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The Sports Events Gold Mine

Destinations Big & Small Are Taking
Hold of the Sports Marketing Opportunity

By Selena Chavis

Destination marketing professionals describe the sports market as steady and reliable during economic downturns and expansive with unlimited growth potential at any other time. It's the primary reason that communities both large and small continue to invest in infrastructure that appeals to the sports events market.

"The reason why we have these stadiums in Arlington is not just because we love sports but because we love the business of sports; it's big business," said Matt Wilson, vice president of sports and events with the Arlington (Texas) Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). "What we've found is that no matter what happens, people will find a way for their daughter to play in that volleyball tournament or their son to play in that baseball tournament."

Calling the sports market "recession resistant," Wilson said that the opportunity today is greater than ever. "You can see it in television programming," he said. "You can see it in how people spend their disposable income. The entire country has just gravitated more and more to sports, and there are more sports than ever to choose from."

Jennifer Sugarman, president and CEO of the Cocoa Beach (Fla.) Regional Chamber of Commerce, attributes more than \$9 million in direct economic impact to the region's USSSA Space Coast Complex alone, bringing primarily slow-pitch softball, baseball, fast-pitch

softball and basketball events to the region. "USSSA's guaranteed room nights generate an estimated \$500,000 a year in additional tourist tax revenue for the Space Coast, based on an average room rate of \$100 a night," she said.

Growing Infrastructure

Growing demand for new sports facilities has led to increased need for innovative, cost-effective consulting and financing solutions, such as those now offered by the Sports Facilities Advisory (SFA), a leading youth sports and recreation consultancy that will manage the new Rocky Mount Event Center in North Carolina's Nash County. Scheduled to open in October 2018, the new center will complement the existing Rocky Mount Sports Complex, which currently brings more than 100,000 visitors to the community each year.

According to Barbara Green, executive director with Nash County Travel and Tourism, the 165,000-square-foot center will elevate the region's appeal as a sports destination by

providing the capacity to host multi-court tournaments, trade shows, meetings, concerts and community events. The facility will also provide a 15,000-square-foot family entertainment center that will have a variety of interactive games, ropes course, climbing walls and other family-friendly activities.

"The Rocky Mount Sports Complex continues to bring in large groups throughout the year with baseball and softball tournaments, soccer and lacrosse teams, and the Down East Viking Classic football, which is in its 21st year," Green said, noting that the new event center will allow the region to expand out to basketball and volleyball tournaments, wrestling, ►



South Seas Island Resort

South Seas Island Resort Aerial



Rocky Mount Soccer



Birmingham SEC Baseball Tournament



Arlington CVB

Arlington Takes on Esports

There is a new sport in town and Matt Wilson, vice president of sports and events with the Arlington Convention and Visitors Bureau, calls it a “force.”

This fall, the city of Arlington will open the country’s largest esports stadium in its entertainment district. The facility will house 100,000 square feet and some of the most cutting-edge LED setups in the world.

Wilson noted that the esports industry has grown at a rapid pace in recent years. “Every city in the country is trying to figure out how in the world do we get in on esports,” he said. “It’s big business ... we are talking billions of dollars.”

He said that the city got serious about the development when they saw that billionaires were investing their money in esports.

Notably, Texas Rangers’ ownership recently partnered with two esports teams: OpTic Gaming and EnVyUS, the latter of which announced plans to relocate its headquarters to Dallas.

A type of competitive video gaming, esports typically take the form of organized, multiplayer professional competitions. The 2017 Global Esports Market Report predicted that the sport would become a \$1.5 billion market by 2020. ■



cheer competitions, martial arts and more. “By providing both a premier outdoor sports complex and a premier indoor event center, this gives us an opportunity to host many types of sporting events.”

Infrastructure enhancement is key to Birmingham’s (Ala.) ability to score wins such as the 2017 Senior Games, 2018 Women’s Open Championship and the World Games 2021, according to David Galbaugh, vice president of sports sales and marketing with the Greater Birmingham CVB. Bringing in 25,000 athletes and spectators over 14 days, the 2017 Senior Games generated a \$35 million economic impact.

“Infrastructure is what you need to host sports because really the buildings drive it first and foremost,” Galbaugh said. “We have to be mindful of that and continue to develop facilities or we’ll be left behind.”

Notably, earlier this year the Birmingham City Council committed to contributing \$3 million a year for 30 years toward the expansion of the multi-venue Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex (BJCC), which includes a downtown stadium and renovation of Legacy Arena. The BJCC Authority, Jefferson County, the University of Alabama at Birmingham and private corporate partners also back the project. Site work is set to begin before the end of this year and the stadium is expected to be completed in 2021. Arena upgrades are expected to be finished in 2022.

The city also recently added the Hoover Metropolitan Stadium, housing six NCAA regulation-size fields appropriate for soccer, lacrosse or football; eight baseball/softball fields; 15 tennis courts; and a two-mile walking track, as well as an expansive indoor facility. In addition, the city is home to the Birmingham CrossPlex, a 221,000-square-foot multipurpose athletic and meeting facility, which houses one of the top track and field options in the nation.

Wilson suggested that in a competitive landscape, it is no longer enough to simply have a good facility. For instance, the city of Arlington (Texas) is home to numerous world-class facilities, such as the Dallas Cowboy’s AT&T Stadium and the Arlington Convention Center, but today, cities must think bigger and better ▶

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in terms of the full package to stand out.

For example, a public-private partnership between the City of Arlington and the Texas Rangers led to the recent opening of the \$250 million Texas Live! Entertainment Complex this summer. The dining, entertainment and

hospitality complex features 200,000 square feet of dining and entertainment space, a 5,000-capacity outdoor event pavilion called Arlington Backyard and the flagship Live! By Loews hotel, which is scheduled to open in summer 2019. It is part of a \$4 billion vision for Arlington's Entertainment District that includes a new Rangers \$1.1 billion ball park and the repurposing of Globe Life Park.

"That's something we have not had," Wilson said. "People like to go to an entertainment facility with bars, restaurants and other entertainment and then go to the game. It's another tool in our bag."

Sugarman noted that planners are looking for a full package that includes the right venues, hotels and entertainment, something that appeals to families since many sports events also become opportunities for vacations. "They want somewhere fun, safe, relaxing and a one-stop shop destination to fit multiple needs," she said, adding that Cocoa Beach and its regional area meets this need through its beach, river, water sports, Kennedy Space Center and plenty of shopping.

Building on Strengths

Sports is a competitive market and smaller

destinations are wise to draw on their strengths to stand out. For instance, South Seas Island Resort, located in the small market of Captiva Island in Lee County, Fla., was recently named the official host of the 22nd Hobie 16 World Championships in 2019. Notably, it will be the first time the prestigious sailing event will be held in the United States in 35 years.

Francesca Donlan, APR, communications director with the Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel, said that the opportunity presented itself through long-term relationship building that began with an opportunity for Hobie executives to experience the region's unique flavor. "The president of Hobie came and was just so enamored with our destination," she said, noting that the atmosphere of Captiva Island and neighboring Sanibel Island aligned well with Hobie's environmental focus. "Sanibel is so well preserved. Captiva and Sanibel are stunning. It's very specific to Captiva's strengths, what they do best."

South Seas Island Resort will host more than 900 athletes, 336 teams from more than 29 countries and 60 new Hobie Cat racing catamaran sailboats for 13 sailing days. Past events have realized more than 7,000 participants and spectators. ■



Fed Cup at the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex



Rocky Mount Kayaking



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