

SPORTS

Basketball

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How Surf City became Hoop City

By Maria Gaura

Santa Cruz bills itself as Surf City and has a reputation for being tough on developers. So there were plenty of scoffers when sports promoter Jim Weyermann showed up at City Hall in 2012 and proposed building a basketball arena, downtown, on borrowed land, before the end of the year.

Weyermann's employer, the NBA's Golden State Warriors, was in the process of moving its Development League team from North Dakota to California, and Weyermann was determined that Santa Cruz would be its new home.

The city officials in the room were less than enthusiastic.

"The reaction I got ranged from skepticism to outright disdain," says Weyermann, president of the team now known as the Santa Cruz Warriors. "There was an assumption that sports weren't a good fit, that things like this can't happen in Santa Cruz. But I knew this city would be a perfect fit for our team. I was willing to stake my career on it."

Somehow, the impossible happened. The 2,500-seat Kaiser Permanente Arena, a towering, tent-style facility, was built in 78 days, opening in time for the Santa Cruz Warriors' first home game on Dec. 23, 2012.

It was a shotgun wedding between a city with cold feet and a team with an impending due date. But the relationship between Surf City and its



Photos by Preston Gannaway / Special to The Chronicle

Mitchell Watt (left), Joe Alexander and Kevin Hopkins run drills on the first day of the Santa Cruz Warriors' training camp.

new sports team has blossomed into an ardent love affair.

Quirky Santa Cruz has embraced its team like no other city in the NBA's minor league, and the first two seasons have been a love fest. Home games regularly sell out, and the team was the first NBA D-League team ever to sell more than \$1 million worth of season tickets.

The team has rewarded its fans with two impressive seasons, fighting its way to the league championship series



If you go

Santa Cruz Warriors: The 2014-15 season began Friday and runs until April 4. For information on the team, games and tickets, go to www.nba.com/dleague/santacruz. The Kaiser Permanente Arena is at 140 Front St., Santa Cruz.

riors' staff and players participate in everything from beach cleanups to blood drives, and sponsor well-received math and reading programs in local

selves as a community."

Santa Cruz Mayor Lynn Robinson admits she was initially skeptical about the arena, first broached when she was a city councilwoman. But she credits City Manager Martin Bernal for recognizing the project's potential, and Weyermann for his tenacity and creativity.

Overcoming skeptics

"The first community voices we heard were the ones saying, 'No!' Robinson says. " 'No, we don't want it. No, it won't

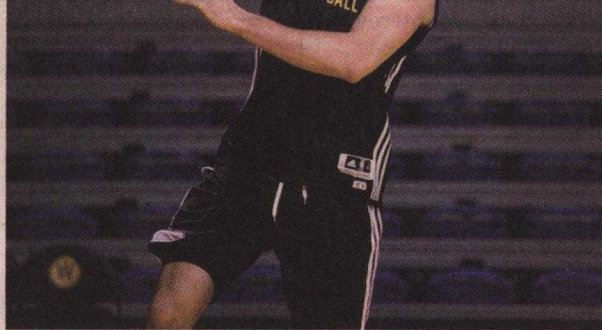
both years, though it hasn't yet taken the crown. The 2014 season began on Friday and runs until April 4.

D-League's big event

The NBA has taken note, choosing Santa Cruz as the site for this season's D-League Showcase, Jan. 15-19, where teams from around the U.S. will compete for the Showcase Cup and players will have a chance to shine in front of league executives.

"All 18 teams in the D-League will converge on Santa Cruz for five days, including the coaches, the front office execs, and people from the NBA," says Gina Antonello, spokeswoman for the Santa Cruz Warriors. "It is really cool to be here for two seasons and to be recognized as a great location for the D-League's biggest event of the year."

Santa Cruz Warriors point guard Kiwi Gardner, an Oakland native and Santa Cruz fan favorite, says the atmosphere inside the Kaiser Permanente Arena rivals the high-adrenaline rush of



Joe Alexander, a 2008 first-round draft pick out of West Virginia, is a forward for Santa Cruz.

the big leagues.

"The arena is the right size for this town. It's always jam-packed. It's exciting," he says. "It feels very similar to being at the (Golden State Warriors) Oracle Arena, but even better because of the fans."

"In Santa Cruz it seems like every single person you come across at a game knows about basketball. They're real fans, they follow us, and they understand what we're doing out there. It's cool. We've got the common ground of basketball."

But the Warriors have done more than just play ball in Santa Cruz, which only fills the arena for a few months of the year.

The city of Santa Cruz

lent the Warriors \$4 million to build the arena, anticipating wider benefits to the community. And in fact, the new arena has spruced up a formerly sketchy area of downtown, and boosted business during the tourist off-season.

Variety of functions

The team has paid back more than \$1 million on the loan, and also brought in roughly \$250,000 in admission taxes to the city.

It has also filled the arena's calendar with a multitude of other sporting and community events, making allies of a broad swath of residents with no particular interest in basketball. War-

riors participated in more than 200 community events last year, Weyermann says, and hosted 64 community sporting events, all at the team's expense. Both the men and women's basketball teams from UC Santa Cruz play at the arena, which also hosts high school basketball and Boys and Girls Club tournaments, and regional competitions in martial arts and gymnastics.

"From day one we wanted to make this arena a new village green," he says. "I believe that is the best thing that sports venues do, is create a space where people of every background and economic level can gather, and we experience our-

Reading programs in local schools.

don't wait it. No, it won't fit in.' But then we started hearing the outpouring of support, people who really wanted this opportunity for kids and families.

"And it really has worked. It has all the elements that make it feel like it belongs in Santa Cruz. It's cheerful and family-friendly, and you see the community there."

"So, yes, something big came into our town, but it added to our hometown feel. There's an irony there that I find rather compelling."

That's not to say there haven't been challenges. The building is technically a temporary structure, there is no parking lot, and nearby residents say that noise levels on game nights are a persistent annoyance. But boosters believe that a permanent facility could resolve those issues, and the city will soon begin a formal process to identify potential sites.

Weyermann says he discovered Santa Cruz's fan base years ago while scouting high school basketball games throughout the Central Coast.

"Those high school gyms were packed with 600, 800, 1,600 people," Weyermann says. "... There's a tremendous family-oriented, sports-oriented community that exists here, but it was nearly invisible. It wasn't part of the self-image of Santa Cruz."

"I'm no therapist," Weyermann says, "but I think people and communities can get stuck in their own self-image. I saw something different, and I'm not the least bit surprised at the love we found here."

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