

Constructing First Coast's youth sports future

By Junior Skepple
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Two years ago, Lisa Davis sat around the dinner table with her family and faced a dilemma experienced by many North Florida sports families: She needed to get her kids to multiple after-school sporting activities, at venues scattered across the largest city in land area in the country.

It seemed like there wasn't enough time to get everyone where they needed to go — and that's when Davis came up with an idea she hopes will change the youth sports landscape on the First Coast.

Davis has started work on a 175,000-square-foot, \$30 million facility off Race Track Road and 9B in St. Johns County that will bring multiple sports under one roof. The facility is designed to allow practices to start earlier and be held in one central location.

Davis' family made it to the various practices on time that night, but she envisioned the facility — which she is calling Project Family — as a way to bring a better future for sports families on the First Coast.

"I am a second generation Jacksonvillian, and my mom and dad were raised in Jacksonville," said Davis, whose day job is as CEO of Analytics Partners, a locally based business consulting company. "I am now raising a third generation to be here, and I want to bring family time back to not only our family, but others too."

The nickname of the facility, Project Family, is appropriate since this endeavor is a family affair for Davis. Her sister, Della Wolfe, is working on the marketing aspect of the facility and has a personal stake in the success of the project.

"My daughter, who is a gymnast, doesn't get home until nine o'clock every night of the week and I miss her," Wolfe said. "Our family time is precious, so starting their after school activities earlier so we can have that time together is important and I know that really strikes a chord with lots of families in the community."

The company behind the project, Saint Johns Development Partners LLC, bought the Race Track Road property for \$2.8 million just over a year ago, according to county records. In April, the St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners unanimously approved rezoning the property to a modified form of intensive commercial.

Groundbreaking is expected to begin “relatively soon,” Davis said, with completion of the facility taking about 18 months.

GREEN FIELDS

Adding a sports facility of this magnitude could be a boost for the First Coast on a regional and national level, providing a facility that could attract decision-makers from the largest tournaments and sports organizations in the country looking for locations to bring their student-athletes, and their dollars.

“With a facility of this size we have the opportunity to attract not only local but state, regional and national events,” Davis said. “There will be money coming to the area through hotel stays, food and sales tax.”

Competitive youth sports are not regulated by a national governing body – local and regional organizations run most leagues — which makes it difficult to get a grasp on how big youth sports is, but the Sports Facilities Advisory pegged the national traveling sports industry at \$7 billion four years ago and WinterGreen Research Inc. reported \$9 billion last year.

Jacksonville sports marketers want to tap into that money.

Jacksonville has not been able to attract major youth sporting events to the area because of a lack of facilities, said Alan Verlander, executive director and chief operating officer of the Jaxsports Council.

Project Family could be the key to the First Coast becoming a hub for youth sports tournaments.

“I talk to event planners all over the country who would love to come to Jacksonville and bring their tournaments with them,” Verlander said. “Facilities are the key. We are going to be pitching events soon to be held at Project Family, because now we have a facility to pitch.”

GOING ELITE

The Project Family team is not the only ones looking to cater to sports families on the First Coast.

About three miles away from the site of Project Family, commercial real estate agent Jay Glatting is leading up development of Above Athletic Center, a year-round elite training academy.

The 60,000 square foot center has 42,000 square feet of air conditioned space with the remaining area serving as a covered open air multi-purpose turf facility. Above Athletic Center will also have sand volleyball courts and a field area.

The \$5 million facility on Phillips Highway will be used for training, recreational leagues and national and regional tournaments.

There is about 20,000 square feet of commercial space in the facility, which is being leased for \$16 a square foot, Glatting said. Half of the commercial space has been leased by a tenant related to the medical field.

Glattig is looking to rent the indoor gym space out to coaches; 85 percent of the space is pre-leased, he said, although he would not release names.

“The plan is to have as much commercial space as we can so we can rent out the gym space for less,” Glattig said.

Roadway improvements for the entrance and median along Philips Highway have begun. The steel for the building arrives in about a month, with Above Athletics targeting November of this year for the grand opening.

Jim Martin, a partner with Above Athletic Center and a well-known basketball coach in the area, is one of the tenants and investors for the facility, and he said the need came for another facility from overflow at his Beach Boulevard location.

“We have been at our first facility for about five years and we are at full capacity,” said the Providence School head basketball coach. “This new facility gives us an opportunity to get in an area that does not have a facility or a basketball academy that can accommodate the great growth that is in the Nocatee/St. Johns County area.”

FAMILY TOGETHERNESS

Back at Project Family, planning work is continuing apace.

Trico Construction is the general contractor on the project and Matthews Designs is being used for the horizontal design and land development. Carter Environmental Services supplied the environmental studies needed for the project to move forward.

The facility will sit on a 46-acre plot in the Durbin Lakes area with 11 acres being used for Project Family. There is also commercial real estate areas on Racetrack Road with road frontage and partials around the lake across from the venue.

The plan for Project Family is to partner with schools and athletic clubs that are already in existence, in addition to working with surrounding schools, Davis said, with eight of them in a three-mile radius.

Project Family plans to transport children from their schools to the facility and allow student-athletes to begin practice earlier.

For parents, there are plans for a group fitness rooms and closed-circuit television that will let parents watch their kids practice while simultaneously fitting in time for a workout.

Even with the completed facility still over a year away, families excited for Project Family have reached out to Davis.

“The community is very excited,” she said. “We have heard nothing but great things and they have presented great ideas and opportunities.”