

# **The Value and Benefits of Sports Tourism**

By Sean Doherty

Sports is big business. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Super Bowl LIX, which took place in New Orleans this year, generated more than \$500 million in economic impact for the area. But it's not only the mega events of professional sports organizations that produce significant financial benefits. Youth and adult amateur tournaments, as well as collegiate events, can pack a punch when it comes to generating revenues for a destination. States, counties and municipalities across the country have come to realize this over the last several decades and have reacted by investing in the recruitment of these types of events. The latest Sports ETA report indicates that in 2023 sports tourism generated approximately \$128 billion in economic impact in the U.S., with Florida leading the way. These revenues not only help support local hospitality businesses such as hotels, restaurants and attractions, but also contribute significantly to a local community's sales tax collections. In the recent past, these funds have been spent on a variety of quality-of-life projects such as recreation centers as well as various infrastructure and public safety initiatives.

Charlotte County, through the efforts of the Punta Gorda Englewood Beach Visitor & Convention Bureau, began investing in sports tourism more than two decades ago and currently there are 36 counties in Florida who employ at least one sports tourism business development staff person to proactively attract sporting events to their destinations. In addition, the State of Florida through the Florida Sports Foundation provides the opportunity for grant funding to assist in the recruitment of this business.

Everyone knows Florida is a prime vacation destination for partileisure travelers who come to experience our theme parks, beaches, fishing and other outdoor pursuits. However, there are quite a few advantages to diversifying our visitor base with sports tourism. For example, sports tourism is recession resistant. Even in times of economic downturns, parents are committed to watching their kids participate in sports, especially in tournaments in which they have the opportunity to win a tournament championship or generate exposure to collegiate coaches or scouts. A youth athlete's career is relatively short, so families realize they may not be able to wait for the economy to improve before investing the time and money to see them participate. Also, some events can provide valuable media exposure via live-streaming and social media coverage of the event. For instance, the Snowbird Baseball Classic has partnered with Flo Sports the past several years to live-stream the games. Many of these viewers hail from the participating schools' locales in the Midwest and Northeast exposing them to our sunny destination during the winter. Another example is the APP Pickleball Tournament, which captured more than 1 million livestream views nationally and internationally the first year it was broadcast.

In fiscal year 2024, the Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Visitor & Convention Bureau was instrumental in recruiting or supporting more than 60 events spanning a variety of sports including baseball, softball, basketball, BMX, swimming and pickleball to name a few. These events generated more than \$51 million in economic impact and produced more than 36,000

hotel room nights. While these results are impressive for our destination, there is much more potential as our community grows, particularly if we're able to identify opportunities to enhance or expand our sports venue offerings. Increasing the sports tourism component of our visitation is a win-win as there's a high return on investment to attracting family-oriented sporting events that not only infuse dollars into our local economy, but at the same time reduce each household's annual tax liability. In addition, these events can enhance the quality of life for our local residents by offering affordable family-friendly entertainment while also providing tournaments in which our local leagues can participate in their own back yard. While Charlotte County won't be hosting the Super Bowl anytime in the future, there are many super events we can host that can have a super impact on our local economy.

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