

SAVING Soldiers Memorial Field Track



BY GWEN JACOBSON

A green oasis in the heart of the urban community of Rochester, Minnesota, just blocks from the world renowned Mayo Clinic, is Soldiers Memorial Field Park. This peaceful green space and athletic complex became the center of controversy earlier this year when the Park and Recreation Department proposed changes to the 91 year old running track.

In 1927, the American Legion transferred the land to the City of Rochester to develop the area into a total recreational ground. An eighteen hole golf course, football field, quarter mile cinder track and a baseball diamond were completed in 1928. A swimming pool, another ballfield and tennis courts were added over time. Eventually, a Memorial honoring fallen soldiers of all wars was built on the north end

of the field. The Rochester High School Athletic Association used these athletic facilities until 1958. Over 75,000 people came to see President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he visited Soldiers Memorial Field in August of 1934.

The 91 year old cinder track is open and free to the public and used by countless individuals and organizations. Probably the most notable is the Hal Martin All Comers' Track meets hosted by the Rochester Track Club since 1971. In 2015, Rochesterfest, an annual nine day event with food trucks and music, moved to the Soldiers Memorial Field Park. Food trucks park on the track and the infield hosts picnic tables and stands for various shows.

Cinder is not readily available today, and because of the expense, the track has received minimal maintenance for over 20 years. Currently the track sits four inches below the grass infield and after a heavy rainstorm the track floods in several areas. This creates a problem for all users of the track.

In March of 2019, the Rochester City Council approved \$850,000 for Soldiers Memorial Field improvements. Of this amount, \$200,000 was allocated to pave the track to make it more suitable for events. The word "pave" was an immediate red flag in the running community. Further investigation revealed the "Soldiers Field Oval" proposal would remove a retaining wall, shorten and pave the track and slope the track to the outside to improve drainage.

Members of the Rochester Track Club and running community rallied and attended the April Park Board meeting and were successful in voicing concerns. Unfortunately, one month later the Park Board rejected the running community request for a bid for a natural surface. The Park Board voted to move forward with a recommendation to accept paving bids for the "Soldiers Field Oval" proposal.

Immediate action was necessary to have any hope in saving the soft surface regulation track. Twelve community members formed the Save



CHILDREN DISCOVER THE FUN OF RUNNING AT THE HAL MARTIN ALL COMERS' TRACK MEET AT THE SOLDIERS MEMORIAL FIELD TRACK IN ROCHESTER.

the Track Organization to inform and educate the community about the potential change and impact to the fitness community. Save the Track – Soldiers Field Track, Rochester MN Facebook page was created to organize, help spread the word and educate others about the concerns of the community. Save the Soldiers Field track petition was started on Change.org to broaden our education efforts and build momentum. Participants were encouraged to contact their Rochester City Council and Park Board representatives to express their concerns.

A sunrise to sunset event at Soldiers Memorial Field track was held on May 23, 2019. People came to walk or run around the track to raise community awareness. The event was covered by local television stations and newspapers. Over 350 participants completed 4,196 laps around the track, totaling 1,050 miles.

Save the Track Organization members held conversations with Rochester City Council and Park Board members to educate them on the

benefits of preserving the natural surface track. Organizations, like MDRA, contacted Rochester city officials and shared the issue on social media. Political figures and community groups within Rochester began to call for a compromise for a surface agreeable to both the fitness community and events.

The rise in community awareness, the numbers joining the Facebook page and signing the petition, demonstrated the concern of the community. This momentum provided an opportunity for Park and Recreation representatives to collaborate with Save the Track representatives and work toward a compromise. After months of educating and advocating, in August the Park Board unanimously voted down the bid to pave the track.

The Park Board has reserved the leftover funds appropriated for Soldiers Field improvements for the track restoration and is allowing Save the Track Organization the opportunity to design and bring forward a natural surface

solution. Improvements will include a drainage system and installation of a geogrid within the track to support the weight of vehicles and make the space usable for events as well as the fitness community. Save the Track is actively fundraising to cover any cost overages and to provide a reserve fund for ongoing maintenance of a natural surface track.

While the effort is still on going, it would seem after many months of advocating and fundraising by countless volunteers, a compromise between the fitness community and events has been reached. For the past 91 years Soldiers Memorial Field Track has been a welcoming, open to the public, regulation 400 meter track for all to use and will be for future generations to come.

If you would like to help restore the Soldiers Memorial Field historic track, donations can be made to: Save the Track GoFundMe or by sending a check to: Rochester Track Club c/o Save the Track, PO BOX 6711, Rochester, MN 55903.