

# Locals have discovered the beauties of 600-acre Nathan Benderson Park

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**UNIVERSITY PARK** -- Although Nathan Benderson Park hosts more than 40 formal events each year, there are weekends when the community park is the sole preserve of the locals.

They have clearly discovered its beauties.

They bike around its paved, 3.5-mile loop, they fish its waters, bird watch and walk, jog and run along its shady, shell-covered trails.

On most days, you can see stand-up paddle-boarders, fishermen, skaters, bicyclists, and young mothers pushing baby strollers.

"We come here at least three times a week," explained one of the latter, Bernadette Brelsford, 35, of Bradenton, who drops off her oldest child, Liam, 2, at preschool before taking her younger son, Nolan, 10 months, around the sparkling lake in a sturdy stroller.

Brelsford, who operates a home-based business called Isagenix, which is a health and wellness nutritional-cleansing program, was enjoying perfect weather at the park Friday with Nolan.

Nearby on the wide, paved loop were Kathleen Pecora, 55, a radio logistic technologist from Sarasota, and Judi Crouse, who is in her 50s, and works as a creative director of a publishing company.

"This is a fabulous place," said Crouse. "It finally feels like it's for the community," she said, noting that it had been transformed over time from a decided eyesore into an attractive lake and beautiful park.

On the lake were a couple of guys catching bass from a boat.

Mike Gadberry, 57, a retiree, and Brandon Gadberry, 26, a firefighter-paramedic for Hillsborough County, both of Bradenton, put into the 400-acre lake at about 9 a.m., caught a few bass, and were out by noon, they said.

"It's very convenient," said the elder Gadberry.

There is plenty of parking, along with portable toilets, great, colorful flower beds, lush stands of trees, and such amenities as picnic tables and boat launches.

Including the 400-acre lake, the park near the intersection of University Parkway and Interstate-75 sprawls across 600 acres of prime real estate near the border of Manatee and Sarasota counties.

Not so long ago, the park, originally named Cooper Creek Park, was a low-brow borrow pit, the lake of which had been formed as a result of construction along I-75.



Nathan Benderson Park is gradually taking shape and representatives with the International Federation of Rowing Associations are considering a Manatee-Sarasota bid to host the 2017 World Rowing Championships.

Grant Jefferies/Bradenton Herald File

In 2009, the company and the family of the late Nathan Benderson pledged \$1 million to add amenities for competitive rowing events. And the former Cooper Creek Park, owned by Sarasota County, was renamed in honor of the patriarch of the Benderson Development Co. LLC.

A partnership formed by the company and Manatee and Sarasota counties has been developing the park and two other venues for world-class rowing and other types of events.

The movers and shakers among the group were able to convince Bob Whitford, who is a native Californian and was a rowing director at the University of California at Sacramento, to forsake his home state, move here, and manage the park.

"The park is such a special opportunity, it was the only thing that could take me from California," said Whitford, 59, of Sarasota, who is now the park's operations manager.

"We have hundreds of walkers, bikers, using the park," he said. "The perimeter of the park, having a loop, is very enticing to a lot of the public, they park their car, do the 3.5-mile loop, and they're back where they started.

"We also have lots of people coming from the south, they come to the park every day," noted Whitford. "The public has found it, and is using it as it is intended.

"Some people use it every single day -- a gentleman comes out every morning with his dogs; bicyclists come every morning and take the loop. It's really a healthy place, and that's what we're so excited about."

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