



**WHILE OFTEN OVERLOOKED, AMATEUR
SPORTING EVENTS PROVE TO BE AN
IMPORTANT ASSET TO MINNESOTA CITIES.**

good sports

BY AMANDA FRETHEIM GATES

Each July, some 20,000 kids, parents, coaches, referees and volunteers swoop down on the National Sports Center (NSC) in Blaine for the Schwan's USA Cup. The 600-acre campus, with the world's largest contiguous soccer complex, brims with excitement and soccer balls for 10 days as the brightly-uniformed youth 19 years and younger compete in the tournament. The parking lot is filled with license plates from Massachusetts to Manitoba. The sidewalks are lined with food booths and swag stations. This past July's wretched heat and thunderstorms settled on the fields, sometimes causing games to be cut short, started as early as 7 a.m. or cancelled all together. But after 28 years in business, the USA Cup and NSC staff embraces the challenges and the event continues to grow.

When the USA Cup first started in 1985, 1,500 players from 69 teams came to Blaine to compete. In 2011, 942 teams from 20 states and 17 countries participated (there was a record number of Canadian teams this year, thanks to geography and a superb exchange rate), making it the largest youth soccer tournament in the Western Hemisphere and Minnesota's largest annual out-of-state tourism event with an economic impact of \$20.4 million.

During their 10 days here each summer, the attendees of USA Cup stay in hotels around the metro area, shop at Mall of America, go out to eat, and head down to Valleyfair or the zoo. In other words, they spend money. And they prove that sports events matter to the hospitality industry, spurring economic activity in cities all across the state.

A RESILIENT MARKET

In the past five to 10 years, as 9-11 and the recent economic downturn affected meetings and conventions, convention and visitor

bureaus (CVBs) had to look for alternative economic generators. They found it with amateur sports. "If you look at the data and the statistics, it's been one of the more resilient segments of all of the tourism economy," says John Connelly, director of sales and development for the NSC. "We've been able to run USA Cup for 28 years and every year we've been able to grow at least one segment. That's a testimonial to the category. We may be down with teams from California or Chicago, but we make up for it by recruiting from Canada."

Why the continued growth? CVBs credit the parents. No matter how tough times get or how high gas prices go, they just won't say no to writing that check for their kid to play baseball or soccer or hockey. "Parents may cut back on that trip to Mexico or not go on a cruise this year, but they'll still go to the tournaments and make that the mini family vacation," says Kelly Sayre, director of sports and special events for the St. Cloud Area CVB. "And they bring spectators. You have

mom, dad, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandma and grandpa, whereas with an adult convention—or even an adult softball tournament—most often they're just going by themselves."

To grow sports events in their cities, areas like St. Cloud, Mankato and Minneapolis have hired on sports-specific sales staff to head out to national conferences like the National Association of Sports Commissions (NASC) or the Travel, Events and Marketing in Sports (TEAMS) conferences to get their cities in front of the sports events operators and form relationships with teams all over the country. "It's about bringing the right people together in one location to talk and try to convince them that we have the right facilities for their event," says Larissa Mrozek, senior sales director for the Greater Mankato CVB.

Cities also invite sports organizers to town to see for themselves through a familiarization tour the facilities the city has to offer. "That's a very important component we have

■ In 2011, the Schwan's USA Cup welcomed 942 teams.



"I think critically, you can do the greatest job selling, you can do the greatest job marketing, but ultimately you have to have the quality venue. If you're going to encourage a California team to come to Blaine, Minn., to play in a soccer tournament, it better be the biggest and the best because there are a lot of soccer tournaments in California they could go to. The venue is critical and then you have to deliver on the expectation of the visitor. If you do that, you're in good shape."

— John Connelly, director of sales and development for the National Sports Center, on-site at the 2011 Schwan's USA Cup.

PHOTOS BY TODD BUCHANAN



■ 2011 Schwan's USA Cup

in our sales process," says Melvin Tennant, CEO of Meet Minneapolis. "Once they see it, we have a much higher probability of securing the event."

Once they see it, book it and love it, they'll go back home and tell their friends. And because kids age, the teams change, and the same clubs can come back year after year. "Once you build that relationship with a soccer club from Washington or Wyoming, then maybe two years later you get another club," says Connelly. "It's been successful for us and we're continuing to attract new people to campus. We made our bread and butter on hockey and soccer, but by diversifying to other sports, we're able to attract even more new people to campus. Because, baseball people are not necessarily soccer people.

"And the beauty about amateur sports is it's not just about entertainment," Connelly says. "Professional sports are an entertainment business. But a parent is going to come

watch their kid whether they're winning or losing, rain or shine. We're not at the whims of the highs of winning streaks or the lows of losing streaks."

