

# THE GREAT BALL

## Pursuit

Inspiring residents to explore parks creates a buzz that began with a simple walk through the storage room

**BY MARGARET COLLETT**

**I**n the summer of 2020, parks and recreation departments across the country were looking for ways to engage community members safely since the COVID-19 pandemic brought most traditional programming to a halt. In Appleton, Wis., the parks and recreation team took on a “2020 Summer Reimagined” theme and set to work on brainstorming safe, community-engagement programs. The team decided to go with weekly themes that included activities and contests promoted through the website and social media. Each team member was assigned a week, and the creativity began! Jeff Brazzale, Recreation Programmer for Youth Sports, was put in charge of Sports Week and went to his storage room for inspiration. He returned with 400 tennis balls, which had been used for programs in years past and needed to be recycled. His initial thought was to distribute the balls and have participants send in videos or photos of how they were enjoying the new balls: maybe playing catch, performing trick shots, bouncing the balls at a park, or even decorating them with a creative design so a winner could be chosen. After further consideration, to ensure engagement and to simplify the event, the discussion turned to an Easter egg hunt. This idea seemed to check all the boxes.



The plan was simple. Each of the 400 tennis balls was numbered. The letter A was also marked on the balls to identify them as part of the event. The balls would be scattered on a specific date among numerous city parks, allowing community members to hunt for the balls, bring one ball home, and two days later a number between 1 and 400 would be randomly chosen. The number would be announced on social media, and the person holding the winning ball would receive a \$20 gift card. There were several positive factors with this program:

● The event was safe during that point in the pandemic. Those participating would be outside and socially distanced.

● Community members may be possibly visiting parks they had not visited before. The hope was that once participants searched for or found a ball, they would stay and enjoy the amenities at the park.

● The event cost very little. The gift card was donated, and the tennis balls were at the end of their useful life. The only work was to scatter the balls and send out communications.

● The event was a great way to engage with the community over social media. Since the winner and the drop times were announced, a large spike in followers ensued.

● There was excitement and anticipation in the community. The thrill of the pursuit and then the wait to see who the winner was was intriguing for those who participated.

Once the plan was set, marketing the event was next. “The Great Ball Pursuit” was established. Graphics were created, dates were set, the website was updated, the grounds crew was briefed, social-media teasers were posted, and e-marketing campaigns were sent to the community. Excitement for the event was growing, and even local television stations picked up the story.

When drop day arrived, the community headed to the parks to find the winning ball that would bring the prize. Social media was alive with comments regarding the findings in both a positive and negative way. Pictures of happy hunters were posted, tips were shared, and frustrations were voiced when all the balls were quickly scooped up. In the end, one lucky winner shared a picture of the winning ball, and the gift card was claimed.

As with any new program, improvements have been made each year to make it more inclusive and engaging to as many in the community as possible. “The Great Ball Pursuit” just completed its third year, and participants continue to enjoy the thrill of the hunt. After considering the feedback received over the past two years, here is how the event works now:

● There are four different “drop times” promoted over three days: 3:00 p.m. on the first day, 8:30 a.m. on the second day, and 12:00 and 5:00 p.m. on the last day. The drop times are intentionally set to include as many families as possible.

● At each of the times, four staff members scatter 25 balls at four different parks. At each drop time, the names of the four parks are announced on social-media platforms. There are 400 balls dropped at 16 parks over three days.



● Participants have three simple rules:

**ONE:** Only one ball per person. *\*Please think of others when collecting balls, and do not hoard balls. Let's make this fun for as many people as possible! We appreciate your cooperation.\**

**TWO:** When a ball is found, a photo of the ball with a landmark (a playground, pavilion, park sign, etc.) indicating the respective park should be taken.

**THREE:** Photos can be shared on social media or when the winning numbers are announced. There is an email address to send in the photo for verification.

● Four gift cards to local businesses were donated, so four winning numbers were announced.

The comments and photos posted on social media make this program fun for parks and recreation staff members who put the event; your photo library of people enjoying the event and the parks will be increased. The grounds crew enjoys being involved as well. Seeing community members in the parks and excited is very gratifying. Of course, there will always be issues with some people disregarding the rules and hoarding balls, but, hopefully, the honesty of everyone else will shine through. The reimagined summer of 2020, although a difficult time, brought forth some creativity that will continue through the years! What creativity could be discovered from a walk through your storage room? **PRB**

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