



The Art of it all

DURING A TOUR OF THE BEMIS CENTER for Contemporary Arts, Cary Tobin pauses to sign for delivery of a package, a thick envelope containing another submission for the residency program she directs.

“This one,” Tobin says, reading the label, “is from Korea.”

Celebrating its 25th anniversary, the Bemis Center has one of the nation’s premier artist residency programs. Each year the center receives more than 500 applications from around the world. Fewer than 30 artists are chosen.



Tobin says the center is known in Europe and around the world. "Everywhere the Bemis is mentioned, artists know about us," she says. "It's an amazing program that just happens to be here in Omaha."

The Bemis Center is one aspect of this city's conscious effort to attract and cultivate artistic creativity. The results extend beyond the Bemis to the vibrant artists' community in the Old Market historical district as well as several blocks north to the innovative Hot Shops Arts Center, with its collection of forges, kilns, studios, and showrooms.

Omaha has long been recognized as a leader in community theater. The Omaha Community Playhouse, where Henry Fonda and Dorothy McGuire took their first bows, is America's largest community theater measured by attendance, staff size, and budget. When Dick Boyd stepped down in December after 30 years portraying Scrooge in the play-

house's annual production of *A Christmas Carol*, his unblemished longevity was chronicled in *USA Today* and on national television.

Each year, the historical Rose Theater draws more than 200,000 children and adults into a magical world of stage performances geared toward young people. It's home to the Omaha Theater Company, which features one of the country's largest national tours. The 2006-07 tour will visit more than 80 cities and feature two shows, including *The Berenstain Bears on Stage*, written especially for the company by the late Stan Berenstain.

Sprinkled throughout the city, more than 35 production companies welcome audiences and



Above: *The Nutcracker* at the Rose Theater
Left: Pottery from Hot Shops

aspiring actors of all ages. Every summer, Shakespeare on the Green presents two plays free of charge at an open-air theater in Elmwood Park. For dance, there is the Omaha Theater Ballet resident professional company, and Chomari Ballet Folklorico Mexicano, the resident dance company of El Museo Latino in south Omaha.

Music adds to the city's flavor. Omahan Chip Davis is the founder and composer of the Grammy-winning band Mannheim Steamroller, which performs here every Christmas. Jazz on the Green attracts thousands to the lawn outside the Joslyn Art Museum, and the Omaha Riverfront Jazz and Blues Festival is growing in scope.

The Omaha Symphony Orchestra performs at the grand new Holland Performing Arts Center, while the stately Orpheum Theater hosts Opera Omaha. Both facilities are managed by Omaha Performing Arts, a nonprofit organization active in education and community enrichment programs.

The Holland's 2,000-seat Peter Kiewit Concert Hall is unequaled in its attention to acoustics, says Thomas

Sounds Impressive

Stepping for the first time into the Kiewit Concert Hall at the new \$94 million Holland Performing Arts Center invariably elicits a "Wow," and when it does, that single word can be heard as far back as the last row of the second balcony. The acoustics in the 2,000-seat hall are designed to astound. Each of the 7,000 hand-cast plaster tiles on the walls, for example, has a varying series of dimples to carry every note and lyric throughout the room. The attention to detail is paying off. "We have had incredible interest in the Holland Center in its inaugural season," says Joan Squires, president of Omaha Performing Arts.



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PHOTO BY ERIC FRANCIS, COURTESY OF GREATER OMAHA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Wilkins, musical director of the symphony.

“The investment of \$100 million, the majority of it from private donors, in the building of the Holland to me is the strongest indicator of how Omahans feel about the performing arts and art in general,” says Wilkins. “Omaha has built a concert hall designed not for stage productions but for acoustic music. That’s an incredible commitment.”

Wilkins, who is also the resident conductor of the Detroit Symphony, says the Holland Center reflects the city’s spirit. “Omaha is on the cusp of great things. Not only is there promise here, but a will to have those promises fulfilled.”

The Bemis Center, founded by a group including artists Jun Kaneko and Ree Schonlau, lives up to its promise to support exceptional talent. The center occupies two warehouses in downtown’s Old Market area, filling a block and a half of space. Artists-in-residence get a place to live and work and a monthly stipend.