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Everyone agrees that the No. 1 thing you need to attract sports events to your town is a great venue. While meeting planners are always looking for the best place to host their groups, it's a completely different, well, ball game when it comes to sports. No team wants to play on crummy turf or melting ice; the better the facilities you have the better events you can attract. The National Sports Center has made it a mission to have the best-of-the-best facilities knowing the profits they can bring in. Not only is the soccer complex the world's largest, so is its Schwan's Super Rink ice facility. Plus, the campus is home to one of only three all-wood, all-weather cycling tracks in the country.

"I think critically, you can do the greatest job selling, you can do the greatest job marketing, but ultimately you have to have the quality venue," says Connelly. "If you're going to encourage a California team to come to Blaine, Minn., to play in a soccer tournament, it better be the biggest and the best because there are a lot of soccer tournaments in California they could go to. The venue is critical and then you have to deliver on the expectation of the visitor. If you do that, you're in good shape."

Not every area has a space like the National Sports Center, but the cities that do well attracting sports teams usually have a college or university nearby. Not only do these schools offer great venues at which to host events, but they also bring in tournaments and sporting events of their own. "We're lucky to have [Mankato State University] here," says Mrozek. "It helps bring in other events that we probably wouldn't be able to host, but they also hold regional conferences, where it's not just MSU competing against another team, but it's a tournament of eight to 10 teams, which drives economic impact as well. And sometimes events are held in areas where the home team is doing well. If the MSU basketball team is doing great, then they're the ones who get to host the regional conference. So, we're always cheering for MSU around here."

But, cities shouldn't count themselves out if they aren't near college or professional sports facilities. Municipally run venues can be just as promising. Cities should also think outside the box passed the likes of soccer, hockey and softball. Sports like lacrosse, volleyball and something as simple as a marathon can be a draw, too. "Every community has some gems and they just need to look around," says Mrozek. "It's some of those sports that you maybe don't think of right off the top but they still bring people to the community." Both St. Cloud and Mankato have BMX biking tracks that have proven fruitful—St. Cloud will even be hosting a BMX Olympic qualifying event.

Want to be a double threat? Have great venues in a family friendly destination. With the high-quality University of Minnesota venues and the new Target Field, Minneapolis is

PHOTO BY TODD BUCHANAN

"It's some of those sports that you maybe don't think of right off the top but they still bring people to the community."

— Larissa Mrozek, senior sales director for the Greater Mankato CVB.

a hotbed ready and waiting for sports events. But it's more than that, too. "Parents and chaperons want to go to a place where they feel safe and secure and where there are a lot of family friendly activities," Tennant says. "We have the appropriate backdrop."

WORKING HARD, JOINING FORCES

It can be a lot of work to bring in big-name sports events to the area. In 2008, Sayre started the bidding process for the 2012 Can-Am Police-Fire Games, a week-long sporting event for law enforcement and fire-fighting professionals from Canada and the U.S. The event features more than 50 sports, ranging from swimming to darts to a "toughest firefighter alive" competition, and draws about 2,000 people to the host city. St.

Cloud was up against Green Bay, Wis., Ames, Iowa, and York, Penn., for the games. Sayre nabbed it for 2012 (even though Green Bay was offering up Packer players and the usage of Lambeau Field).

While big, one-time events like the Can-Am Police-Fire Games (or, say, a Super Bowl) are excellent gets, every area CVB leader says that those events that sign long-term contracts are even better. Recently, Minneapolis grabbed the U.S. Racquetball Championships from Memphis because with all the Life Time Fitness courts around the city, Minneapolis has more courts in a more concentrated area. The event is in year two of its five-year commitment with the city. "As great as it would be to get a Super Bowl, it's a lot of work for an event that will be over in a few days," says

Tennant. "Events like the U.S. Racquetball Championship are those we really want to secure."

As part of its strategy, the National Sports Center aims to attract one-time events, like the USA National Disabled Festival this past April, as well as events that come for several years in a row. For those events that must change venues every year, Connelly is confident that when they're in the Midwest, they will look at the NSC. The Ice Skating Institute, an association for the ice skating industry, has held its World Figure Skating Championships at the NSC three times. "They move around the country, but when it's the Upper Midwest's turn to host, we get them because we're the biggest and the best venue and their association will make more money," Connelly says. "You can put on the greatest event in the world but if it doesn't make money, how do you sustain it?"

