

READINGTON TWP.

Lottery, Devils join Festival of Ballooning landscape

Caroline Fassett *For The Star-Ledger*

The New Jersey Festival of Ballooning will return to the Garden State this weekend after being canceled in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

So how does the event's executive producer feel about its return?

Just like those aboard the roughly 100 hot air balloons that will soar through the skies, he's looking up.

"I'm tremendously excited," said Howard Freeman. "After the pandemic of 1918, you had the Roaring Twenties, and it looks like that's happening again. Everybody's got cabin fever, and everybody's looking for a safe place to go with their family outdoors."

The 38th annual New Jersey Lottery Festival of Ballooning will be held at the Solberg Airport in Readington Township today through Sunday. Billed by organizers as the largest summertime hot air balloon and music festival in North America, the event features concerts and other activities and entertainment that usually attract upward of 165,000 people.

And this summer, the Solberg Airport might see more visitors than ever before.

"The potential is there. We're up probably 20% to 25% for advance sales," Freeman said earlier this month. "For those people who do want to social distance, we have enough space."

General admission tickets can be purchased online. Tickets cost \$40 per adult and \$15 for children, not including service fees.

Prices for adult tickets are slightly higher than they were two years ago due to inflation and other financial reasons, according to Freeman.

"It's the first time we've raised prices in eight years," Freeman said. "The prices of everything have gone up — including human resources and what we have to pay people to work — because so many people got incentives from the government.

And everything is costing more, and we're spending more on talent, frankly."

Max Weinberg's Jukebox, Barenaked Ladies and Styx are featured headliners. There's also a children's concert on Friday afternoon with Laurie Berkner.

"Styx is a band we've been trying to get for years," Freeman said. "If our ticket sales are any indication, that's going to sell out."

But the band's upcoming performance is not the only first for the festival. In light of the pandemic, organizers have teamed up with the state Department of Health and Wegmans to offer festivalgoers shots of the Johnson & Johnson or Pfizer coronavirus vaccine. Individuals who receive the Pfizer vaccine can work with administrators on site to schedule their second dose at a Wegmans pharmacy.

Freeman said "lots of special prizes and incentives" will be offered to those who get the shot at the festival.

Attendees will not be required to wear masks at the outdoor festival, but various precautions have been implemented in response to the pandemic, such as hand-sanitizing stations.

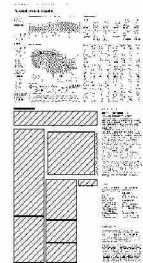
This year's festival is the first in which the New Jersey Lottery will serve as the title sponsor of the event, a role previously filled by QuickChek for 26 consecutive years.

"The lottery has taken over," Freeman said. "The lottery has been unbelievable partners with us, given the pandemic and last year."

Lottery Land, a spacious entertainment complex, will replace "the QuickChek footprint." The complex includes a stage for musical performances, marking the first time in festival history that more than two concert stages will grace festival grounds.

"We will have eight different emerging New Jersey artists of all different genres playing throughout the weekend, and DJs playing when the artists are not playing," Freeman said.

In Lottery Land, festivalgoers ages



18 and older can enjoy the Quick Draw Lounge; buy Quick Draw and CASH POP! games; and play the Beanbag Bucks giant cornhole game with “beanbags the size of pillows” to win scratch-off prizes as well as an actual cornhole set, Freeman said.

The New Jersey Lottery will also debut Big Jack, its new Fast Play Progressive 12-foot-tall inflatable mascot.

Attendees will find a second cornhole set and other games in the new New Jersey Devils’ exhibit, a 45-foot trailer where

players from the team will make appearances throughout the festival.

“You’ll be able to shoot pucks at a goalie. And you’ll have all kinds of interactive things,” Freeman said.

“Team members will be present for autographs and pictures at select times throughout the weekend.”

In addition to the New Jersey Lottery hot air balloon, other new special balloons include a giant sloth and a colorful unicorn.



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