

PROFILE



Up close: Hill Carrow

Since heading the charge to attract the U.S. Olympic Festival to North Carolina in 1987 and then put on the event, Hill Carrow has been a leader in building the industry that surrounds amateur sporting events.

Although Carrow and his company, Sports & Properties Inc., are based in Raleigh, he has become a familiar and important figure in the Triad's sports development scene. He has orchestrated the U.S. Figure Skating Championships that were held over nine days last year at the Greensboro Coliseum Complex and headed an ultimately unsuccessful bid to have the event return just prior to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. He is working now to bring the U.S. Olympic swim trials to Greensboro. Whether it's working with the Olympics or with local sports and tourism boards, Carrow has helped promote the enjoyment of amateur sports and the economic benefit that communities enjoy as hosts.

What was your very first job? Lifeguarding at the local pool. I am a swimmer, and I still swim. The U.S. Masters Swimming Championships that were just in Greensboro, I served as the co-meet director for that, and I competed.

How did you get involved in organizing amateur sports events? I am a lawyer by training and became in-house counsel at Carolina Power & Light, but I was always organizing sports and activities on the side. What led me into this as a career is the U.S. Olympic Festival in 1987, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Greensboro was an important part of that.

How did you make that leap? I was leading the charge for the bid on that event. We got selected as the host in late 1984. In discussions with the powers that be (at Carolina Power & Light), they were nice enough to give me a three-year leave of absence to go and run the U.S. Olympic Festival. When it came time to go back (to Carolina Power & Light), I had another talk with (CP&L CEO) Sherwood Smith, and said, 'I kind of like this. It's really exciting, it's real entrepreneurial, it's fast-moving.' That kind of launched me into this as a full-time career.

What does Sports & Properties Inc. do?

There are three different areas that our firm concentrates in. One is major event bids and management, which is represented most closely here by the U.S. Figure Skating Championships. The second is major sponsorships, particularly naming rights. We were involved with the BB&T Field naming rights at Wake Forest University and did studies that led to BB&T Ballpark in Winston-Salem. The third is we work with a lot of the sports commissions of a lot of cities and communities. We call it bolstering your sports economy.

What challenges do amateur sports face? In the days when I was first getting involved, there weren't really hosting organizations in communities other than the local soccer club or the local swim team.

What has made that industry grow is that people have come to realize in the last several decades what an important part sports and entertainment activities play in

tourism. The challenge with sports events is different than if (Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center) hosted all the doctors in town for a convention. With sports, they are often looking to the community to help stage the event at a certain level.

What's helped drive the growth of amateur sports? A significant part of that growth has been with women's sports because of Title IX. There have also been private parties that have come in and created mud runs, the "iron man"-type events, big running events. A lot of those are now controlled by private corporations that have found a way to make money off of those.

Best lesson learned from the 1987 U.S. Olympic Festival? I called the Olympic Committee, and said I thought North Carolina would be a great place to do it, given the collection of great universities and facilities. I figured my first call I might get dismissed or laughed at. I think if I had been treated unkindly during that first call, the story would have been different. In the end, to this day, North Carolina holds every record for attendance and revenues for that event. That lesson was that we believed in ourselves, but it takes the other guys to believe in you, too. But if someone places a little faith in you, we'll go over the top to prove ourselves.

What kept Greensboro from not landing the 2014 figure skating championships? The fact that Boston was in the fray. Sometimes it's all about your history, your tradition.

You're working to help bring the U.S. Olympic swim trials to Greensboro. What advantages does Greensboro have? What gives us some hope is that many of the cities that will be competing have very intensely programmed facilities, and for the swim trials you have to take your facility out of commission from mid-May until the first week of July. That's a lot for the Greensboro Coliseum too, but because you don't have professional franchises in there, you have the option to move some things around to accommodate that.

What challenges does the Triad face in landing big sporting events? We have to work triple time to overcome the bias for some of the governing bodies, that they feel like they have to be only in the largest markets in the country. They will get so much more love if they come to a market like this.

What's something that most people don't know about you? That I shaved my whole body for the U.S. Masters Swimming Championships. That's the way swimmers are. They might not realize that's something we do even with our elderly status.

What's your favorite way to relax? Believe it or not, it's actually visiting and enjoying other sports events and activities. I enjoy going to things that I think relate to our business, and kind of taking mental or actual written notes about the way things are done.

Biggest sporting event you'll attend this year? I'm taking my family over to London (for the 2012 Olympic Games). I had to work triply hard to get tickets to the swimming competition, despite having contacts.

— Owen Covington