

King of Rock, Paper, Scissors

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By DIANA NEWTON Staff Writer

The promise of free burritos, a wealthy businessman and the childhood game "Rock, Paper, Scissors" contributed to one of the most unique and successful fund-raisers in University of Illinois history.

Scott Wolf, 21, of Deerfield, was the mastermind behind a giant game of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" last fall that drew more than 400 students to the campus' south quad.

Scott Wolf, a graduate of Deerfield High School, raised \$20,000 during a Rock, Paper, Scissors fund-raiser at the University of Illinois, to help send underprivileged children to camp. He ran a similar event as a camp counselor at the park district.
(Rob Dicker/Staff Photographer)

The quirky event raised over \$20,000. The money will help send underprivileged children from Champaign-Urbana to summer camp this year.

"The office of registered student organizations at U. of I. told us that it was the second-largest amount of money ever raised by a first-year campus organization, and there are almost 1,000 campus organizations," said Wolf, a junior at the university and a former camp director for Deerfield Park District.

"This kid didn't sleep," said Scott Shefler, 21, of Northbrook, nodding at Wolf.

Help from friends

Wolf enlisted Shefler to serve on the Board and launch a Web page for his newly created Illini Summer Opportunity Organization. Wolf also persuaded Holden Metz, 19, of Highland Park, and Steven Markowitz, 20, of Northbrook, to join the Board.

"We started talking about different ways to succeed, and we knew we needed a fun event, a big turnout and little start-up capital," Wolf said.

Wolf ran a "Rock, Paper, Scissors" tournament for third-grade campers in Deerfield, and he used the same strategy: Lots of enthusiasm, giveaways and a giant grid that allowed participants to see where they stood in the tournament.

"Scott has a lot of crazy ideas, but he's really passionate about everything he does," said Markowitz, who kept the project and the finances organized. "He goes 100 percent. No, 200 percent."

Even months later, Bobbie Herakovich, executive director of the Champaign Park District, marvels at what the students pulled off.

"I don't know what his (Wolf's) major is, but they need to hire him in fund-raising," she said. "He's the perfect salesman."

The new organization popped up at just the right time. The major fund-raiser for the park district scholarship fund got rained out last year, Herakovich said.

"I don't know what we would have done if they hadn't come along," Herakovich said.

The four novice fund-raisers and fraternity brothers (Sigma Alpha Mu) hustled coupons for free Chipotle burritos -- a favorite among college students -- and they camped out on campus overnight to sell raffle tickets. They wrote to alumni. They told everyone they knew about the tournament and got other sororities and fraternities to help.

U. of I. students paid \$10 to play "Rock, Paper, Scissors," and they received a coupon for a free burrito, seven raffle tickets -- with the top prize a trip to Acapulco -- and a free T-shirt designed by Shefler that had the words "I got rocked" printed above an image of a rock. The tournament winner also won a trip to Acapulco and 65 free Chipotle burritos.

Wolf said the group originally planned to just sell raffle tickets when a wealthy alum from the northern suburbs stepped in. The alum, who stayed anonymous, pledged matching funds, up to \$15,000. That spurred them to do more.

Prizes and more

They printed 2,000 fliers, got Chipotle and Noodles & Company to donate \$15,000 in food coupons and landed two trips to Acapulco and a 32-inch HDTV LCD as raffle and tournament prizes. They sold 13,000 raffle tickets.

Home on winter break, the four talked about their whirlwind experience.

The charismatic Wolf considers himself an entrepreneur, so starting up a new campus organization appealed to him. And he knew he wanted to help kids.

"I like the challenge of not knowing," Wolf said. "We were jumping into uncharted territory."

"I was skeptical about what four people could do," Markowitz said. "But just one idea turned into that huge reality. We're hoping to inspire other students."

"It was really cool to see how many other organizations came together to help our organization," Metz said. "For one week, it didn't matter what fraternity house or business you were from. There definitely was a buzz about it on campus."

Driving the effort was the children they knew they could help.

"I knew Champaign had a lot of poverty, but I didn't know how much," said Wolf. "The idea of not being able to afford camp was incredible to me."

Wolf felt passionate about giving children the chance to experience camp because he has seen firsthand what a positive effect it has.

All four felt fortunate to have grown up on the North Shore, and that motivated them to help.

"We come from an area where we can afford to think of other people," Markowitz said. "We have that luxury."

Big payout

Shefler, who is studying public policy and law and who plans to attend law school, as do Wolf and Markowitz, said handing over the check was the most memorable moment.

"Seeing everyone smiling and knowing how happy they were because they knew how it was going to help was when it hit home for me," Shefler said.

Wolf gave credit to his hometown, where it all began.

"I feel that I've been blessed to have such wonderful memories working with the Deerfield Park District," Wolf said. "This project would have never occurred had I never met the hundreds of children in our community. Whether it was through my years umpiring for DYBA or my precious camp memories, I owe all of the success of Illini Summer Opportunity Organization to the inspiration of our community's children."

Wolf plans to study abroad in Milan next semester, but he will be back at U. of I. for senior year. He'll help with the organization, but Metz, studying to be a sports agent, will take over running it. The four said they would like to see their organization go on for years. The park districts look forward to that.

"We are planning on it being a lifelong partnership," said Herakovich, who said applications for financial aid are on the rise. "I'm continually amazed by students today. They are doing more and more for the community."

For more information on Illini Summer Opportunity Organization, visit www.uiuc.edu/ro/isoo.