When you think about all the cities in Minnesota that could compete for sporting events, plus throw in the National Sports Center, it seems more like one large competition than anything. Even if a smaller city has its own niche, like a great softball

■ Minnesota Vikings training camp in Mankato, 2010.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SPORTS FIX



■ More than 130 volleyball and 30 lacrosse teams competed during the 2011 Star of the North Games.

stadium or a state-of-the-art ice arena, can it really compete with Blaine and Minneapolis? And when each of these cities travels to the big conferences like NASC or TEAMS, won't they get lost amongst the likes of Las Vegas or Indianapolis? Numerous other states around the country have statewide sports efforts—like Sports Wisconsin, Sports Illinois and Kentucky Sports Authority, just to name a few. Tennant gives the example of Indianapolis, a city that's built a reputation on amateur sports. The city recruited a number of amateur sports federations and houses them in a building they helped build, Tennant says. "They recruited the NCAA and one of the benefits of that is the city gets the Final Four every five years," he says. "That type of investment is something that I think we can look at doing in the future. I think there's a willingness of everyone to want to work more together and I think that's something to strive for."

The joint effort proves successful, too. Minneapolis, St. Paul and Bloomington all

joined forces to get the 2015 National Senior Games, an event that could bring more than 30,000 people to the Twin Cities area. When a group from the local CVBs traveled to Houston to sneak a peek at the 2011 games, Tennant saw just what Minneapolis could do with its convention center, because in Houston, they had nearly every sport, from basketball to badminton, under the convention center roof.

And while there's no official statewide coalition for Minnesota, about five years ago, several cities formed a partnership to become Minnesota Sports. They requested to have all their booths put together at tradeshow and they decided to wear blaze orange to really stand out. The group then invites U.S. Olympic committees or the USA sports organizations to a suite at a Rockies game in Denver, for example, or they'll rent out the top floor of a restaurant and throw a party, as just another way to get Minnesota out in front. "We've been doing this on our own and we're up to nine cities," says Sayre,

mentioning cities like Bloomington, Fargo-Moorhead, Grand Forks, Mankato, Duluth, Minneapolis and Minneapolis Northwest's coverage area; Explore Minnesota Tourism has also expressed interest in joining forces. "We started doing clients events, which gives us an opportunity to talk to them individually as well. We've found that working together is a lot easier than working against each other. The Senior Games is not going to affect me. The likelihood of me getting any room nights out of that is, like, none. But it puts Minnesota on the map. And if we all work together to put on an awesome visit, that just leaves a good impression of Minnesota in general"

In 1987, the Minnesota State Legislature developed the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission (MASC), a group with a goal of promoting the economic and social benefits of sports. This group governs the NSC, works to create annual sporting events and helps communities develop local sports tourism. Some of the other facilities that fall under the MASC umbrella include the 70-meter Bush Lake Ski Jump, the Guidant John Rose Minnesota OVAL, Giant's Ridge Golf and Ski Resort, the University of Minnesota Aquatic Center and others. In 2009, the economic impact (fees, lodging, meals) of the 5 million visitors to MASC facilities totaled \$70 million. The MASC also sponsors the state's Olympic-style competition called the Star of the North Games.

CREATE YOUR OWN EVENTS

While recruiting regional and national events to our state is very important, some cities, as well as organizations like the MASC and NSC, realize that the most stable and profitable option is to create their own sporting events—tournaments that don't move, happen year after year and offer a consistent economic impact. The USA Cup is a great example. Not only has the event grown in attendance and profit, it's become a must-attend tournament for many teams. The players get to compete against some of the greatest teams in the world, they're officiated by international refs from Jamaica to South America, they get to participate in an elaborate opening ceremonies, and they

walk away with great swag and merchandise from a high-powered presenting sponsor like Puma. As Connelly says, by owning USA Cup, the National Sports Center controls its own destiny.

"We still bid for some events, but bid events are risky," says Barclay Kruse, chief communications officer for the NSC as well as associate director of the MASC and executive director of the Star of the North Games. "You don't always win the bid. More often than not you put a fair amount of money into your bid and don't win. And sometimes not all bid events are good events to get. If you create your own event, you own it, you can define the terms and it happens every year where you want it to happen."

With this goal in mind, the MASC saw that many other states were developing Olympic-style state games, so the group organized the Star of the North Games. The competition moves around the state each year and has been as large as 10,000 athletes. Kruse says he's intentionally kept it smaller in recent years, around 5,100 athletes, because the size can limit where it can be located.

From 2007 to 2017, three Minnesota cities share the hosting duties for Star of the North. St. Cloud, Rochester and St. Paul all bid on the games, and because all had merits and all were qualified, Kruse and the board estab-



■ Kids 19 years and younger compete during the Schwan's USA Cup.

lished a rotation. In another few years, they'll put it out to bid again expecting more cities to participate. "Some of the smaller cities just don't have the facilities or the hotel rooms to handle it," says Kruse. "Duluth could, but our dates always conflict with Grandma's Marathon."

