

Site links athletes to games

Akron businessmen's free service is home base for 40,000 who meet up to play sports

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You're new to town, itching to find a group of athletes to play a friendly, competitive pickup game of your favorite sport.

Or maybe you're a longtime resident, but your friends and acquaintances aren't likely sports competitors.

A group of three Akron entrepreneurs is hoping their Web site, www.GameSnake.com, will take off as the answer to making those connections across the country.

The site connects athletes who want to play pickup games in one of 104 sports. Athletes can register with the site, include information on their sports skills and try to find opponents in their area willing to meet up.

The majority of games are pickup games in local parks or facilities, though some people meet and pay fees at a facility.

The site worked for Jessica Trahey two years ago when she was getting ready to move back to Akron from Washington, D.C. She worried that she wouldn't be able to find other athletes to play pickup games of Ultimate Frisbee, a game that's a combination of soccer and football played with a flying disc. It was also a way to meet some new people.

When you move, "the big things you're getting involved with are sports, intramurals or church or something like that, or your co-workers. That's really where you're meeting people. This gives you another outlet," she said.

Other athletes, such as Shawn Nelson, a professional rodeo bullfighter, use GameSnake games as a way to stay in shape.

"I don't like going to gyms," said Nelson of Hinckley Township. "Because I'm so active in what I do and what I do is so physically demanding, I like doing these other sports."

Nelson has played dodgeball, softball, baseball, touch football, flag football, Ultimate Frisbee and horseshoes through GameSnake connections.

"The variety of people I meet is just phenomenal," he said.

Nelson said he doesn't use GameSnake to find pickup games when he's traveling because he's so busy, but he thinks that the idea will spread around the country.

"I was shocked no one has ever come up with it before," he said.

There is at least one other similar Web site that launched about a year and a half after GameSnake started in the summer of 2004, said Andrew Holland, one of the partners.

"I think we've done it better. It's definitely 'Game on,'" he said.

Site branches out

By day, Holland, Andrew Hopkins and Glenn Somodi run Interactive Media Group, an Internet professional services design and development site, in Akron. But the 30-somethings' passion for sports is what drove the creation of GameSnake.com.

They initially launched the site in 30 college towns and netted 6,000 members. Now they have about 40,000 members around the country, mostly concentrated in Northeast Ohio, Chicago, Minneapolis, New York and San Francisco.

The big challenge now is building a critical mass of players in the system in different parts of the country. Ideally, that will be 2 million users, Holland said. That will not only serve the purpose of having enough participants to connect players with each other, but it also could launch the business aspect of the site, with targeted marketing to athletes by national companies.

The partners are seeking investors and a partnership with a national sports brand that could help launch the site to a national audience.

Connecting people

Dallas Aleman, owner of Towpath Racquet Club, has been partnering with GameSnake to encourage tennis playing in public parks and at clubs.

``The challenge right now is if you are looking for someone to play an activity you enjoy, you have to seek those people out one by one. This is a way for you to find people fast in a safe way," Aleman said. ``This is the kind of thing that if it takes off, it's neat to have this kind of innovation going on in Akron."

Holland said connecting people of all ages is a way to make a community vibrant. The site tries to create an after-work life for young professionals that doesn't have to be a thriving bar scene.

``As you get older, socioeconomics becomes our filter for friends. It's very hard to connect with someone" to play a sport, said Holland, 38. Young professionals, Holland said, are also too busy to commit to an amateur league.

Inclusive environment

On a recent Thursday night, Holland and about 20 other players got together at the Bath Community Center to play a pickup game of soccer. The games have attracted anywhere from 20 to 50 players.

Maria Costanzo of Highland Heights said when she first played at one of the Thursday night games, she and a friend were a bit intimidated to be the only two women with 20 men.

``But they were all real friendly. We all got passed to," she said. There were also people of all ages from 14 to 30 and abilities at the game, said Costanzo, 21, a recent college graduate.

The best part, Costanzo said, is just having a friendly and competitive game.

``No one really cared about what the score was. It wasn't die-hard competition. Everyone was there to play and have fun," she said.