

With regard to Virginia Amateur Sports, from founding to present, David Van Covern has seen it all. He was on the board of directors in 1989 and remains there to this day, one of its lifetime members.

“I’ve been there since Day 1, the very beginning,” Van Covern says. “It started out as a group of people deciding if this was something worthwhile. Once we decided it was something we wanted to do everything started coming together and we got going.”

As the Commonwealth Games started, the first board was able to land funding from the state and localities in the Roanoke area that saw the benefit of the Games. That was more than 30 years ago and everything – literally everything – has changed. Except for David Van Covern being a driving force.

That’s not to say he’s made all the decisions. Far from it. David will seem to contradict himself by taking a stance he doesn’t believe in, just to force a discussion.

“I’m one of those people who likes to butt heads,” he said. “I’ll argue the opposition just to see what other people are thinking, rather than see them just sit on their hands.”

Various boards have made moves he voted against. “The release of the first president, Doug Fonder, was not something I felt comfortable with,” Van Covern says. “And I’m the only remaining board member who voted not to go to move the Games to Liberty (University). That turned out to be a very stupid choice on my part.”

When he’s wrong, he says so. Looking back, the move to Liberty has vaulted the Virginia Commonwealth Games into one of the premier state games in the country, he believes.

“Liberty has been very good to us and for us. They’ve presented us with facilities that are better than you’ll see anywhere, across the board. People who come to compete there are always impressed. They’re competing in the best places most of them have ever played,” Van Covern says.

For all the statistics regarding numbers of teams, participants, sports offered, changes made, there are still moments that Van Covern says hit home. It’s when he sees an athlete, usually of a certain age, find someone else they know from competing against in previous years.

“At first I thought this was going to be for children,” he says. “It’s obviously not only for children. We’ve got the whole spectrum of life. We are giving people the opportunity to play and compete with people in your their group in events that are conducted well and conducted fairly. That means so much to so many people.

“You go and sit and watch, you’ll find senior adults come back and looking for people they met years ago, wondering if they’re still participating. The joy they have seeing their fellow athlete and friends -- seeing that is something special. There are a lot who participate and the reason they’re there is to have a good time and meet up with people they see year after year. That’s special.”

The relatively recent addition of Pickleball to the Games is a perfect example of a change that allows participants in the middle age or older age brackets to come together and enjoy the games. It also highlights how the games, led by the board, is adaptable.

“The staff comes up with new ideas and we discuss them,” he says. “Often it’s from another state, what they’re doing. Some things take off. Sometimes I don’t care for it. There was an idea to have a video game part. I have a hard time considering that a sport.”

David was asked to be part of the first group of board members because he had the right background. In 1982 he was hired as the director of Parks and Recreation in Waynesboro.

“If you know the parks and rec business then you know amateur sports. You just do,” he says. That’s why he’s been keen to bring more people to the board and staff who have the same background.

In 1991, Van Covern brought aboard Fredricksburg’s parks and recreation director, Dr. Robert Antozzi, to the board.

He was also instrumental in hiring Amanda Mangum as the Games Director. She was with the Roanoke City recreation department.

“I read 170 resumes and I looked at hers and said ‘That’s the one,’” he says.

Van Covern was the chairman of the board and on the hiring committee that selected Dan Foutz to replace Pete Lampman as president. That’s another hire that was a home run, he says.

A native of Charlotte, NC. Van Covern went to N.C. State where played football as a walk-on on teams coached by Lou Holtz. After college, he worked in Virginia Beach before landing the director’s job in Waynesboro, a post he held until retirement.

For all its growth, Van Covern says the greatest success of the Commonwealth Games came in 2020 when, amid the pandemic, the Games were held in a reduced manner.

“The biggest accomplishment was, by far, the ability for us to run state games in 2020 when almost no one else in the country was able to do so. With support from the folks in Lynchburg and excellent work from staff. Everyone was obeying protocols.

There were two measures of success. First, VAS survived as an organization, which was by no means assured. Second, there was not a single known transmission of Covid-19 in a Commonwealth Games event.

“We came out great,” David says. “No one is aware of someone who contracted covid at the event. I thought we’d come away with a handful, and thought if it was just a handful then it’s a victory. The staff did it the right way.”

After 33 years on the board and more to come, Van Covern says the job continues to be rewarding.

“We’re pleased with where we are and where we’re going,” he says.

