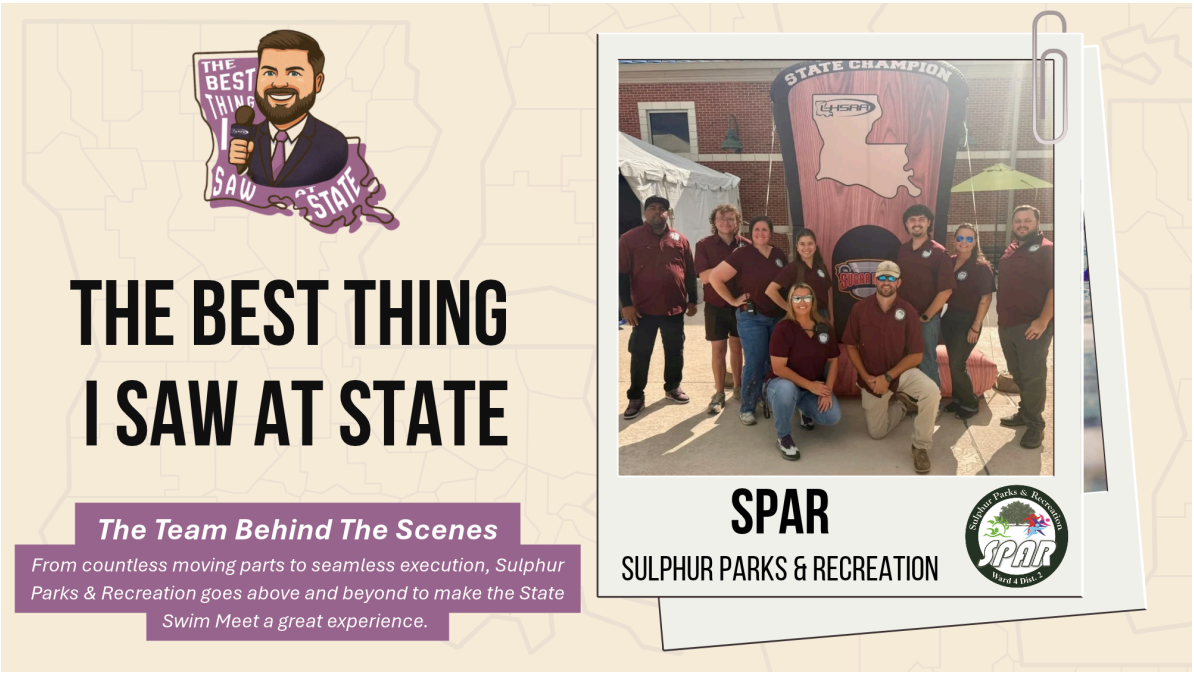
The Best Thing I Saw at State

The Team Behind the Scenes at State Swim

From countless moving parts to seamless execution, Sulphur Parks & Recreation goes above and beyond to make the State Swim Meet a great experience.

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



By Ethan W. Anderson

SULPHUR — The 2026 Sugar Bowl LHSAA State Swimming Championships brought together some of Louisiana's best swimmers for four days of competition, record-breaking performances, and championship moments.

But while swimmers raced for state titles and coaches guided their teams through competition, another team was working just as hard outside the pool.

From early-morning preparations to long days inside the facility, Sulphur Parks & Recreation (SPAR) staff members played an instrumental role in making the championship experience possible. Their work often goes unnoticed, but without it, the State Swim Meet would not be what it is today.



Approximately 45 SPAR employees work specifically on the State Swim Meet each day. That includes Recreation & Aquatic Center employees, parking attendants, maintenance personnel, IT support, and approximately 15 lifeguards assigned to monitor the pool and maintain a safe competition environment. Beyond those working directly on the championship, another 15 employees help maintain regular facility operations.

That's a significant undertaking, especially when you consider that the facility doesn't stop serving its everyday members just because thousands of visitors are coming through its doors.

Under the leadership of Natalie Bowers and her supervisory team, including Tara Coltrin, Director of Operations for the Recreation & Aquatic Center, the operation requires months of preparation and coordination.

"We're working on the next meet all year," Bowers explained. "We book tents and police presence a year out. Tara and her team discuss the meet quarterly, and the final planning and coordination really picks up about six weeks before the event."

For the Aquatics Department, preparation begins approximately three months in advance with meetings, safety checks, equipment inspections, and facility preparation. A detailed checklist covers everything from maintenance and cleaning to competition equipment and employee responsibilities.

Staff members also participate in a pre-meet in-service covering safety procedures, facility operations, and customer service expectations. The goal is to ensure everyone understands their responsibilities and the importance of creating a welcoming environment for athletes, coaches, officials, and spectators.

That preparation extends to SPAR's partnership with Sulphur High School, whose swim program plays an important role in the event. The school helps coordinate staffing, menu planning, hospitality, and concessions, allowing SPAR employees to focus on facility operations and the overall championship experience.