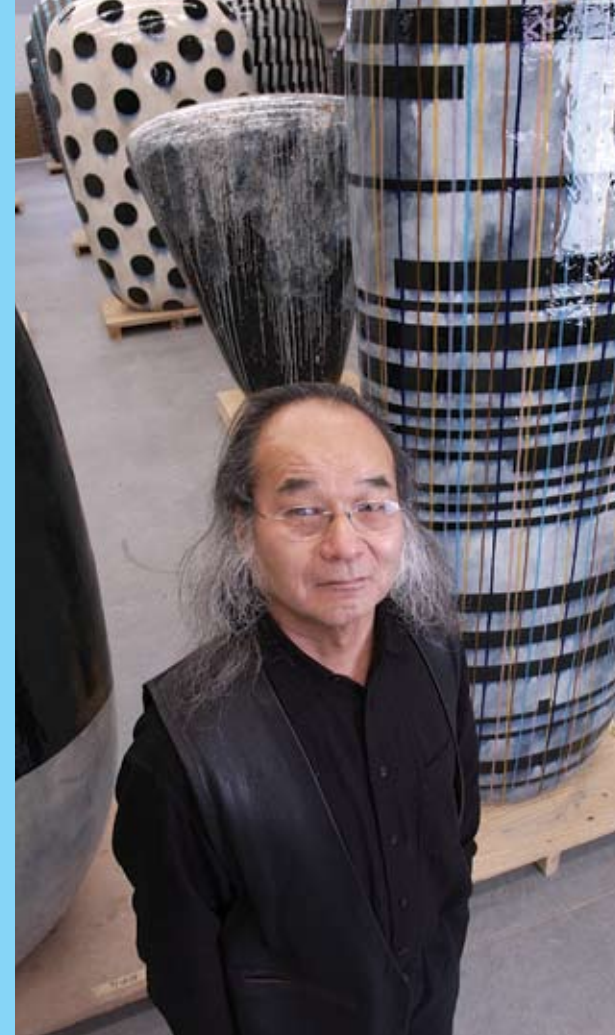
Sculptor Mark Masuoka came to the Bemis in



The Omaha Community Playhouse’s annual production of *A Christmas Carol* attracts dedicated fans.

1989 as an artist-in-residence. He returned in 2003 to become the center’s executive director and lauds Omaha for its “artistic economic development.”

“This city has always benefited from a strong, contemporary arts scene, where the community nurtured and established the retention of artists,” he says. “That became the foundation of today’s arts scene, and it’s building an incredible reputation around the world.”



No Limit to His Creativity

Internationally acclaimed sculptor and painter Jun Kaneko first brought his art to Omaha in the early 1980s. Most recently, Opera Omaha invited the Kaneko to design visually stunning sets and costumes for Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*. His next venture is even more daring. In a building in the Old Market district, he is creating “The Kaneko,” described as “open space for your mind.” It’s a nonprofit “center for creativity” that he hopes will attract artists, poets, philosophers, and scientists. “There are great cities all over, places where I have friends and could gain equal support,” says Kaneko, who turns 64 this year. “But with the amazing arts community here, Omaha just made so much sense to me.”

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Holland Performing Arts Center



