

ASBURY PARK PRESS

July 22, 2009

Monmouth County Fair's just the ticket for many.

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FREEHOLD BUREAU



If Rich Siessel had a microphone in his hand, it must be Monmouth County Fair time.

There he was again as the gates opened Wednesday afternoon for the five-day run of the 35th annual fair, hawking 50/50 tickets, raising funds for the Monmouth County Park System, which sponsors the fair along with the county 4-H program.

"Fifty-fifty, Friends of the Parks, 50/50 drawing, 6:30 (p.m.)," Siessel, 55, cried out, as he has for the last half-dozen years. "Get those tickets while you can."

Year in and year out, at the fair's main intersection — where the main path meets the amusement rides, the vendors, and the administrative trailers — an enthusiastic group, wearing yellow Friends of the Parks shirts, sold the raffle tickets.

The Friends, formed in 1991, is the nonprofit group of 335 volunteers raising money for projects and programming the park system cannot fund itself, said Maria Wojciechowski, the system's liaison to the group.

Last year, the group raised \$190,000, of that \$16,000 from the fair raffles alone, Wojciechowski said. The group raises the money through memberships, various events and selling tickets for the fair's three daily 50/50s and the big raffle whose three winners are announced as the fair winds up Sunday.

Gale Pucci, 54, of Neptune bought the \$5, 15-ticket package for the 6:30 p.m. drawing to support the 39 parks and to have a chance of winning. Every year, she buys tickets — and she has not won yet.

"It doesn't prevent me from buying," Pucci said.

Plus, there is more to the fair — "To catch up with friends, to have a good time, to eat," Pucci said.

There was plenty of food — funnel cakes, Italian sausage, lemonade, hamburgers, hot dogs, French fries, gyros and cheese steaks.

Bill Grischuk, 56, of Howell came with his family — wife, Karen, 42, and son, Andrew, 9 — for the "the food, (amusement) rides," he said.

They, too, bought raffle tickets for the 6:30 drawing.

"We do a lot of things through the parks and we like to see all the programs continue," Karen Grischuk said.

Over the years, Friends of the Parks has supported such projects as the 9/11 Memorial at Mount Mitchell Scenic Overlook and exhibits at Thompson Park, Longstreet Farm, Historic Walnford and the Manasquan Reservoir, Wojciechowski said.

"The park system can't do everything," said Tracy Boyle, 48, a Middletown resident who sits on the Friends board of directors. "That's where the Friends step in."

"It could be 100 degrees, we could have tornadoes, those people come," said Wojciechowski, speaking of the Friends members selling tickets.

As for the weather, many people spoke of it. Regular fair visitors know that thunderstorms, or at least rain, are likely.

"We want to thank who's in charge of the good weather," said Barbara J. McMorrow, director of the Monmouth County Board of Freeholders, as she opened the fair at 5 p.m. under sunny skies.

But the sun peeked in and out and some thought they felt some rain drops.

Debbie Todd, 47, of Jackson was with her children — Josh, 12, and Erica, 11, at the 4-H tent, where they were displaying various animals — chickens, roosters, goats, pigs and horses. Todd's advice was to take advantage of the fair early, while the good weather was available.

"Don't wait till the end to come to the fair," Todd said.

Meanwhile, the Todds sat near their menagerie. Erica's roosters crowed away.

"They're talking, they're probably looking for their friends," said Erica, explaining, here, they were in cages, while at home they roam free with the chickens.

And Josh's goat, "James Baand," might be up to shenanigans.

"We might see a brand-new game, 'Capture the Goat,' " Josh said.

At the Home and Garden tent, where art was on display, Lora Abolafia, 49, of Freehold Township, shouted, "You won."

Abolafia's daughter, Nicole, 9, won a first-place ribbon for fabric-painting a pillow. Then, Nicole discovered she won a first-place for an oil painting. Of three entries, Nicole had two first-places.

"That's excellent," Abolafia said. "You better call Daddy."

Siessel, who lives in Edison, continued hawking raffle tickets over a public-address system.

"Some people are very comfortable just selling (tickets), they don't want to be hawking," Siessel said.

But he does not mind.

"You get to know people a little more," Siessel said. "You feel like you're in the limelight a little bit. I feel like I'm going to be discovered."

Curt Schneider, 71, of Jackson continued calling out to anyone who might buy a ticket, "How would you like to say, '6:30, I'm going home with money?'"

Ed Mace of Howell was able to say that. He won \$576 in the 6:30 p.m. raffle.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

- The Monmouth County Fair continues until Sunday at the East Freehold Park Showgrounds, corner of Kozloski Road and Center Street, Freehold Township.
- Today is Family Night and Traveling Circus Night at the fair, which runs from 5 to 11 p.m.
- More information is available from the Monmouth County Park System, www.monmouthcountyparks.com.