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Revived softball league is a new field of dreams in Nelson County

By Erin Conway econway@newsadvance.com

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Chris Jones, rec department staffer took care of the pitching duties for both teams.

Lee Luther Jr.

As June rolls around, it brings with it warmer weather, students out of school on break, and for the first time in years, the end of the season for a revived Nelson County softball league.

On Monday nights from March through May cheers were heard coming from the softball field at the Nelson Center in Lovingston as women took over the dugouts. Decked out in tie-dye, black and gray, the teams are all smiles every Monday night as they spend an hour playing slow-pitch softball with old and new friends.

Their friends, relatives, and spouses cover the grass by the field in lawn chairs. Younger kids start up games of kickball in the grass next to the softball field while their moms, aunts, and sisters play softball.

“I am forever at a sporting event for my children and now they can come to a sporting event for me,” said Alison Lawhorne of Nelson County.

The Nelson County Parks and Recreation Department kick-started the revival of the women’s softball league in late February, when Chris Jones, recreation technician for the parks and recreation department, decided it was important to the community. Jones said the last time the county had a women’s league was the late 1990s or early 2000s.

“I wanted to give the community something to do,” Jones said.

Over the season, the department spent \$700 on umpires, softballs, and trophies for the women’s league. The money spent and the department’s efforts proved to be worth it. Women from Nelson, Amherst, and Madison Heights made up three teams and began practicing in late February.

The three teams — Slappin’ Pitches, Burks Logging Pitches, and Torres Trucking/Fine Wine — competed against each other every Monday night for three months. Each evening, two teams played and one team would have a bye week. After seven regular-season wins and one loss, Slappin’ Pitches claimed the championship title.

Allegra Johnson, the site supervisor for the recreation department, was quick to get a team together as soon as she heard the county was bringing back women’s softball. Slappin’ Pitches is made up of about 20 women from Nelson and the surrounding localities.

“I’ve really enjoyed playing with people I hadn’t seen in a long time,” Johnson said.

Johnson has been playing softball since she was seven years old. Slappin’ Pitches is made up of people she has played with and against over the years.

“We’re really out here to have fun,” Johnson said.

The fun, supportive environment is felt throughout all three teams as the women cheer for their teammates making good hits and solid catches, and as they shout words of encouragement when someone strikes out or dives for a catch they just barely miss.

“It’s been one big family,” said Carla Campbell of Amherst.

Campbell began playing softball when she was eight years old with Dixie Youth League and continued through school. It’s been 23 years since she last played on a team, and Campbell is happy to be back with a bat in her hand. When asked about her favorite part of being on Burks Logging Pitches, she said it was the teamwork.

Lawhorne jumped at the opportunity to get a team together and was coach of Burks Logging Pitches this past season.

“When the [recreation] department announced they were able to get this going again, we had a team formed. I called Chris right away and started practicing in February,” Lawhorne said.

Much like Campbell, Katie Duff, a 29-year-old from Madison Heights, has been playing softball since she was five years old and through college.

“It’s great and a lot [of] fun and all the girls get along. It’s like taking some people back to the glory days,” Duff said.

Duff, who plays left field for the Slappin’ Pitches, said she heard about the league from Jones, who she plays on a co-ed team with and played with while at Ferrum College. Duff said it’s an adjustment to move from fast-pitch softball to slow-pitch, but overall she has enjoyed playing in Lovington.

Duff said the revival of the women’s league gives women a chance to do something active as they get older.

“It only leads to good things, I think,” Duff said.

After eleven weeks of Monday evenings spent on softball field, the women's season ended on May 20. It proved to be popular, gathering crowds of support from friends and family every Monday. The parks and recreation department hopes to continue the leagues for both women and men in the future.

“We are just excited to bring softball back to the county and for it to be so well received,” said Claire Richardson, director of the parks and recreation department.

Erin Conway covers Nelson County for the News and Advance. Reach her at (434) 385-5524.