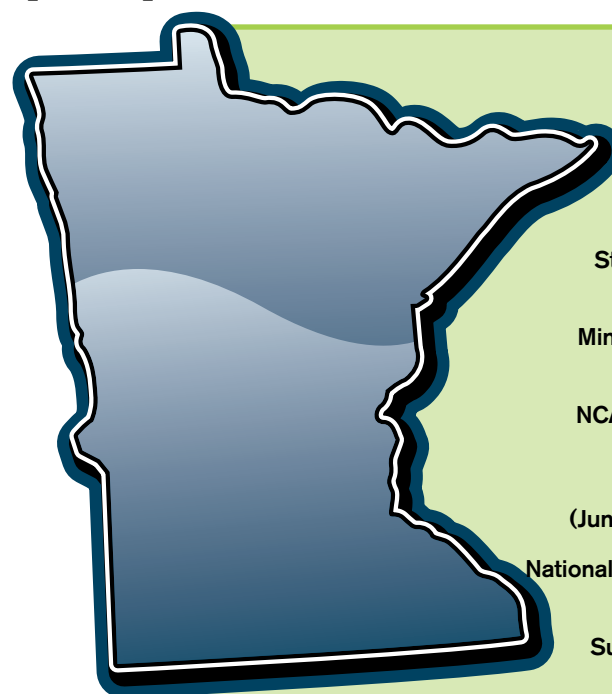
St. Cloud, which hosted the games in 2009 and again this past summer, falls right on the edge of being large enough. Two weeks out from this year's event, which was held June 17-19 & 24-26, the city was sold out, says Sayre, with 136 volleyball teams, 30 lacrosse teams, 200 track and field athletes and many others. "I was like, 'Do you want to pitch a

tent? I have nothing left!'" she says. "But, it's a great problem to have."

With an economic impact of \$1.8 million, the Star of the North Games are a great homegrown annual event. Any city capable of holding the event most likely gets the chance at it, too. "The most important thing is that the participants have a quality experience," says Kruse. "We've felt that the best way to have a quality experience is to make it a size that's achievable for the host cities. I have very good relationships with the host cities and I don't want to have winners and losers. Plus, the cities work with each other and cooperate with each other."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STAR OF THE NORTH GAMES

PHOTO BY TODD BUCHANAN



Making Money for Minnesota

USA Cup:	\$20 million/year
Star of the North Games:	\$1.8 million/year
Minnesota Vikings Training Camp:	\$5 million/year
NCAA Frozen Four (April 2011):	\$10 million
NHL Draft (June 24-25, 2011):	\$10 million
National Senior Games (2015):	\$40 million (estimate)
Super Bowl XXVI (1992):	\$120 million

Holding an event of this caliber also gets the wheels turning for other sports organizers in town. When the Start of the North Games were held in St. Cloud in 2009, there were only nine lacrosse teams competing. When 30 lacrosse teams showed up in 2011, Sayre and others saw in front of their eyes a growing sport and a growing opportunity. “We didn’t know there was that much of a draw for lacrosse,” Sayre says. “Now [St. Cloud State] University is all excited saying, ‘Let’s look into holding our own lacrosse tournament.’ There are always new events and you don’t have to go through a huge national governing body. You can create something at a local level that will stay in your city year after year and you can grow it.”

THE IMPACT

So much is made about the economic impact of events, but it can be a tricky number to tabulate. When soccer tournaments are open to the public for free (i.e. no gate), how do you count heads? When coaches and parents stuff four to six kids into one hotel room, attendance is hard to figure out that way, too. Sporting events are quite different than a meeting or convention in that way. However, media exposure and visitor presence in the community can oftentimes be realized more for a sporting event than a conference.

“In tourism, there’s the four-hour rule,” says Connelly. “Any time you can engage someone in your location for more than four hours, your chances of getting more spending out of them is that much greater. Usually a meal, maybe a room night.” USA Cup families could be in Blaine for a week, and sometimes with only one game each day. That’s a lot of down time to fill at places like Bunker Beach or Brunswick Zone—great places to cool off between games, Connelly says.

This past July saw record temperatures, with many hot days falling right during the USA Cup. While they faced some adversity with the heat and the storms, Connelly says, there was a silver lining. The tournament was the lead story on some of the local news channels, and it even made *USA Today*. Everyone knew there was a soccer tournament going on.