It takes countless people working together to make everything run smoothly.

As Bowers noted, "It takes people being willing to handle their piece and help each other when something changes, which, with an event this size, it always does!"

That commitment is also reflected in the improvements SPAR has made to the facility throughout the years.

Over the past several seasons, investments have included new starting blocks, touchpads, lane lines, a bulkhead, and an upgraded scoreboard. Additional improvements have addressed pool tile, bleachers, restrooms, spectator entrances, and hospitality areas.

This year, SPAR added a second tent to improve vendor visibility and installed two sets of double doors to improve access between the waterpark, pool deck, and hospitality room.



Those additions might seem like small details, but they make a significant difference in how the event operates. They also allow the facility to continue accommodating its regular members while hosting a state championship.

The same hallway used by championship visitors is also where senior members gather for morning coffee, families bring their children to Kid Zone, and everyday members enjoy the facility.

For SPAR, maintaining that balance is just as important as hosting a successful championship.

And the improvements haven't gone unnoticed.

According to Hillary Franklin, one of the most rewarding comments following this year's championship came from visitors who walked into the facility and simply said, "Wow, it's beautiful in here."

For SPAR, those comments serve as a reminder that the investments made behind the scenes translate into a better experience for everyone attending the championship.

But providing a great experience goes beyond the appearance of the facility. Safety and professionalism remain at the center of the Aquatics Department's responsibilities.

With approximately 15 lifeguards monitoring the pool each day, SPAR places a tremendous emphasis on training, accountability, and maintaining high standards.

One particular moment from this year's championship demonstrated just how much that preparation matters.

An aquatics director from another facility noticed one of SPAR's lifeguards actively scanning the pool and performing his duties. Impressed by what she saw, she took a photograph and explained that she wanted to share it with her own staff as an example of professional, focused lifeguarding.

It's a small moment, but one that speaks volumes about the standards SPAR works to maintain. The training and expectations established behind the scenes were on display for everyone to see, even when the staff didn't realize anyone was watching.

That same mindset carries throughout the organization.

Before and after every event, the staff looks for ways to improve and make the next championship even better.

"'Good enough' and 'that's how we've always done it' aren't approaches we take to these events, or really anything we do," Bowers said.



It's a philosophy shared by the many employees, including student workers, who help make the championship possible. For those young employees, the State Swim Meet provides an opportunity to take pride in their community and recognize the role they play in creating a memorable experience for visiting athletes and families.

Hosting the championship also means a great deal to the people who have been part of SPAR for years.

Bowers began working for the organization in 2003, just two years after SPAR began hosting the softball championships. Swimming was added following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, with baseball joining the lineup in the 2010s.

"We really do measure our years by these events," Bowers said.

For a community the size of Sulphur, hosting multiple state championship events is a distinction worth celebrating. More importantly, it provides an opportunity to showcase the hospitality and welcoming nature of the community to visitors from across Louisiana.

"It's the pride," Bowers said of the relationship with the LHSAA. "We get to show our hospitality, the welcoming, accommodating, kind, and polite nature, to people who might otherwise only know Sulphur as somewhere near Lake Charles."

She also emphasized the importance of providing young athletes with an opportunity to compete at the highest level of their high school careers.

"Win or lose, that's an experience they'll carry with them, and we get to help make it happen."

The swimmers, coaches, and fans will always be the heart of the State Swim Meet. Their performances and accomplishments are what make the championship special. But behind every great championship experience is a team of people working to make sure everything runs as it should.

To Natalie Bowers, Tara Coltrin, Hillary Franklin, the entire supervisory team, and every SPAR employee who puts in the long hours, monitors the pool, answers questions, solves problems, and goes the extra mile, thank you.

Your work does not go unnoticed. The continued improvements to this championship, the professionalism of your staff, and the welcoming environment you create reflect the pride you take in what you do.

Sometimes, the best thing you see at state isn't in the pool. It's the people who make it all possible.



Author's Note: *In my role as the Director of Communications, I have the unique privilege of attending nearly all sanctioned LHSAA State Championship events. Although the schedule is demanding, I have the privilege of seeing student-athletes from all walks of life, united by two things: their participation in Louisiana high school sports and their pursuit of a state championship. In my first year in this role, I've gained a deeper appreciation for high school athletics and for all the dedication that goes into making each season and event possible. Although my current role involves less writing than my previous positions, it has given me the opportunity to return to something I've always loved. While much of my work now focuses on press releases and public statements, I also have the chance to reconnect with my passion for feature writing, this time highlighting what I consider the purest form of sport: high school athletics. The goal is to highlight the best thing I saw at each state championship and share the unknown stories behind these events, capturing memorable moments for student-athletes, coaches, administrators, officials, and everyone who makes Louisiana high school athletics special.*