Tom Kessler Photography

Marine Life Studies in the New York Harbor



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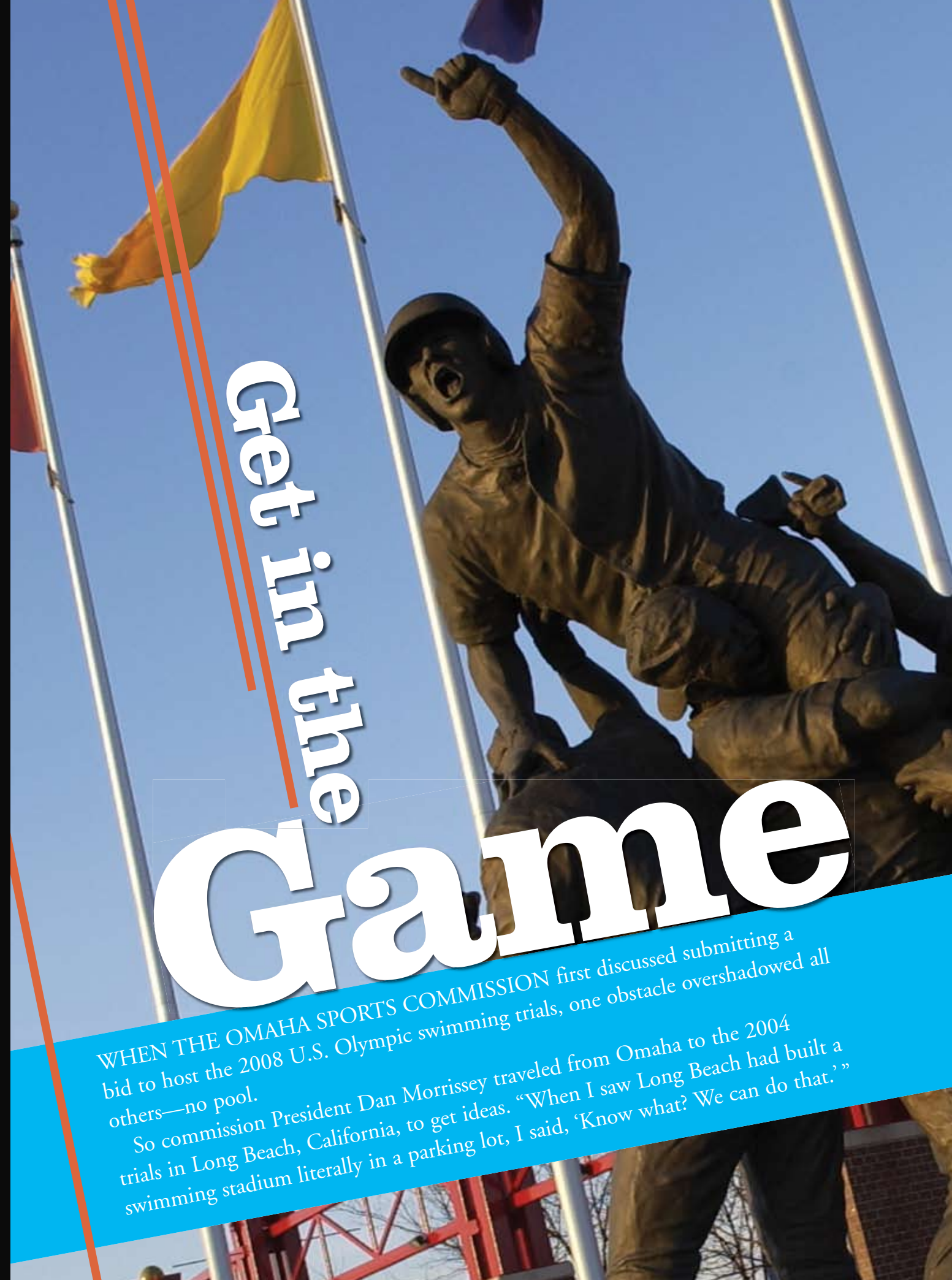
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Get in the
Game

WHEN THE OMAHA SPORTS COMMISSION first discussed submitting a bid to host the 2008 U.S. Olympic swimming trials, one obstacle overshadowed all others—no pool. So commission President Dan Morrissey traveled from Omaha to the 2004 trials in Long Beach, California, to get ideas. “When I saw Long Beach had built a swimming stadium literally in a parking lot, I said, ‘Know what? We can do that.’”



Left to right: Creighton University basketball; the NCAA women's volleyball tournament; University of Nebraska at Omaha Mavericks hockey.

The commission bid to host the trials not in a parking lot but at the Qwest Center Omaha, a \$291 million convention center and arena completed in 2003. In the end, Omaha was selected over two other finalists: St. Paul, Minnesota, and San Antonio, Texas.

Announcing the selection, Chuck Wielgus, the executive director of USA Swimming, touted Omaha's "vigorous business environment and a sports-mad population."

