

In Iowa, It's State Fair and Presidential Campaign Season

August 10, 2023 by **Dan McCue**



(Iowa State Fair photo)

DES MOINES, Iowa — Somewhere the gods of fried foods on a stick, butter cows and electoral politics are surely smiling.

That's because as of 9 a.m. local time Thursday morning, the gates will open to the 2023 edition of the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines, a tradition that dates back to 1854, and which every four years marks the unofficial start of the presidential primary season.

At the center of it all, on the fair's Grand Concourse, will be the Des Moines Register Political Soapbox, which this year will welcome 13 presidential hopefuls.

In reality, the "soapbox" is a very modest black stage set up on a small patch of grass. A few bales of straw and a discrete backdrop

are the only decorations, and by tradition, a candidate only gets 20 minutes to speak and take questions from the crowd.

It's retail politicking at its most intense — before a bipartisan crowd at an 11-day event that draws millions of visitors. Yet nearly all candidates profess to love it.

“It's real conversations with people with issues on their minds,” said then-South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg when he attended the fair as a presidential candidate in 2019.

“It's a great chance to look somebody in the eye and, in the course of telling them what we plan to do, make sure they understand what we care about, too,” he said.

But appearances can also prove dangerously image-defining.

A case in point occurred in 2011, when then-Republican candidate and future senator, Mitt Romney, got in an ill-advised back-and-forth with a heckler who shouted a disparaging remark about corporate influence on elections.

“Corporations are people, my friend,” Romney replied as his aides no doubt cringed. “Of course they are. Everything corporations earn ultimately goes to people.”

And so excited is former South Carolina governor and Republican hopeful Nikki Haley that she announced days ago “blitzing Iowa this week with a jam-packed schedule” at the fair.

Her official schedule in Iowa begins Thursday night, when she will sit down with the hosts of the “Ruthless” podcast live from the state fairgrounds.

Other scheduled guests include another Republican presidential hopeful, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, Republican U.S. Sen. Joni Ernst, and Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds.

On

2023 Illinois State Fair Butter Cow (Screen grab from butter
cow cam)

Friday, Haley, who served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations during the Trump administration, will again meet up with Ernst, for a Bastion Institute-sponsored discussion of U.S.-China policy.

On Saturday morning, Haley will participate in a “fair-side chat” with Reynolds, visit many of the high points of the fair — including, no doubt, this year’s butter cow sculpted by Sarah Pratt — before taking her turn on the soapbox at 3 p.m.

The theme of this year’s butter cow creation, by the way, is “Harvest the Fun.” It depicts real-life Illinois dairy farmer Lorilee Shultz from Mill-R-Mor Dairy in Orangeville, Illinois, harvesting milk from one of her cows.

The iconic sculpture will remain on display in the Dairy Building for the duration of the fair and is viewable live via the [Butter Cow webcam](#).

Haley, meanwhile, will close out her fair experience Saturday with a stop at the Iowa Pork Producers tent.

None of the other candidates has been as thorough in announcing their fair schedule as the former governor.

Former President Donald Trump has announced he'll visit the fair at 1 p.m. Saturday, but he has not committed to any of its traditional events.

As for the Des Moines Register Political Soapbox schedule, it currently stands as follows:

Thursday, Aug. 10

1:30 p.m.: Republican Doug Burgum

4:30 p.m.: Republican former Vice President Mike Pence

Friday, Aug. 11

11:15 a.m.: Republican Francis Suarez

Noon: Republican Perry Johnson

1:30 p.m.: Republican Larry Elder

Saturday, Aug. 12

11:15 a.m.: Republican Ryan Binkley

Noon: Republican Vivek Ramaswamy

1:30 p.m.: Democrat Marianne Williamson

2:15 p.m.: Democrat Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

3:00 p.m.: Republican Nikki Haley

Friday, Aug. 18

Noon: Republican Will Hurd

Saturday, Aug. 19

2:15 p.m.: Libertarian Chase Oliver

4:30 p.m.: Republican Asa Hutchinson

All of the soapbox appearances will be broadcast, and the Des Moines Register will also be posting the video.

