



FAMILY FUN AT CATFISH BAY

Summer fun for the entire family awaits at Catfish Bay Water Ski Park in Sioux Falls. *Photos by Billy Gibson*

Pigs fly and family fun abounds at Catfish Bay Water Ski Park

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If you stop by Catfish Bay, you probably won't see a single catfish during your stay. But you will definitely see a pig flying, a chicken hurtling through the air and water skis sprouting up from a pocketful of magic seeds.

Catfish Bay Water Ski Park, located just off I-90 in Sioux Falls, is a family entertainment venue where a squad of highly skilled skiers leap and spin and build four-tier human pyramids as they skim across the water's surface.

Billed as "The Greatest Show on H₂O," the event attracts spectators from miles around who show up each Friday evening during the summer months to see the high-flying theatrics reminiscent of Florida's famed Cypress Gardens. The show features ski jumpers dressed as chickens, Hee Haw-inspired corn pone humor and a daredevil in a pig costume elevating 30 feet into the air astride a water-propelled fly board.

The show is the brainchild of Jim

Bruns, an idea that spawned from his mind as "a God thing." While he was a college student in the early '90s, Bruns joined the Sioux Falls Water Ski Club and honed his skills enough to turn pro.

It was during college that he hatched a plan to establish a show similar to those being staged at SeaWorld and other similar sites. First thing he needed was a lake. He found the perfect spot when a contractor dug out a 25-acre borrow pit adjacent to the interstate. He bought the pit and – voila! – one man-made lake...just add water.

Second thing he needed was a performing cast. Bruns gathered some of his fellow skiers of all ages and sizes, pulled together a program and then plowed forward for a few years determined to make the show a success. Just when he began wondering if he was going to be able to keep the labor-intensive venture alive, he experienced another epiphany. He needed to rededicate the program to building youth, strengthening families and developing leaders. He formed a

mission statement: "MV2 – Mission, Vision and Values."

"It was a simple plan from the start," Bruns said just before the start of the season-opening show on Memorial Day. "But in 2007 I hit a wall. I sat down and prayed about it and came up with MV2. Now I have so many stories of kids who have come out here and learned a skill and learned about teamwork and goal-setting. They learn how to overcome obstacles."

One of those youngsters is Beth Bruggeman, who serves as assistant show director. A recent college graduate, she has been involved in the program for 10 years. She was a 13-year-old gymnast and cheerleader when she decided to try out for the ski team and now she's a star in the show with boundless energy, a beaming smile and a scar on her eyebrow as her personal badge of courage and grit.

"One of the things I like about it is there are people who participate of all skill levels who are anywhere from 6 to 60 years old. You don't find groups with that kind of diversity. You get to form different kinds of connections and friendships," she said.

Bruns' own children, James and Amara, are two other stars of the show. Amara, 13, professes to be the more gushingly dramatic. A student at O'Gorman Junior High, Amara has been part of the act since she was 2, riding on her dad's shoulders. Today she barefoots, swivels, climbs the pyramid and charms the crowd with her effervescent smile.

"I like entertaining people and making them feel like they've come to a special place," she said.

Beside Bruns, Jeremiah Newman is another example of the motto: the family that skis together stays together. He and his children, 14-year-old Marissa and 12-year-old Tyler, are involved in all aspects of the show. He's a member of the military and a former international professional skier who still competes around the region and specializes in performing flips and twists on an air chair hydrofoil.

"This is such a family-friendly environment. It's priceless. It keeps me active and it keeps our family close. Instead of sitting on the sidelines watching my kids, I get to be out there with them," he said. "We talk about the importance of making a life-long commitment to fitness and good nutrition and things that will serve them well along the way."

While the skiers are preparing for their next set, attention turns toward the stage area and a charming recurring character named Norman, who always comes up with some crackpot scheme that never fails to fail. Bruns explains that the Norman character stands as a metaphor for anyone who has had a dream and felt the frustration of failure.

"The thing about Norman that makes him different is that he never loses his enthusiasm and keeps on trying," Bruns said. "His motto is to dream big and never give up."

Bruns is living out the dream he had as a younger man. To this point, Norman has never revealed his last name. But it could very well be Bruns.

Below, Catfish Bay performers pull off a "four-stack" configuration. At right, the character known as "Norman" rides a flying pig.

