

Tournament draws top area basketball players

Ballin' in the Willow returns for second year

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Hundreds of local basketball players are expected to showcase their hoop skills this summer at West Willow Park during a popular summer-long basketball tournament.

Ballin' in the Willow, a second-year, three-on-three tournament, runs every Tuesday from 4 to 8 p.m. until Aug. 10. About 90 players participated last summer and organizers hope that number increases.

The tournament has grown faster than expected, said Ozone House Education and Outreach Director Derrick Jackson.

"It started out slow last year, but by the last week, we had 15 teams in each age group," said Jackson, whose organization is sponsoring the event.

Players range from 10 to 20 years old, and come from Ypsilanti and several surrounding cities. The tournament is free.

The Ozone House, which helps at-risk children, began the tournament to give young people something positive and fun to do during the summer.

"We were thinking about what we could possibly offer in the neighborhood," Jackson said. "Since resources are limited, this made the most sense."

Cedric Collins, 14, a basketball player for Willow Run High School, said the tournament is a good way to improve his basketball skills.

"Working with the older dudes, they help me with my game," he said. "I get to play against some good guys."

Despite being an organized tournament, Ballin' in the Willow attracts players with a relaxed atmosphere. There are few rules, and no referees, which leaves players to officiate themselves.

"We try to have a little organization, but leave the game as it would be if they were here by themselves," Jackson said. "It's not so structured that the kids can't come out and have a good time."

Ron Wilson, 18, likes not having too many rules.

"It's like street ball," he said. "You can just hoop. Just play for fun."

Another objective is to introduce children to the Ozone House and its services. Jackson wants the players to know they can get help at the Ozone House if they're having problems at home.

"Part of the reason we're doing this is to reach out to the community," Jackson said. "They're at the park having a good time, but we're trying to educate them as well."

All that said, it's the basketball that keeps drawing more players each week. Matt Thomas, 19, said the tournament's competition is strong.

"I don't play to lose," he said. "There's a lot of talent around here."

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