets 'America Ninja Warrior.'"

Fields worked closely with Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Director Jim Garges and Superintendent of Park Operations Greg Clemmer to hash out a basic plan for the KidZone. "Riley and I actually designed this project on the back of a napkin," Clemmer says, laughing. They then took those ideas to Todd Lehman, owner and executive creative director at Cre8Play, to see if the manufacturers of custom playground features and equipment could bring their vision to life.

For "design guy" Lehman, the project was an easy sell. "I've done a lot of traditional playground designs over the years, but one thing I really enjoy is creating these totally unique environments that have never been done and really trying to fulfill the clients' dreams," he says.

Building the Dream

Mecklenburg County boasts 222 parks, but Freedom Park's location and size made it the ideal spot to add the KidZone playground. The 98-acre parcel includes both active and passive recreational opportunities, like tennis courts, athletic fields, a large lake and ample green space. "Freedom Park is probably the most iconic park in our county," Garges says. "Many people recognize it as our 'Central Park,' due

One of dozens of young attendees explores the KidZone at its September 2013 unveiling.



to its location, size, history and the variety of things to do there. It's just a very, very special spot."

Once the site selection and visioning process for the KidZone was finalized, Lehman and his partners at Cunningham Recreation began to "drill down" on the necessary design and manufacturing aspects of the project. Lehman says that undertaking is a lot more complicated than simply placing prefabricated equipment here or there. "We had to study the anthropometrics of a child," he says. "How fast they run, how long their strides are.... But we're not just building for kids — we also have to think about a parent or a 250-pound lineman who might run across some of these things."

Nothing about the Play 60 KidZone is "off the shelf," Garges says. The area includes a 40-yard dash with built-in automatic stopwatch capabilities and a scoreboard where runners can see their times in digital display. There's a "pep-talk station," where prerecorded messages from Panthers players encourage kids to exercise hard and do their best. "How cool is it if you're 9 years old and [Panthers middle linebacker] Luke Kuechly is telling you that you're the GOAT, because you're the Greatest of All Time?" Fields asks.

Several bright blue tackling dummies, huge climbing structures that resemble polyhedrons stacked atop one another, three specialized running ramps, a rope walk and still other amenities make up the KidZone. The ramps in particular were a big hit with Lehman and his team. "It's so cool and physical — kind of like skateboarding or parkour — so much design time went into that," he says.

As the KidZone project intensified in scope and design, its cost increased as well. Quickly Clemmer realized, "You can't do a lot" with the initial \$25,000

grant, but, he says, "As the budget grew, [Panthers owner Jerry] Richardson said 'We're going to do this right,' so they raised more money through the NFL Foundation. At end of the day, the facility cost \$280,000, but everything in there is Grade-A awesome."

The Panthers, NFL Foundation and Mecklenburg County also inked a maintenance contract for upkeep and improvements at the Play 60 KidZone, which is good for the lifetime of the park.

In The End Zone

Community response to the Play 60 KidZone has been overwhelmingly positive, according to Clemmer. "Kids and people come from all different areas — this is a place where you can be like a football player, but also use your

imagination to do anything you want to do," he says.

Plans for KidZones at other parks are being tossed around, but so far no ideas have been put into action. "At this point, this project is a one-off thing, but we have had conversations with a couple different NFL teams, and they're very interested," Lehman says.

"The team will host special Play 60 events at the KidZone... that will provide kids and families the opportunity to 'play 60' with Panthers players and staff," says Fields. "Knowing the Play 60 KidZone is serving children and families every day is a great feeling." 🌱

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