

## **Behind the Gold Medal-** by Jane Hodgkinson

The National Gold Medal Award is the most prestigious award a park and recreation agency can receive. It recognizes service excellence. It is as coveted as the “Oscar” is to the movie industry. Only five are given out per year (six on the years when state park systems are reviewed). The Gold Medal is a comprehensive award that looks at the challenges and resources of an agency and how it is meeting those challenges. Ask past recipients about the crowning moments of their career and the comment “Receiving the Gold Medal” will frequently emerge. Yet, most people know very little about how the recipients are selected or the history behind our most coveted award. What is “Behind the Gold Medal”?

### **Historical Time Table**

**1965-** The Gold Medal Award program begins when the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA) creates the Sports Foundation, Inc. to encourage participation in sports and recreation activities by recognizing the best and most innovative programs of the nation’s park and recreation agencies. In partnership with NRPA, four finalists are selected from each population category and the recipients are announced at the annual NRPA congress in front of the attendees.

**1980-** Recognizing that the award helps “raise the bar” in services, the Sports Foundation and NRPA add a second category of awards for Special Recreation services. This new award category honors communities that provide services for special populations (people with mental and physical disabilities, at-risk youth, economically disadvantaged, older adults, homeless and others). These awards challenge community programs to broaden their spectrum of services and to serve populations that are under-served.

**1997-** The State Park Award is added to honor the most outstanding state park system in the fifty states. This award is given every other year.

**1999-** The Special Recreation Gold Medal is discontinued on the basis that this component of a park and recreation system is integrated into all communities.

**2003-** The Sports Foundation announces the decision to discontinue the sponsorship of the Gold Medal Program. They cite the reduced membership of local sporting goods stores caused by the increased sports competition from Wal-Mart, Sport Mart, and other large chains.

**2003-** Fearing that the program will decline, the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration (AAPRA) agrees to assume the program subject to finding adequate financing and sponsorships. The AAPRA is a distinguished group of the 125 top practitioners and educators in the country. Its mission is to advance knowledge related to the administration of recreation and parks, to encourage scholarly efforts by practitioners and educators to enhance the practice of park and recreation administration, to promote broader public understanding of the importance of parks and recreation for the public good, and to conduct research, publish scholarly papers and/or sponsor seminars related to the advancement of park and recreation administration.

**2004-** Porter Athletic Equipment Company and Musco Lighting become the official sponsors of the Gold Medal Program.

**2005-** Dr. Bertha Cato of the University of Florida conducts a survey of award recipients from 1990-2003. Chief among the findings are that receiving the gold medal award:

Increased recognition/public support (83%)

Validated staff performance (67%)

Boosted morale / staff motivation/ source of pride (60%)

Enhanced the department's image/civic pride (53%)

Enhanced perception of quality of service/confirmed excellence (53%)

**2006-** The application process for the awards goes online.

**2007-** Musco Lighting becomes the sole sponsor of the awards and introduces the Gold Medal Reception for all the nominees. This reception takes place a day prior to the award ceremony and honors all of the nominees. Joe Crookham, President of Musco Lighting, emphasizes they support the program because of the value “Recreation professionals can create in the lives of individuals and the strength of communities. By highlighting excellence, innovation and building partnerships, the Gold Medal program can cause more people to think about what is possible.”

## **Application Process**

When beginning the application process, administrators need to gauge whether their agency is “organizationally ready”. Are master plans up to date? Have needs-assessments been conducted? Has the agency received any type of accreditation? Are park practices environmentally sound? Are services available to people with disabilities? These are just a few of many issues to consider. While not required, an agency that has completed an accreditation or self-audit is probably ahead of an agency that has not. Submitting an application is time consuming. It can also be demoralizing to staff if the agency is not selected as a finalist. Information is available at the [NRPA.org](http://NRPA.org) website. A detailed list of judging criteria, application forms, and intent to file an application form are available.

Agencies choosing to “Go for the Gold” must go through a number of steps before being selected. The agency must first decide who will coordinate the effort and serve on the team to contribute information. Is it better for one person to complete the application form or for many team members to answer the questions? Next, the agency submits an “Intent to nominate” form to NRPA.

This is a good time to assess whether the agency’s technology can support the application process. Is statistical data available for the application process? The questions asked in the application process deal with population, demographic breakdown of the community, usage numbers, median household income, funding sources, operating expenses, capital improvements, and key measurements of

the facilities and areas owned or leased. The agency software must be able to support this type of data retrieval.

The application form will also ask about the agency long-range plans and if those plans have been achieved. An agency that shows a history of accomplishments will rank higher than one that is just starting the process. If the agency is just starting this planning process for the first time, they should consider waiting to apply until they have proven outcomes.

The form will ask about unusual challenges and strategies utilized as well as two projects implemented in the last five years. This is an area where innovative partnerships and programs can really be showcased and can reflect a community's unique flavor. A frequent response used by past applicants to this question has been "Fast growing population with too few resources". This answer gives very little information to a judge about the community. Your answers must help the judges see why your community is distinctive.

The form also asks for evidence of environmental stewardship and cultural protection, external professional involvement, citizen support and advocacy, technology to enhance communication, agency effectiveness and efficiency, and how the agency provides services to special populations. Each of these questions has a more detailed list of criteria on the website.

Each agency must submit six copies of the application form along with a brochure or catalogue of services. Judges then select the four finalists in each of the population categories. Finalists will be notified in April and receive notification that they must submit a 12 minute DVD for the next round of judging.

## **2009 Timeline**

March 5<sup>th</sup> -Nomination Intent Form deadline (See NRPA.org awards)

March 6<sup>th</sup>- Application deadline

April 13-17 -Finalists notified, participants notified

July 10<sup>th</sup> - Finalists deadline for DVD submission

## **Judging and Scoring**

Before I served as a Gold Medal judge, my agency twice won the Gold Medal for Special Recreation Services. I assumed that the five judges sat around a table and discussed each applicant. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a judge, I received a box with the applications, judging criteria (which is the same criteria given to the applicants), and timeline for the process. I reviewed each application, ranked each agency, and returned them to NRPA without any contact with other judges. Judging this process took about twenty hours to review all applicants thoroughly.

NRPA then totals the judges' rankings, determines the four finalists in each category, and notifies all participating agencies. The finalists then submit a 12 minute DVD for the final round of judging. The written application is worth 75% of the total score and the DVD is worth 25% of the score.

In July, the judges gather in person to watch the DVDs. Again, there is no collaboration between the judges concerning the DVDs. Each judge sits in a different area of a theater and ranks each applicant based on the screening of the DVD. NRPA staff then tally the rankings. It seems to be a fair process.

A judge can excuse himself from a category when a conflict of interest occurs. For example, one of the communities in my special recreation cooperative was a finalist and I did not cast a vote in that category. No judge knows the ranking until the grand plaque recipients are tabulated by NRPA.

### **What is in the Future for the Gold Medals?**

The AAPRA, based on recommendations from both the judges and previous recipients, would like to see the Gold Medal process continue to improve in the future. A task force has been named to help make the questions measurable: that will be a goal for both the 2010 and 2011 application process.

Agencies have commented that they would appreciate getting feedback on their applications and suggestions for improvement. This issue is being studied.

NRPA does not have the resources to fund the Gold Medal program so sponsorship is vital. We greatly appreciate the support Musco Lighting has provided to the program and hope support will continue in the future. The Gold Medal Program continues to elevate services park and recreation agencies provide to the public. The general public benefits from the Gold Medal Awards as they raise the bar of expectations for the public.