

Toll Gate track renovations part of system-wide renewal of athletic facilities

State Class A track tournament returns to school after 14 years May 20

On May 20, track and field teams from eleven of the biggest schools in Rhode Island will congregate at Toll Gate High School to show off their running, jumping and throwing prowess at the Class A State Track Meet. Athletes from Toll Gate will participate, but they have something other than athletic prowess to show off as well - a renaissance for track and field at Toll Gate and across the Warwick Public School system.

It's been 14 years since Toll Gate hosted a State event, and with good reason. The facilities at the school, according to Coach Norman Bouthillier, had always been lacking, but had fallen into serious disrepair in recent years. Bouthillier, who has been coaching track and field at Toll Gate since 1992 said that although facilities were built in 1999, corners were cut and the program was not a priority.

"Then, when Superintendent Thornton came in, it became a big thing to have the track redone," Bouthillier said.

Not only was the track repaired and resurfaced, but cages, pits, and throwing squares were also brought up to competition specifications. Before the school system invested \$160,000 into the project, the track was in really bad shape. Athletes were throwing the shotput at a substandard throwing area, making measurements inaccurate. Other event sites like hammer throw and long jump were sorely lacking.

The Toll Gate project is part of a system-wide program focused on the restoration of athletic and recreational facilities. Projects included in the initiative include resurfacing the tracks at Tollgate and Pilgrim, a new football field and batting cages at Pilgrim High School, and small gyms at both Pilgrim and Toll Gate being repurposed as weight/workout facilities.

In addition to facilities, one more component was added. The students at Winman Junior High School and Veterans Junior High are also running, throwing, and jumping with the addition of middle school track and field, one of the full complement of middle school sports added in the district this year for the first time. Thornton said enhancing athletic programs at the junior high level, which previously consisted of just a few intramural teams, was important for the students.

"It's great to have it," said Bouthillier, who also teaches Social Studies at Winman. "It's great because now we have a feeder system and the kids are so enthusiastic about it."

It has been that enthusiasm that has made the project feel worthwhile. He said it is gratifying to to watch the young athletes of Winman and Vets line up to race in the 100-yard dash heats and seeing the potential for student success every time the starter's pistol fires.

"That's what is great about track," he said. "There are 18 events. There is no bench. Everyone participates as a team. That's what this is all about."