

INTRODUCTION TO YOUTH SPORTS TOURISM

2024-2025 EDITION





Valued at \$52.2 billion and growing, sports tourism is among the country's most exceptional industries. Regardless of circumstance, numbers—both economic and participation—rise, powered by parents who will not sacrifice their children's activities. Destinations across the country have relied for some time on travel sports to support hotels, restaurants, and retail stores. Sports complexes have become a beacon to welcome out-of-town athletes and their families, who turn tournaments into vacations.

As the industry adapts to new and greater demands, sports tourism is becoming a more powerful tool. Athletic facilities are no longer just a home for the best amateur and youth athletic contests. They are now becoming vital tools for local governments to improve their communities' qualities of life. Rather than simply helping to support existing hospitality, sports complexes are spurring business that might not otherwise come. Facilities are anchoring mixed-use developments where athletes and their families can stay, eat, play, shop, and recreate.

As a result, the sports centers are becoming a community hub to gather for celebrations and for locals to stay physically fit. Statistics show behavior patterns changing since COVID-19 to more active lifestyles and communities must find ways to support this momentum, as greater community health sparks vitality across sectors.

In this report, we examine the economic cents and quality-of-life sense it takes to invest in and support sports tourism. The expression, "If you build it, they will come" holds true far outside Iowa cornfields. Read on to explore the many benefits sports tourism and athletic complexes bring to cities large and small.

QUICK GUIDE

YOUTH SPORTS TOURISM INDUSTRY

The quick reference guide for city officials, economic and private developers and tourism professionals.

63%

Destinations who said sports was their top hotel room night generator.

69

Number of events destinations, on average, hosted in 2023.

**In 2021, the number was 52 events per year.

\$30 BILLION

Amount families spend per year on club fees, equipment, and travel costs related to sports tourism.

ABOUT THE INDUSTRY

Sports tourism is among the country's most durable and dynamic industries, generating **\$52.2 billion in total direct spending**, according to Sports ETA, the national association for sports tourism professionals. The industry is built primarily upon youth and amateur athletes competing on travel teams across the country at complexes with a combination of indoor courts, outdoor fields, tracks, and other playing surfaces. With the right facilities, destinations ranging from cities with fewer than 20,000 residents to metropolises can effectively attract out-of-town visitors who spend multiple nights staying at area hotels, dining in restaurants, and shopping at local malls and stores. Many families turn travel tournaments into vacations, seeking out local experiences ranging from museum trips to college visits to outdoor recreation.

Having led economic recovery amid financial and health crises, sports tourism remains one of the safest investment communities can make. Revenue generated from tournaments and competitions often exceeds millions of dollars that can be reinvested into improved local amenities, including infrastructure projects, school and medical upgrades, and more. However, the impact is far greater than heads in beds. Sports tourism can be transformative, creating opportunities for local residents to embrace active and healthy lifestyles through individual competitions, recreational activities, and fitness regimes.

KEY PLAYERS:

Successful sports complexes are the result of coordination between myriads of invested parties all interested in the best experience possible but approaching the facilities from different perspectives.

Facility Owners: Finances can be provided solely by corporate ownership, private equity groups, or local municipalities, or can often be a public-private mix. These organizations are most concerned with sustainability of revenue generated.

As mixed-use developments come into the fold, real estate companies will gain greater influence.

Facility Operators: These are the experts in the field with experience hosting tournaments and competitions in the most efficient way possible. Beyond filling buildings and fields, operators are responsible for maintenance to provide the safest and best playing environments possible for the athletes.

Event Owners: These are the industry's buyers. They actively search for top-of-the-line complexes for up to thousands of athletes (hundreds of teams).

Their top priority will be highest quality playing surfaces.

Nearby hotel rooms and transportation are major needs.

Restaurants and retail are also in high demands, which are great feeders into the local economy. Easily accessible experiences for families,

siblings and players on off days. These can range from local and national parks to museums, beaches and other attractions.

Typically, will seek additional space for awards banquets, team meetings, and large sales pavilions for tournament merchandise.

THE PAYERS

Funding for such projects is often a joint venture between public and private entities.

Scenarios include:

Municipalities provide funds from hotel and sales tax, as well as bonds.

Local fundraisers contribute resources

Municipalities grant land to a private developer, which then invests the majority of finances into the development of the sports facility.

In such cases, local governments may offer to provide infrastructure improvements to ease accessibility and combat new traffic.

National and local organizations, often affiliated with health and wellbeing objects, provide financial support through sponsorships.

Private equity firms may purchase facilities that are struggling financially.

This could lead to a facility being sold multiple times in a relatively short span (within a decade).



