

2024 marks the 35th Anniversary for Virginia Amateur Sports. The organization was formed to bring an amateur Olympic style festival to Virginia for all Virginians to enjoy. The signature event is now known as the Virginia Commonwealth Games. What started as a germ of an idea has turned into an incredible event and remains Virginia's largest multi-sports festival. Now, thousands compete in dozens of sports across multiple venues each year, it's strange to remember how touch-and-go things were in the beginning. Those nascent years of Virginia Amateur Sports were a struggle. A lot of work was done to plant enough stakes so the big tent that is VAS could be erected.

It started with a word from the Governor.

Gov. Gerald Baliles served in office from 1986-1990. During that time, he was a member of the Briarwood Club, an indoor swimming and tennis club near Richmond. Doug Fonder was a co-owner. As it happened, Baliles was with a delegation in New York and was shown the Empire State Games. He saw potential for a similar effort in Virginia.

"Back then there was a Virginia State Sports Commission, and I was chairman of that for the Governor," said Fonder. "One day he asked me if I had heard of the Empire State Games, said it was a great thing for New York. He said, 'I'd like to see you bring that to Virginia.'"

Starting an initiative like a statewide mini-Olympics takes money. Might as well ask the legislature.

"We met with Dick Cranwell, who was speaker of the house, and he said he could get us \$150,000, but the Games had to be in Roanoke," Fonder said.

Cranwell chuckles when remembering adding that caveat.

"Sounds like something I'd do," he said with a laugh.

Cranwell got the legislature to approve the state funding and he wrote the legislation in a way that made sure the Games were in the Roanoke area, thwarting a group pushing for a similar games in eastern Virginia.

"None of it would have happened without Doug Fonder," Cranwell said.

Bern Ewert, who left local government three years prior to founding the Explore Park, was invited to join the board.

"It was a big dream, and it was going to take a lot of money," Ewert said. "Doug convinced me he could raise the money, so I went to the city of Roanoke and pitched it for the tourism dollars it would bring. I started soccer tournaments before that, and they were growing and providing economic benefits. I really saw how sports and tourism could work together."

The first board of directors was chaired by Roanoke attorney Ken King (deceased), who was a driving force behind the effort to create an organization that could maintain its purpose and standing as it grew.

Dr. Elizabeth Lee-Robertson, then the principal at Patrick Henry High School, was a part of the first board, later served as chairperson for more than 10 years, and has returned to serve again. She is currently back at the helm as chairperson of the board for VAS.

"Ken King and Doug Fonder had a conversation with me because they knew I had a strong interest in sports, especially at the high school level, and my involvement with sports and the VHSL," Lee-Robertson said. "Ken was really the father of the organization. He laid out a great framework with the bylaws. He wrote the constitution. His legacy lives on."

Lee-Robertson said King's leadership was vital to the long-term success of the Games.

The articles of incorporation, written by King, list 10 purposes of the corporation.” VAS is there to promote amateur athletics across the state, a purpose that it fulfills today with a massive increase in events and locations in the Games, as well as added events like a half marathon, a triathlon, Able games, all-star showcases and more.

“He handled a lot of difficult things. He worked to find sponsors. He was so important,” she said.

Sponsorship dollars were both necessary and vulnerable. The first title sponsor, CorEast Savings Bank, fell victim to the savings and loan crisis of the mid-’90s. Fonder said that one of the last transactions before the company locked its doors was to make good on its annual contribution to VAS for the Games.

As a dedicated community servant, King also chaired the board of the Special Olympics. He hired Virginia Foster to be the president of Virginia Special Olympics, then recruited her to serve on the VAS board. She is now a lifetime member and the current secretary of the board. “I really hoped to involve our Special Olympics athletes in the Games, and we did have one athlete earn a medal. Since then, we’ve added Able Games and look where we are now,” Foster said. “The Commonwealth Games is such a significant event, but Virginia Amateur Sports is so much more than just the Commonwealth Games.”

Foster said the growth of the Games and VAS has been the result of hard work.

“It’s been tough and it’s still challenging. Sponsorships are always needed.” VAS is a non-profit 501(c)(3) and is considered a charitable organization.

After the organizing and planning in 1988, the State Corporation Commission officially issued a certificate of incorporation on Feb. 9, 1989.

In 1990, just two years after the first conversations, the Commonwealth Games debuted with an opening ceremony at Victory Stadium in Roanoke, VA, with 4,400 competitors descending upon the Roanoke Valley to compete. Now, the Games average over 10,000 participants and generate approximately 7 million dollars in economic impact statewide annually.

In April 1992, Pete Lampman was asked to run the Games in an interim period for the upcoming June games. In October of 1992, he was hired as the second President at Virginia Amateur Sports. He would hold this position for 25 years until his retirement in 2016. Under his direction the organization continued to grow. In 2016, Pete constructed a move to Liberty University as the new title sponsor for the Games. Pete had strong connections with the National Congress of State Games and worked with Liberty University and the City of Lynchburg to win the bid to hold the 2019 biannual State Games of America at Liberty University. After his retirement in December of 2016, Pete has remained close to VAS as a consultant and currently serves as a member of the VAS board of directors.

2017 VAS hired its third President. Dan Foutz, working closely with his experienced staff and Pete Lampman in the consulting role, VAS was able to provide a smooth landing and successful 2019 State Games of America. In March of 2020, a world pandemic forced a national shut down. Under Foutz’s leadership he was able to work closely with the VAS board, Virginia Health Department, and the Governor’s office to safely hold most of the summer outdoor events. This also allowed VAS to keep the doors open and retained all employees. VAS continues to grow its signature events, the Virginia Commonwealth Games at Liberty University, the Able Games, the Smith Mountain Lake Triathlon, and the Star City Half Marathon and 10K races. The VAS mission statement is to promote the awareness and benefits of physical fitness and healthy lifestyles

through education, training, and competitions for all Virginian's. Happy Anniversary to Virginia Amateur Sports. Virginians of all ages are thankful for those who worked so hard to bring the concept to fruition.