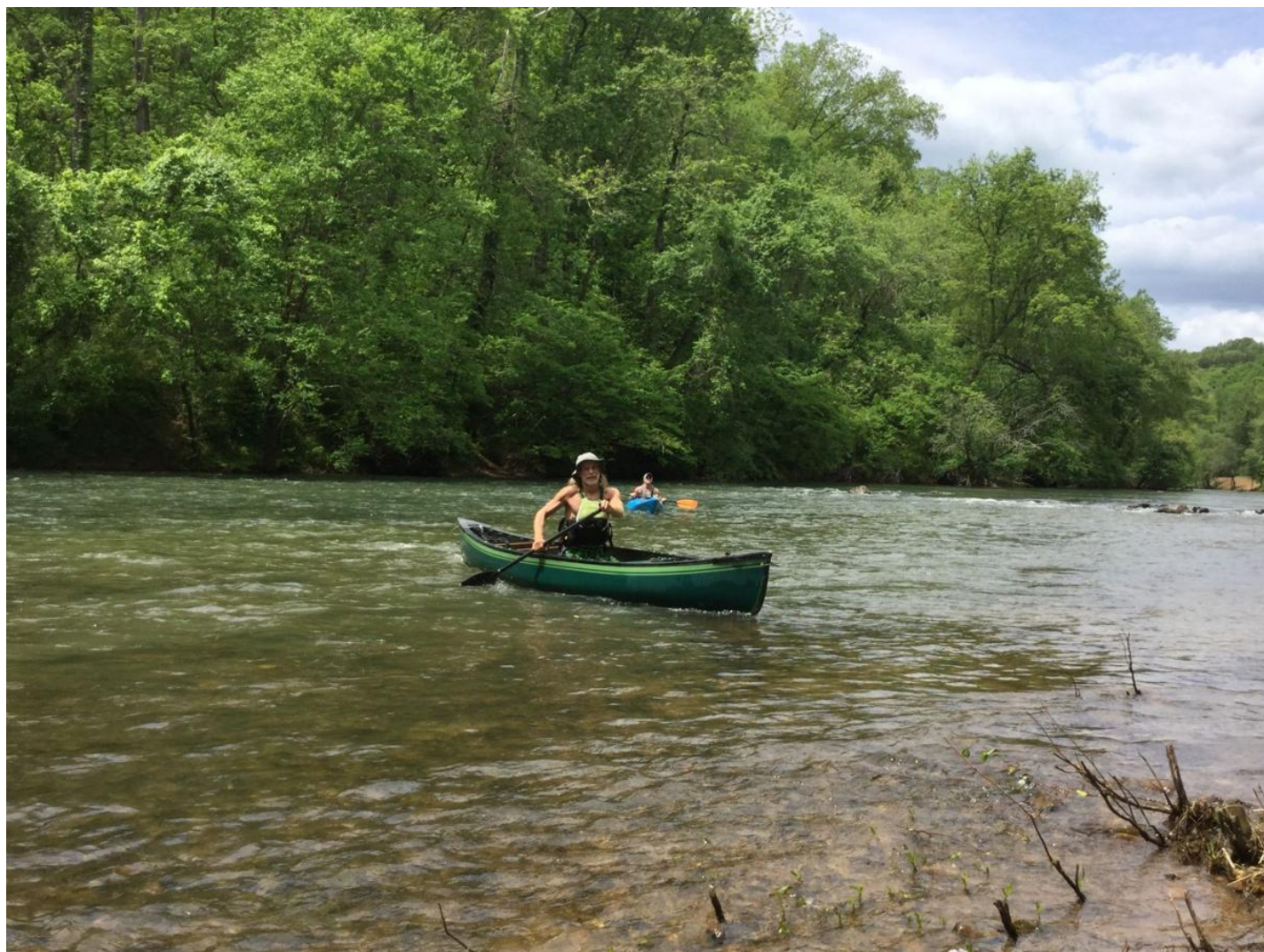
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'Great river and great people'

Nelson County Parks and Recreation Department hosts 22nd annual canoe, kayak race

Erin Conway

May 8, 2019



Lee Williams finishes the Nelson Downriver Canoe and Kayak Race on May 4.

Erin Conway

The rain held off long enough for the Nelson County Parks and Recreation Department to host another year of the Nelson Downriver Canoe and Kayak Race this past Saturday.

Twelve boats registered for the 22nd annual canoe and kayak race along the Tye River. Conditions were perfect for the eight-mile paddle race and people from different parts of Virginia and North Carolina joined in the fun.

“It’s a great thing to do as a father-daughter activity,” Arrington resident Shannon Tillman said.

Tillman and his 13-year-old daughter Violet have been participating in the paddle race for the past six or seven years.

“Every year we get faster,” Violet said.

Participants gathered at the “put-in” on South Powells Island Road in the Tye River Depot area starting at 10 a.m., registering and preparing their kayaks and canoes.

The sun was out and after Conny Roussos, who helps to organize the race each year, gave the participants a safety talk and some advice about certain parts of the course, the paddlers got into their boats, eager to start.

Roussos said the race started in 1997 with the Nelson Area Paddlers and in more recent years has been organized and run by the parks and recreation department.

In the past, the race has drawn up to 50 boats. Last year, the event drew 30 paddlers and 23 boats. The numbers vary year to year, depending on the predicted weather for the first weekend in May.

“It seems to be a lot of fun for everyone,” Roussos said May 1.



Lee Jones (left to right), Chris Crawford and Dave Dolak talk about the downriver race before putting their kayakers in the water May 4.

Erin Conway

Categories the participants could register in differ depending on the type of canoe or kayak used, ages, gender and teams.