CENTER OF THE ACTION

The heart of a destination's sports tourism industry is a versatile athletic complex with indoor and outdoor playing surfaces. Basketball and volleyball are the most commonly played sports inside these state-of-the-art gymnasiums, followed closely by cheerleading, dance, and wrestling. Outdoor athletic areas are generally divided between diamonds for baseball and softball and rectangular fields, whose multipurpose functionality suits football, soccer, lacrosse, Ultimate frisbee, and more.



CENTER OF THE ACTION (CONTINUED)

NOTABLE FACILITIES

No two sports tourism centers are alike. Each community must determine what makes the most sense for how the facilities are incorporated in the city's economy or sense of identity. Examples to consider include:



GRAND PARK SPORTS CAMPUS
WESTFIELD, IN

Arguably the most renowned sports facility has made the Indianapolis suburb a hot spot for youth sports.



SAND MOUNTAIN PARK & AMPHITHEATRE
ALBARTVILLE, AL

Success here is a model for smaller communities looking to make it big in sports tourism.

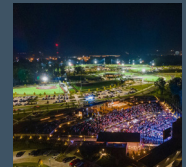
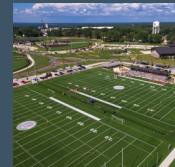
FEATURES

- 31 Multipurpose Fields
- 26 Diamond Fields
- 377,000 sq.-ft. Indoor Events Center with 3 Full-Sized Indoor Synthetic Turf Fields



FEATURES

- 4 Basketball Courts/8 Volleyball Courts
- 4 Baseball and 5 Softball Fields
- 5 Multi-Purpose Fields
- 16 Tennis Courts
- Indoor and Outdoor Pools



CENTER OF THE ACTION (CONTINUED)

NOTABLE FACILITIES

No two sports tourism centers are alike. Each community must determine what makes the most sense for how the facilities are incorporated in the city's economy or sense of identity. Examples to consider include:



PUBLIX SPORTS PARK PANAMA CITY BEACH, FL

Award-winning facility has added elite outdoor fields to the beach destination's appeal.



HOOVER MET COMPLEX HOOVER, AL

A vast center for myriad sports has become a top facility in the Southeast.

FEATURES

- 13 Configurable Fields
- 5 College Baseball Diamonds
- Up to 10 Collegiate/Youth Softball Fields
- 1,500-seat Championship Stadium



FEATURES

- Championship baseball stadium that can be converted for other sports
- 5 Baseball Fields and 8 Softball Diamonds
- 5 Multi-Purpose Fields
- 16 Tennis Courts
- 155,000 sq.-ft. Indoor Events Center



PRO TIP:

ADD A NICHE ELEMENT FEW OTHER FACILITIES HAVE, TO ATTRACT MAJOR EVENTS WITHOUT MANY OPTIONS. HYDRAULIC TRACKS, FOR INSTANCE, ARE AN INSTANT ATTENTION-GRABBER FOR STATEWIDE HIGH SCHOOL MEETS, NCAA CHAMPIONSHIPS, AND INTERNATIONAL EVENTS.



CENTER OF THE ACTION (CONTINUED)

NEW ADDITIONS

Changes in behavior has led to facilities adapting to new demands. Among popular new additions to sports complexes:

- Pickleball courts (outdoor and indoor)
- Hydraulic indoor tracks
- Ice sheets for skating and ice hockey
- Family entertainment centers

BUILT TO LAST

Sustainability is an emphasis across many global industries. In sports tourism, this not only refers to adopting eco-friendly policies to reduce waste and limit emissions, but it also refers to ensuring tournament complexes remain in high demand years after completion. Destinations with existing sports facilities must maintain and upgrade them regularly to compete with the high volume of centers available throughout the country.

DID YOU KNOW?

The number of Americans who participated an activity has increased every single year for 10 years, **growing by 5 million in 2023.**

CENTER OF THE ACTION (CONTINUED)

MAINTENANCE

Are rainouts putting a damper on soccer tournaments? Install turf fields. If you can't keep up with the required field times, add lights to add hours to the day. Such capital projects require funds, but without the upgrades, the facilities could sit idle.

ADAPTABILITY

Is there room to add amenities? Does your community have a long-term plan? Predicting the future is impossible, so it's vital to leave options open so the facility operators can react to new trends.

MIXED USE

Among the growing trends is to build amenities on-site at the youth sports complex. Hotels, restaurants, and retail add to the venue's appeal, and also add more opportunities for visitors and locals alike to visit the site for activities ranging from going to the movies to grabbing a coffee or playing at an arcade.