Greater Mankato’s Mrozek says teams are very visible in the community, which helps hotels and restaurants identify that those people are visiting and spending money. “They travel in packs and they usually have a uniform on,” she says. “With a convention, they might be in one location the whole time, but not out in the community as much. It really helps bring the point home that these sports events in our community are out there spending money when they are literally at

your business in their outfits.”

St. Cloud hosts a big basketball tournament every final weekend in February. On the Monday morning after this year’s tournament, two teams called Sayre looking for 100 rooms and 70 rooms for the next year’s tournament. “I called the two big hotels thinking it wouldn’t be a problem,” she says. “Oh no, those hotels were sold out. Everybody had booked their rooms for the next year when they were checking out this year.”

With entire cities selling out, it shows amateur sports mean big business, yet it continues to fly under the radar, says Kruse. All those small tournaments happening in every city across the state on every weekend mean something to those places. “Amateur sports don’t get the front page attention that pro and college sports do, but in many ways it’s a much more sustainable business stream,” he says. “Witness all the media coverage and melodrama over the Vikings stadium—you don’t have that kind of win-lose situation in amateur sports. Even if you’re an adult and unemployed, you still love to play softball and you still play on your team and attend tournaments.”

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Minnesota Vikings Playoff Game Economic Impact

On Jan. 17, 2010, the Vikings played the Dallas Cowboys in a playoff game.

- + 25,160 visitors (non-metro residents) attended the game.
- + The average attendee spent \$230 each.
- + The game had an economic impact of \$5.8 million, as visitors spent money in restaurants, hotels, retail stores and on transportation.
- + Overall sales in the Twin Cities economy expanded by \$9.1 million that weekend.
- + Labor income increased by \$3.6 million over the weekend.
- + 113 additional jobs were supported during the weekend.

—“The Economic Impact of Minnesota Vikings Attendees: A Playoff Example,” Brigid Tuck and David Nelson, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality, March 2010

Going Pro

WHAT ABOUT PROFESSIONAL SPORTS?



Economic impact can be harder to tabulate than with amateur sports, and the subject is quite volatile, but pro sports have their place in the local hospitality industry. Whether it’s the Twins new ballpark, a new ballpark for the St. Paul Saints, a new stadium for the Vikings, a collapsed Metrodome roof or a renovation to Target Center, we can’t deny that Minnesotans (and the Legislature) have professional sports on the brain. Some argue that professional sports don’t matter to the economy, while others say we can’t compete with other major-league markets without, for example, a football team and a new venue.

This past summer, when NFL players were in a lockout with the owners, the city of Mankato didn’t know until the week before training camp was supposed to start whether it would see Vikings players this year. Last year during the entirety of training camp, 50,000 fans came through the gates. Some fans make it a vacation and come for the whole time, while others just stop in for a day or two. According to Larissa Mrozek, senior sales director for the Greater Mankato CVB, the CVB has tracked the economic impact of training camp as \$5 million each year. It’s safe to say the community was relieved when the lockout ended and the players came down. (Though not as big, Mankato also hosts the Minnesota Timberwolves training camp.)

“When you have an influx of people coming into the community, it trickles down to affect a lot of people,” Mrozek says, mentioning bigger businesses near campus but also the smaller gas stations.

“It’s really great for Greater Mankato. I know there are some people who aren’t thrilled about it because of all the extra traffic and stuff, but the economic impact it has can’t be questioned.” (For the economic impact of a Vikings playoff game, see sidebar on p. 40.)

The addition of Target Field to the Warehouse District has had a huge impact on hotel occupancy and profitability, says Melvin Tennant, CEO of Meet Minneapolis, especially since fans from Milwaukee, Chicago, Cleveland and even New York and Boston are willing to travel here to see games. When families start making summer vacation plans, they think about Target Field and, in turn, hotel elevators are filled with fans in Twins garb.

Another hope for the new ballpark is the potential for an All-Star Game. Tennant and Mayor Rybak have their sights set on 2014, the next open year an American League city can host the mid-season event. Not only do fans travel from all over the country to go to an All-Star Game (with 12 million viewers watching it on television), but corporate sponsors fly in their executives for the experience as well. For Tennant, it’s the Home Run Derby, which takes place the evening before, that most excites him. As each home run is hit, the camera follows the ball out of the ballpark. If the camera follows a home run out of Target Field, it catches the Minneapolis skyline. “[In 2008] Josh Hamilton of the Texas Rangers hit 28 home runs in the first round,” Tennant says. “If you can imagine 28 panoramic views of downtown Minneapolis? That would be immeasurable for us.”

TARGET FIELD PHOTO BY TODD BUCHANAN