“I’ve been coming here for about 10 years. It’s a great river and great people,” said Dave Dolak of Charlottesville.

It was a full day for the participants, who all spent an hour or more paddling down the Tye River. Mike and Robyn Larson, from Goochland, raced for the first time.

“We’ve wanted to do it for the last few years but it hasn’t worked out,” Robyn said.

For Lee Williams, participating in the race for the first time in 2006 got him into whitewater sports and paddling and the “good river and good people” keep Williams coming back every year.

“This race really just opens up doors,” Williams said.

After the race, an award ceremony took place. Along with medals for the top three finishers in every category, the parks and recreation department gives an “outstanding paddler” award. This award doesn’t necessarily go to the paddler with the best time but someone who raced well. Last year, Violet and her father won the award. This year Chris Crawford, who has been racing kayaks for over 30 years, won it.

“We try to identify someone who has put in excellent effort and who has done a lot for the group [they] are in,” Roussos said May 1.

Before and after the award ceremony, participants hung around enjoying each other’s company, discussing different paddle races, eating, and engaging in a raffle drawing for prizes. “It was great,” said Shelli Schinkus, of Charlottesville.

https://www.newsadvance.com/nelson_county_times/news/grand-squares-of-nelson-group-coming-up-on-years-of/article_effd4704-99d6-536b-a25c-4a324a12a2b7.html

FEATURED

WITH VIDEO

Grand Squares of Nelson group coming up on 35 years of square dancing

Erin Conway

Jan 24, 2019



Square dancers move to calls made by professional square dancer caller Larry Winegard on Jan. 18. The Grand Square has been active in Nelson County since the group was founded in February 1984.

Erin Conway

The Grand Squares of Nelson

The cafeteria at Rockfish River Elementary School was filled with women in puffy dresses, men in bolo ties, and smiles as the Grand Squares of Nelson held its monthly square dancing event last Friday evening. For the dancers, experienced and new, square dancing is a fun way to meet people no matter the location.

“It’s an international language. The calls are all the same no matter where you are,” said Gigi Kelly, who has been dancing since the 1970s. Kelly said she has danced all over the world including in England and Japan during her travels.

Chuck Chesteen, who was a square dancing caller for about 40 years, can attest to square dancing being an international interest. Chesteen said he was in the United States Air Force and stationed in Japan in his 20s.

“I found a square dancing club in Japan and started,” Chesteen said.

Chesteen, now in his 80s, no longer is a caller but still dances with the Grand Squares of Nelson.

The group, a nonprofit, has been active in Nelson County since it was founded Feb. 26, 1984. This year it celebrates its 35-year anniversary. The club currently has 18 members and seven students.

“I’m still going strong,” Chesteen said with a smile before the caller began grouping everyone together for another dance.

Square dancing is a dance for four couples arranged in a square. A caller announces each step in the sequence to the beat of the music. Barry Shawley, co-vice president of the Grand Squares of Nelson, said the caller thinks of each next step on the spot. Barry said there are 69 mainstream calls and 30-plus — or advanced — calls.

“It takes talent,” Barry said, referring to being a caller.

The music starts and Larry Winegard, a professional caller since 1974, tells the dancers to bow to each other. Winegard then starts instructing each dance step for the 24 people on the floor. The squares made up of eight people move, twirl, step, and navigate around, through, and past each other making the squares move together almost flawlessly.

The extra people on the side, sat chatting and watching everyone move smoothly in time with the beat. After each dance, the groups would switch giving everyone who wanted to dance a turn. The squares were mixed with experienced dancers and new students, and everyone helped everyone as they stepped and laughed through the calls.

Winegard said he had a friend who kept bugging him about trying square dancing, but it didn’t interest him. Finally, Winegard said, he decided to try it once with his wife. He loved it.

“I love the fellowship and seeing people connect,” Winegard said.

Midge Shawley, co-vice president with her husband Barry, has been dancing for three and half years. Fairly new to Nelson County, Midge said she and her husband got involved because of friends from church.

“We went to an open house and then started taking lessons,” Midge said.

Mary Pallone, the Grand Squares of Nelson's president, said square dancing keeps everyone young.

"It's inspirational to see people getting up in age and dancing," Pallone said.

Pallone got involved with the group four or five years ago and became the president this past September, and before that was co-vice president.

"It's just fun," Pallone said.

Want to Go?

» The Grand Squares of Nelson dance on the third Friday of each month year round from 7:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. September through May, with the exception of October and December, the dance is held at Rockfish River Elementary School. In October, the dance is held at the Rockfish Valley Community Center (RVCC). In June, July, August, and December the dance is at the Rockfish Valley Fire Department.

Anyone interested, please contact:

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- » Phone: Barry and Midge Shawley: (434) 361-1830