RECREATION

Travel sports will typically dominate weekend calendars, but many facility operators encourage local recreational leagues and organizations such as YMCA chapters to take advantage of the high-quality fields and courts. This helps level the playing field for families with disadvantaged backgrounds, and also offers valuable opportunities for families who opt against travel sports but want their children to remain active.

GROWTH SPORTS

PARTICIPATION IN PICKLEBALL HAS RISEN 223.5% IN THREE YEARS, INCLUDING 51.8% IN 2023.

WOMEN'S VOLLEYBALL SET MULTIPLE ATTENDANCE RECORDS IN 2023, INCLUDING MORE THAN 92,000 FOR A GAME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN.

FLAG FOOTBALL HAS SEEN AN EXPLOSION, PARTICULARLY AMONG YOUNG GIRLS AND WOMEN. NFL FLAG HAS MORE THAN 1,800 LEAGUES ORGANIZED NATIONWIDE, WITH NEARLY 700,000 PLAYERS.



FACILITY TYPE	ANCHOR	TOURNAMENT FRIENDLY
FLAT FIELDS	Minimum 16 Fields	8-15 Fields
POOL	50M/8-10 Lanes with Diving Well	25M with Diving Well
DIAMONDS	Minimum 12 Fields	8-11 Fields
HARDWOOD COURTS	Minimum 8 Basketball/16 Volleyball	4 Basketball/8 Volleyball
INDOOR TRACK	200M/6 Lanes/Banked	200M/6 Lanes

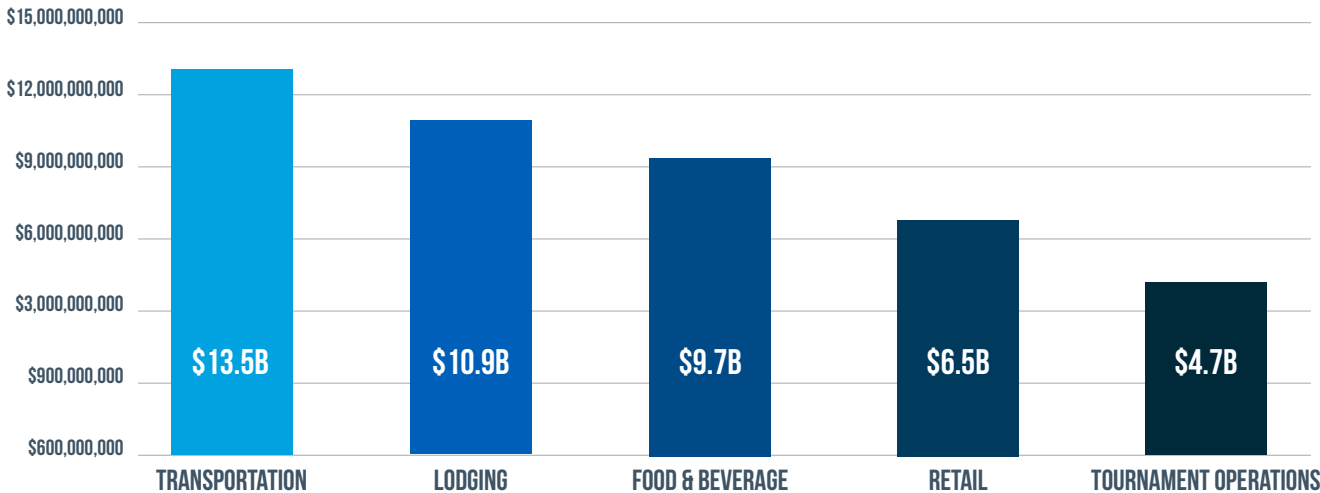


BEYOND THE BALLGAME

Building a top-of-the-line sports facility can place a community on the map with visitors, spurring new business and development that would otherwise not come to fruition. One Midwestern mayor's office compared its ongoing improvements related to a new sports complex to opportunities that an international airport would create.

The effects on a local economy are undeniable. More hotel rooms are filled, shops are frequented, and restaurants are occupied. This demand leads to a surge in employment and builds momentum for other local projects, including improvements to parks, trails, libraries, and other civic offerings. Sports ETA reports that sports complexes led to 757,600 jobs nationwide in 2023. These include facility staff, restaurant servers, hospitality employees, construction workers, and more.

SPORTS TOURISM-RELATED SPENDING





BEYOND THE BALLGAME (CONTINUED)

In many ways, a sports complex is a more beneficial addition to a community than a convention center. The sports venue can serve many of the same functions as a convention center, but offers more opportunities than a standard meeting venue.