And it's not just active candidates who get into the act. For instance, as the fair opened Thursday, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Iowa Democratic Party Chair Rita Hart were slated to hold a press conference on the fairgrounds "to contrast 2024 Republicans' MAGA agenda with President Biden and Democrats' record of success."

For
more

(Iowa State Fair photo)

insight on the fair, The Well News spoke to Tim Hagle, a political science professor at the University of Iowa, who said while the fair may seem like the start of the presidential campaign season to the rest of the country, that's not really the case in The Hawkeye State.

“While the Iowa State Fair is certainly important in a variety of ways, politically speaking, things have actually been going on here for months,” Hagle said.

“I mean, once you get past the midterms, or maybe the holidays following the midterms, things are already starting to get underway,” he continued. “What is different with the arrival of the fair is the level of intensity of these activities.

“With the caucuses set for Jan. 15, as we get deeper into the summer and into the fall, the pace of activity will pick up and things will keep rolling right along from now until then,” he said.

Hagle pointed out that already this summer at least two big events have drawn a large number of Republican candidates to the state. The first was the Family Leader Summit, held in Des Moines in mid-July.

Promoted as the largest gathering of evangelical Christian voters in the Midwest, it drew several GOP candidates who promised to be the vanguards of a cultural transformation in the country.

Two weeks later, many of the same Republican candidates and a few of their more moderate challengers returned to Iowa to attend the state Republican party’s annual Lincoln Dinner.

“These were opportunities for the candidates to meet a lot of the political activists in the state, elected officials, county chairs of the party ... and that’s good, because the candidates need to meet those folks,” Hagle said.

“What’s different about the fair is that it’s not exclusive to the political elites,” he said. “This is an opportunity for them to interact with ‘regular’ people and be seen doing so — and that’s a big thing in terms of how candidates connect with Iowa voters,

who are the people who are ultimately going to be showing up at a caucus site.”

On a

(Iowa State Fair photo)

typical visit, Hagle said, a candidate will set aside time to visit the fair concourse, sample the food — “almost always something fried on a stick” — check out the attractions and ultimately visit the butter cow.

“Everybody has got to see that; that’s the big thing,” he said.

“Meanwhile, you’re meeting people, taking a few selfies, maybe getting into a few more lengthy conversations with voters ... and obviously, the media covers this as much as it does the scheduled events ... which the campaigns love because it provides them with some footage of their candidate actually interacting with people,” he said.

Hagle said the level of political party activity at the fair is typically dictated by which party controls the White House ahead of the caucus.

This year, with Democrat Joe Biden in office, the vast majority of candidates on hand will be Republicans.

“This year, however, is a little different,” Hagle said. “Not only do we have two Democratic candidates making appearances — Kennedy and Williamson — but we also have an independent, Chase Oliver, which should be interesting.”

Another factor is how well individual candidates do in getting their supporters to attend.

“They all have staffers working on this, and hopefully by this point in their campaigns, they have the names and contact information of people they can call on to provide the appearance of support,” Hagle said.

“At the same time, sometimes your opponents’ supporters will also show up,” he said.

“In those cases, the candidates will likely get some hard, if not harsh, questions, and what campaigns will tell you is their goal in those situations is for the candidate to keep their responses simple, yet informative, and to keep things rolling so that it doesn’t become when they say something goofy that could haunt the whole campaign,” he said.

Hagle said he’s also interested in seeing how the individual candidates perform during their “fair-side chats” with Reynolds, which is a new feature at this year’s fair.

“From what I understand, these are going to be town hall-style events, with at least some questions solicited from the public, but at the same time, the governor has indicated she wants to try to dig a little deeper and find out about the character of the candidates and who they are as a person. So that should be interesting as well,” he said.

Of

(Iowa State Fair photo)

course, one thing everyone is mindful of as the fair opens and the candidates arrive is that there's a certain level of danger in any kind of interaction they engage in.

"In a sense, the fair is similar to debates in that it is often said you can't really win a debate, but you can certainly lose it," Hagle said.