While "sports-mad" may be a little extreme, Omahans are loyal sports and recreation enthusiasts. No matter the season, they find a way to exercise their passions.

During the winter, sledding and cross-country skiing are popular pastimes at many of the city's more than 200 parks and the 15 state parks that lie within a 50-mile radius. Indoors, youth and adult hockey leagues and figure skaters keep the city's ice rinks busy.

In the summer, softball leagues crowd the bases at city ballparks, while golfers tee off at more than 50 public and private courses. Runners line up for the annual Omaha Marathon and other competitive challenges. Joggers and bicyclists follow miles of trails alongside tranquil creek beds.

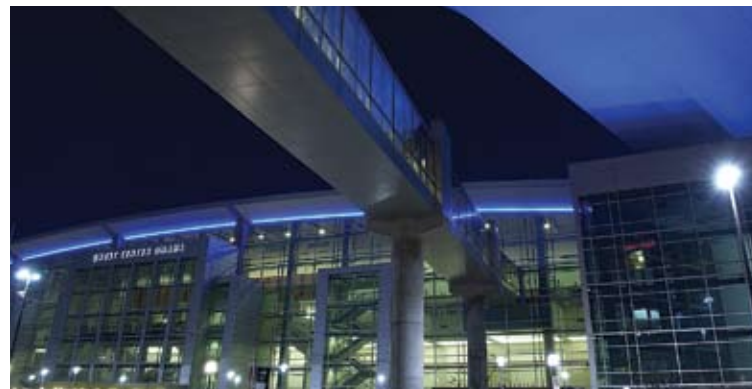
Those who enjoy deeper water take to area lakes for fishing, boating, and swimming or visit the Missouri, Elkhorn, or Platte rivers. The Riverfront Marina is the City of Omaha's newest addition to the exciting Missouri riverfront-redevelopment area. The marina offers short-term docking slips and easy access to activities and events at Rick's Café Boatyard, Lewis and Clark Landing, Qwest Center Omaha, the downtown area, and the Old Market.

Spectators have plenty of choices, too. Each August, the Cox Classic golf tournament at Champions Run takes on a life of its own. Coverage of the 2005 tournament on The Golf Channel put the city's big red O! symbol before a national television

audience. The event followed its own record-breaking tradition with more than 82,000 people turning out during the tournament. And the nightly parties went on long after the sun had set.

Hockey is a hot ticket, with three well-followed area teams, while the Pacific Coast League AAA Omaha Royals crack the bats at Rosenblatt Stadium. Loyal fans follow Creighton University Bluejay basketball and soccer teams.

The soccer team plays at the 5,000-seat Michael G. Morrison, S.J., Soccer Stadium, remarkable for its high-tech turf that's composed of sand, rubber, and fibers. Designed in Amsterdam especially for the sport, it incorporates 60,000 used automobile tires and is the



The Qwest Center Omaha

only field of its kind in the United States.

Setting Omaha apart and establishing the city as the nation's leading host of collegiate and amateur sports championships is the primary function of the Omaha Sports Commission, created January 2004 by a group of prominent civic leaders.

"The successes in our first two years have been quite incredible," Morrissey says.

Last year, crowds at the Qwest Center Omaha set

records for women's college volleyball single-game attendance and two-day session attendance at the NCAA women's regional tournament. This December, Omaha will be the site of the NCAA women's volleyball semifinal and championship matches.

The city is attracting other collegiate events. In 2008, first- and second-round games in the NCAA men's basketball tournament, and in 2010, the NCAA Division I wrestling championships will take place at the Qwest Center Omaha.

For the Olympic swimming trials, two temporary 50-meter pools will be installed in the Qwest Center arena. The convention center will be transformed into the USA Swimming Aqua Zone, a sponsor- and fan-experience area.

"It's probably safe to say that Omaha will never get the Olympics," Morrissey says. "But we have been able to cultivate a relationship with arguably one of the premier Olympic sports and bring those trials here."

He says the economic impact of this event and its telecast on the NBC and USA cable networks should be phenomenal.

"We think it'll blow everything else right out of the water," he says.

Once the pools are filled, of course.

