

An all-day celebration

Southern Utah doesn't let heat prevent July Fourth fun


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ST. GEORGE - Southern Utah residents didn't let Friday's sweltering temperatures keep them away from July Fourth celebrations at Vernon Worthen Park and elsewhere.

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Event coordinator Aaron Metler proclaimed the annual city of St. George July Fourth celebration a success. Approximately 6,000 people were expected to attend the daylong event, culminating in a fireworks display at the Sunbowl.

The celebration during the day included many attractions for children and adults, but event planners cited the hot dog eating competition as the event's most prominent feature.

The competition, which was sponsored by The Dogfather restaurant, began at 1 p.m. and featured 15 local participants.

Stature was not an obstacle for many participants, as the field of competitors ranged in weight from 44

pounds to 350 pounds.

The rules were simple: Contestants were given 12 minutes to eat as many hot dogs and buns as possible. Condiments and beverages were optional. A strong stomach, however, was not.

As a large crowd gathered at the start of the competition, participants took drastically different approaches. Some ate the hot dogs and buns together in a traditional fashion, others opted to separate the two and dunk the buns in water for easier consumption.

The heated contest came down to last 30 seconds when one of the top competitors was disqualified, which left Jay McKeehan as the victor.

McKeehan, who finished with nine and one-half hotdogs eaten, said he accomplished his task by submitting himself to an unusual preparation technique.

"I ate four pounds of salad last night to help expand my stomach," McKeehan said. "I learned that from watching professional eating competitions."

McKeehan was far from the largest competitor weighing in at only 180 pounds but he said preparation was the key to his success. He said studying video footage of renowned competitive eater Takeru Kobayashi helped.

Event staffers presented McKeehan with a trophy following the event, which he promptly hoisted above his head in a final proclamation of victory.

"I will return next year," McKeehan promised.

Aside from the hot dog eating competition, the Independence Day celebration offered a host of other activities.

The park featured a host of attractions for children including a rock climbing wall, an inflatable castle, a revolving swing ride and two 100-foot slip-n-slides to keep the attendees entertained.

Metler said the celebration was equally equipped to satisfy adults with 51 booths lining the park's perimeter with food, beverages, clothing and other goods and services.

Genevieve Eklund saw the celebration as an opportunity to let her young daughter play at the numerous attractions, but ended up enjoying the event herself as she escaped the heat and enjoyed a snow cone under the comfortable shade of a nearby tree.

"It is great to see the community get together like this," Eklund said.

St. George resident Kirt Larsen brought his family to the celebration and said it was a fun and cost-efficient way to spend time with his loved ones.

With a firework celebration slated for 10 p.m., the event staff expected crowds to filter in as the day continued.

Metler expects next year's event to be even more diverse, as he hinted at the possible inclusion of a parade.

"Next year it will be bigger and better," Metler said.

Community celebrations also took place Saturday in Washington City, Hurricane and other cities. Some events, such as the Gunlock Rodeo, will continue today.



Jay McKeehan shoves a hot dog bun into his mouth as he competes in a hot dog eating contest during the July Fourth festivities at Vernon Worthen Park on Friday. McKeehan won the contest by consuming nine and a half hot dogs in twelve minutes.

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