"I mean, in 1984, famously, former Vice President Walter Mondale effectively lost a debate with then-President Ronald Reagan by attacking him on his age," he said. "You may remember that Reagan turned the age issue completely around by telling the crowd he wouldn't hold Mondale's 'relative youth and inexperience against him.'

"Similarly, former Texas Gov. Rick Perry's presidential campaign was effectively finished in 2012 when he couldn't name the federal agencies he consistently said he wanted to get rid of; while both of these moments occurred during debates, the same kinds of things can happen at the fair."

The most commonly cited example, of course, is Romney's aforementioned comment on corporations being people, but it's not the only one.

Another fair faux pas that Iowa State Fair attendees well remember involved former senator and character actor Fred Thompson, who was seeking the Republican nomination for president in 2008.

In Thompson's case, it wasn't what he said, but what he wore to the fair that cut him down.

"He showed up wearing these fairly expensive Italian loafers, as I remember, which is not typically the kind of footwear you're going to see at a state fair, especially in Iowa," Hagle said.

"Now, for Thompson, these were probably his very comfortable, walking around shoes ... he probably didn't even give it a thought when he put those shoes on that morning ... but it became a big story in Iowa, an agricultural state, where people jokingly said they hoped he didn't go into the livestock barns with those things on," he said.

"The lesson there is that sometimes the most innocent thing, the smallest unintended slight, can hurt you as much as something you say ... and certain people are maybe looking for those negative stories," Hagle continued. "'The camera never blinks,'" as Dan Rather once said.

The obvious question then is, why expose oneself to that danger? Is the Iowa State Fair such a big deal that not showing up four months before the Iowa caucus will really get noticed?

"It depends on the candidate," Hagle said. "I mean, look at Donald Trump."

In 2015 Trump flew to Iowa on the first Saturday morning of the fair after a Friday night rally in New Hampshire, and then took a helicopter emblazoned with the Trump name to the fairgrounds.

Rather
than

(Iowa State Fair photo)

participate in the Des Moines Register Political Soapbox, Trump held a quick conference in which he promised, among other things, to spend \$1 billion of his own money on his campaign.

“I’m turning down so much money,” Trump said in his inimitable style, adding, “Nobody else would do the job that I will do.”

Trump also rejected the notion that people wanted to know his specific positions on the issues.

“I don’t think the people care. I think they trust me, I think they know I’m going to make good deals for them,” Trump said.

He then proceeded to give several young fairgoers rides on his helicopter.

“It got a lot of attention, and it was different from what everybody else was doing,” Hagle said. “Even then, Trump did not run a traditional caucus campaign and I think part of it was simply that the grip-and-grin approach to campaigning simply isn’t his style.

“At the same time, he benefited from the fact his name recognition was so much larger than anybody else, so he didn’t have to do the same kind of things,” the professor continued. “Obviously, his name recognition is even greater now than it was then. So he can take a different path than some of these other folks.

“For instance, Trump didn’t come to the Leadership Summit in July, but Kari Lake was here in Des Moines, basically doing a counter-programming thing as a surrogate for Trump,” he said.

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(Iowa State Fair photo)

Thursday, it’s easy to wonder what kind of “legs” it will have for the candidates, especially considering that the first GOP presidential debate of the 2024 election cycle will be broadcast by Fox News in just two weeks’ time, on Aug. 23.

Could the close scheduling of the two events squash the impact of the state fair?

Hagle believes it won't.

"It's always a combination of factors that make coming to the Iowa State Fair important, and the first is that it's important to Iowa," he said. "I mean, I can't imagine that voters in New Hampshire care all that much about what transpires here. They care about candidates coming to their state fair or whatever they happen to have.

"On the other hand, given the amount of media attention this fair gets, and especially if you have a situation where somebody really messes up ... that's going to be a story for a while, regardless of whatever other events occur in the aftermath of the fair," he said.

"And remember, we're not talking about something that's here and gone. Clips from the Iowa State Fair are going to be available online long after the event packs it in for the year, and that's sure to have some impact on the early voting states and maybe other states as well," he said.

"I mean, go back to the Romney comment again. That statement about corporations went well beyond Iowa and it remained a part of the narrative of criticism against him for the remainder of his campaign," Hagle said.

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