Pass the Mustard

Omaha claims a professional baseball team, three hockey teams, and several others—enough sports to keep a hot dog vendor busy all season long.

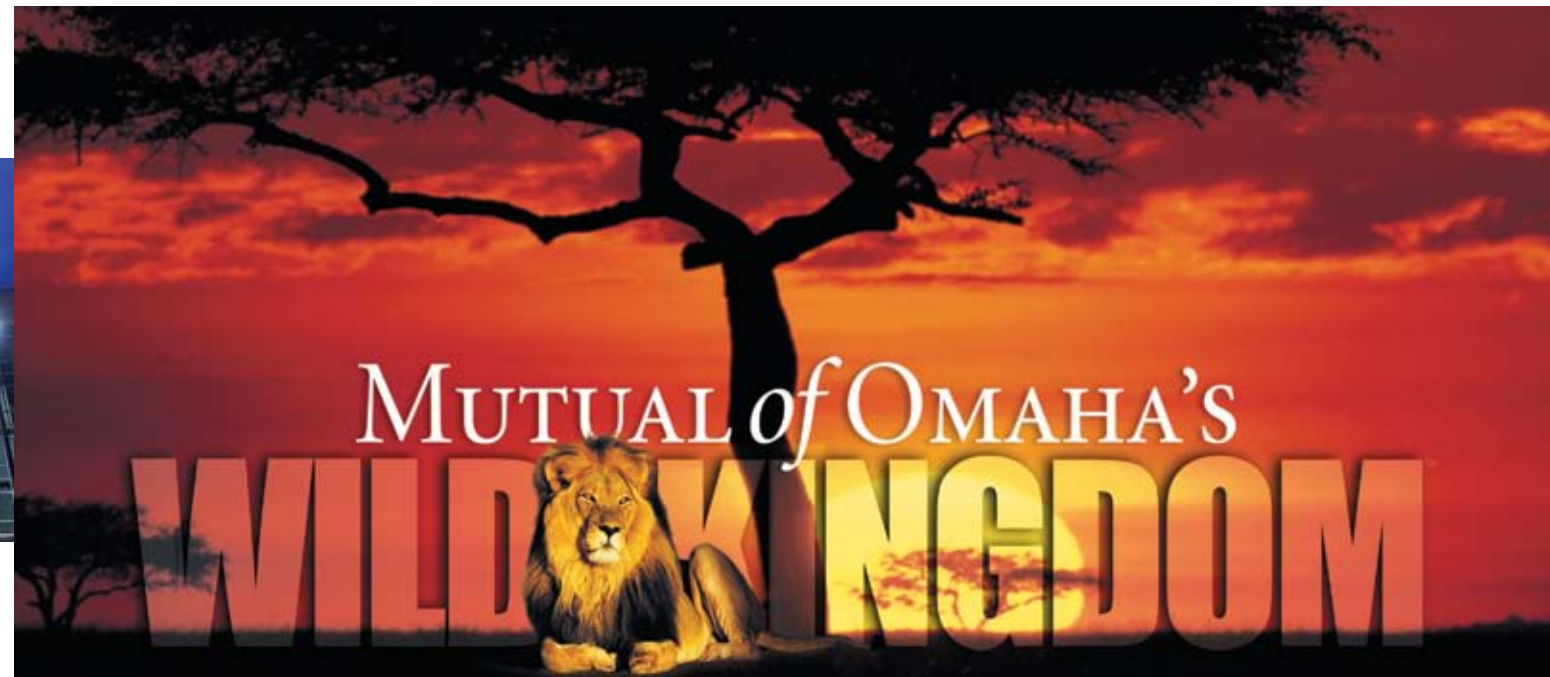
The Pacific Coast League AAA Omaha Royals baseball team is the top farm club for the Kansas City Royals.

The Omaha Ak-Sar-Ben Knights American Hockey League pro team plays 40 home games.

The Omaha Lancers amateur U.S. Hockey League team has won several championships since play began in 1986.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha's hockey team is an NCAA Division I program. The Mavericks are part of the Central Collegiate Hockey Association.

Creighton University's soccer teams are among the nation's best; the Bluejays lead the Missouri Valley Conference in men's basketball championships.



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