NONTRADITIONAL WAYS TO USE SPORTS FACILITIES EFFECTIVELY ARE:

- Trade shows
- Parking lot activations
- Indoor and outdoor reception sites
- Car shows
- Concerts/ticketed events
- Fundraisers/galas



VENUES GO BEYOND THE GAMES

Complexes often turn into community hubs, as well. Examples include:

COMMUNITY CELEBRATIONS

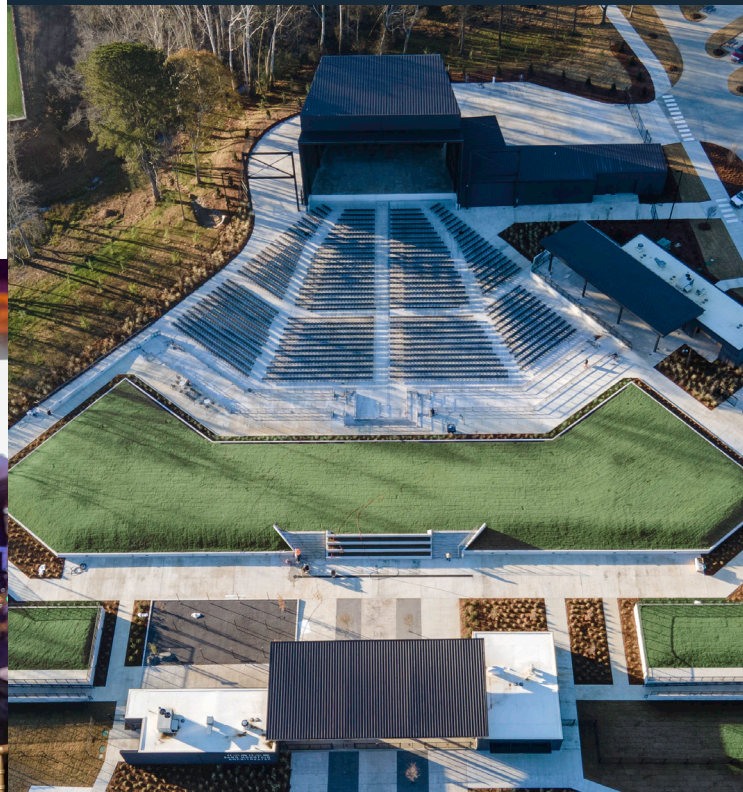
Indoor sports facilities are a natural fit for high school or college graduation ceremonies; proms and other formal dances, fundraising galas, and local awards functions.

HOLIDAY EVENTS

Sports complexes are often integrated into seasonal festivities, including Halloween decorations, Christmas light exhibitions, Oktoberfest, and other festivals.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Sports centers have become shelters for local residents facing threats from wildfires, flooding, and other natural disasters.





STARTING POINTS

While every community has different strengths and needs, there are some basic guiding principles that are universal for creating a dynamic complex to anchor a local communities' sports tourism efforts.

1. DESIRABLE LOCATION

The most important aspect to planning a sports complex is to make it accessible. Ideally, the facility will be off a clearly marked highway exit. It's even better if the venue is a short drive from a major airport.

2. FIND YOUR SPACE

If there is a major youth sports venue a short drive from your project, it could quickly become too much of a good thing. Aim to have your facility a couple of hours from other potential sites to help distinguish your complex from the crowd.

3. PLAN AHEAD

A sustainable sports complex will need to keep adding features or risk standing still. Make sure the plot of land the facility sits on can accommodate growth.

4. DON'T GO IT ALONE

A sports complex with little or no amenities on-site is going to look outdated by today's standards. Make the facility an anchor to attract hotels, restaurants, and retail so that the site remains in use whether or not there is a tournament.

5. THINK LOCAL

Make sure to get community input prior toward construction and consider their needs. New dog parks, walking and cycling trails, and picnic areas are generally welcomed additions to any community.



**A SUSTAINABLE
SPORTS COMPLEX
WILL NEED TO KEEP
ADDING FEATURES OR
RISK STANDING STILL.**

STARTING POINTS

(CONTINUED)

6. REMEMBER THE AUDIENCE

Many professional sports teams now have entertainment districts built around arenas and ballparks (San Diego's Petco Park started the trend in 2004). While there will be some crossover with the pro sports crowd, a youth sports complex should cater its amenities toward parents and siblings also in town for a tournament. Think family-friendly!

7. STAY OPEN

Developers and local government officials backing a sports complex must communicate with the community, which is going to wonder where its tax dollars are going. Take your case for why it's needed to the public and build a strong partnership.



INTRODUCTION TO YOUTH SPORTS TOURISM



THE SPORTS FACILITIES
COMPANIES

THESFNETWORK.COM | SPORTSFACILITIES.COM | 727.474.3845