



SPORTING LIFE: Tuscaloosa sees big economic impact through hosting sporting events

Wednesday

Posted Jan 4, 2017 at 9:41 PM

Updated Jan 4, 2017 at 9:41 PM

By Becky HopfSpecial to The Tuscaloosa News

Tuscaloosa has a long-standing affection for softball, one that goes back at least half a century when men's leagues drew hundreds of fans.

Decades later, softball is still a major draw and a major boost to the city.

According to Jay Kasten, Director of Sports at Tuscaloosa Tourism and Sports, hosting the National Pro Fastpitch Championship Series in August at the University of Alabama's Rhoads Stadium led to also hosting, simultaneously, the Select 30 All-American Camp at Bowers Park. That event drew about 600 elite-level softball players from 38 states.

"The National Pro Fastpitch Championship Series was nationally televised by CBS Sports and had about a \$1.1 million impact," Kasten said. "It was held over a period of five days. Not only that, as a part of it, we were able to negotiate an ancillary event that came with it, the USSSA Elite Select 30 Combine. It was a three-day combine for five different age groups to be named the top 30 in that class. Seventy-five to 100 kids came from each class, and they competed for three days. So that event had close to 1,100 hotel room nights, all during the NPF Championship Series. Thirty eight states were represented. It, on its own, had about a \$1.1 million impact. So, that weekend, altogether, it was close to a \$2¼ million economic impact."

He said Tuscaloosa will not host those events in 2017 because the facilities are not available during the dates needed but they will likely place a bid to host it in the future when the bid cycle opens again.

It's no secret that sports are big business in Tuscaloosa where University of Alabama athletics looms large and ultra-successful. But the city has become a popular venue for a variety of other sporting events.

In the last year, Tuscaloosa has been host to some first-time events, among those, an Alabama High School Athletic Association bowling regional.

A new tennis event started in 2015 and returned in 2016.

"We created a youth U.S. Tennis Association junior tournament, the Alabama State Winter Championship. The first year went from 130 participants to 180 this past year. We had people from seven different states here for that event."

Tuscaloosa hosted its first International Tennis Federation event for wheelchair tennis, the Alabama Open in September. The university has announced that it will return in August.

Tuscaloosa hosted the USTA Southern Closed 11&Under Championships in tennis for what Kasten believes is also a first.

The American Waterski Association Southern Championships return for a second consecutive year and will be held in Duncanville at Lymanland-USA.

"It's approximately about an \$864,000 economic impact," Kasten said. "It brings some of the best water skiers in the world here. This past year we had the best water skier in the world, Regina Jaquess."

That event is scheduled for mid-summer.

TTS also helped host the Tuscaloosa NCAA men's golf regional as well as the Southeastern Conference track and field championships.

"All that and Alabama football? It was a pretty good year," Kasten said.

Kasten, who is beginning his third year with TTS, said 2017 should shape up to be another big year for sporting events.

In April, Tuscaloosa will host the USA Triathlon Collegiate Club and High School Triathlon National Championships. It will bring in about 1,300 athletes for three nights. On April 28-30, former Crimson Tide softball player-turned-professional, Haylie McCleney, will host the Ultimate Fastpitch Experience at Bowers Park. And Tuscaloosa will host the USTA Southern Closed 10 & Under tennis tournament.

"Those are the main three new events for this year. We have a lot of repeat events as well," Kasten said.

Those include the AHSAA Super 7 state football championships, the Tuscaloosa Half Marathon and youth gymnastics meets, among many others.

At the top of the wish list for future events is a Deontay Wilder world heavyweight fight. And there are other events Kasten said they'd like to see happen in Tuscaloosa, like the USA Cycling Collegiate National Championships, a USTA Futures event, the USA Triathlon Duathlon and the College Swim Coaches Association of America Open Water Championships.

Tuscaloosa will bid for the 2018 U.S. Southern Regional Quidditch Championships.

"It's a dream community. The community gets lots of support from different directions," Kasten said. "USA Triathlon was just here for a site visit, and they said the city and tourism, that we really set the standard of how to run an event and get everybody to cooperate together."