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## Ready, set, dig! Sand-sculpting contest set for Wednesday

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They will arrive Wednesday morning, armed with buckets, shovels, plastic spoons and straws. They will scope the beach. They will claim a spot.

And then the competitors in the 22nd annual New Jersey Sandcastle Contest will proceed with the serious business of turning parched sand into prize-worthy sculptures.

"It's an opportunity to express themselves, to reclaim their youth and just to have fun," said Domenick Cilea, owner of the public relations firm that coordinates and promotes the contest. "And some people are in it for the bragging rights."

A decade ago, the sand castle contest drew about 2,000 people, Cilea said. Now it attracts more than 10,000 people and features some 300 entries, taking over the beach from 15th Avenue up to 20th Avenue, he said. Organizers call it the largest sand-sculpting event in the state.

Competitors in the sand castle contest include day camp children who are bused in for the day, and families who choose a theme a year in advance and spend weeks on the beach practicing and perfecting their work of art, Mayor Kenneth E. Pringle said.

"The (sculptures) range from the sand castle version of stick figures to Picasso," he said. "It's amazing, some of the talent that you see down there."

The creations do not always include towers and turrets. In past years, contestants have molded the sand into Yankee Stadium, the New York skyline, a bowling lane — complete with 10 pins and a ball — and creatures as varied as an octopus and SpongeBob SquarePants.

Some have fashioned the sand into a political statement. Two years ago, the winning entry depicted two sharks attacking the SS Pringle and splitting it in two.

The mayor said he was not offended by the sandy jab at his ship of state.

"I was complimented," Pringle said. "How many mayors rank sand art in their name?"

D'Jais Bar, the contest's lead sponsor, began hosting the annual event about 10 years ago, bar owner Frank Sementa said. He said he stepped in when the previous sponsors dropped out and left him feeling "just sad" at the thought of no longer seeing sand sculptures spread out across the oceanfront.

"The whimsical nature of sand castles on the beach," he said. "What can be better than that?"

D'Jais expects to see a large turnout this year, said Cilea of the public relations firm. With gasoline prices at historically high levels, people likely will choose a free day of entertainment at the Belmar beach over more expensive destinations farther away, he said.

Still, by Thursday morning, no trace of the competition will remain. Most sand sculptures will disintegrate before Wednesday ends, Cilea said.

Any work of art that survives the night will meet a harsher fate.

"Belmar rakes the beach every day," Cilea said. "So by the next day, if it's still standing, it will get put to rest."

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