

Crowd eyes Hawk Pro skateboarder draws thousands to Extreme Park

By Brandy Warren
The Courier-Journal

Skateboard, pillow and blanket in tow, 16-year-old Irvin Wilson of Jeffersonville, Ind., camped out all night at the Louisville Extreme Park for a chance to be among more than 8,000 people who endured sweltering heat yesterday to see Tony Hawk, skateboarding's biggest celebrity.

"This is a pretty big deal," Irvin said, after watching Hawk, on his Gigantic Skatepark Tour, test Louisville's fledgling park.

Hawk said he specifically included the Extreme Park among the 10 locations where his crew of 11 professional skateboarders and bikers will stop nationwide, ESPN cameras in tow. He had no regrets after yesterday's show.

"It was unbelievable . . . the best turnout we've had on the tour this year," Hawk said last night, adding that the park had lived up to its billing.

"Every stop we go to, people are talking about this park. They ask us, 'When are you going to Louisville?'" Hawk said after yesterday's event. "This park is everything it was touted as."

Yesterday's crowd, which doubled some city officials' expectations, also afforded a jubilant Mayor Dave Armstrong more ammunition in his pitch to proclaim the park among the nation's best.

"This is one of the premier parks in the world," Armstrong said in the midst of a teeming crowd that largely consisted of teen-age and pre-teen boys who endured 90-degree temperatures to see Hawk. "The crew that's coming here today are the top athletes in this sport. It's a real testimony to this park."

City and business leaders are betting the Extreme Park will draw national events and attract young professionals eager to take a crack at the concrete testing ground.

Armstrong has even bigger dreams for the skate park, hoping to add a \$2 million indoor facility to the grounds before the year ends.

Even without an indoor addition, Louisville's park has plenty to offer, Hawk said.



Tony Hawk, skateboarding's biggest celebrity, executed tricks on the vert ramp as part of his Gigantic Skatepark Tour.



Despite hot weather, more than 8,000 people ventured to the Extreme Park to witness the performances of Hawk and other athletes.

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"Most cities don't have one," Hawk said. "I wouldn't be too picky about what's there."

Even Hawk seemed somewhat unprepared for the mob of fans who turned out to see him. Waiting in the downtown Hyatt Regency before his performance, Hawk watched yesterday morning as kids scurried through the hotel for a chance to meet him.

Some of the tour's professionals left the hotel long enough to offer the young fans T-shirts and stickers. They were filmed as part of the eight-part series ESPN2 will air later this month.

While there's normally some fans outside the hotel when the tour makes a stop, they were nothing like he saw in Louisville, he said.

"This is a little crazy," Hawk said.

Back at the skate park, the crowd kept growing even as the temperature rose.

Tony Nichols, 14, held his disposable camera over a rail at the park, hoping to get a picture of the skaters in action. He had been waiting since 11 a.m. to see two of his favorite professionals, Willy Santos and Bucky Lasek.

"You see them on TV, and then you're like, 'Wow, they're here,' " Tony said.

An estimated 35 heat-related incidents were reported at yesterday's event, said Lt. Col. Thomas Arnold of the Louisville Fire Department. Four people were hospitalized for treatment, while another five people at the park were treated for minor cuts and scrapes.

To fight dehydration, water and bottled drinks were distributed among the fans after emergency crews requested that more water be brought in, Metro Parks Director Brigid Sullivan said.

Despite the large numbers, the crowd was well-behaved, said Detective Bill Keeling, a spokesman for the Louisville Police Department. There were no problems beyond the suffocating heat, he said.

But even that didn't deter people as they packed the rails and hillside at the Extreme Park.

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