

By Tom Belden



Team Spirit

We have all heard of the Super Bowl and the NCAA Final Four basketball tournament. We may even recall some of the cities that hosted them recently. But do you know where the NCAA Division III field hockey championship was played last month? Or where the women's Division I soccer tournament was to be staged the second weekend of this month?

The schedules and myriad details of those and tens of thousands of other youth, college, senior and professional sports competitions — most of them involving thousands of participants and spectators — need to be on the radar screen of anyone who manages travel and meetings. They could be coming to your city or another where your travelers are headed, putting the squeeze on not just sports venues but hotel rooms, meeting space, support services and airline seats.

Potentially more nerve-racking for some planners, no one knows more than a few days or a week ahead where the

World Series or National Basketball Association and National Hockey League playoffs will take place. While far less frequent than youth and college sports competitions, those events are akin to an unexpected citywide convention, sending hotels, event planners, caterers, destination-management firms and convention bureaus into a frenzy to prepare.

That was the scene in Philadelphia in late October when its long-suffering Phillies got into the World Series for the first time since 1993. The same week the Tampa Bay Devil Rays were on their way to town for the third, fourth and fifth

games of the series, the American College of Chest Physicians' annual convention, with 5,000 attendees, moved into the Pennsylvania Convention Center.

For hoteliers, "It was the perfect storm, in a good sense," says Peter R. Tyson, vice president of PKF Consulting in Philadelphia. Last-minute requests were filling rooms at close to rack rates downtown and the demand was spreading to the suburbs.

"At least there were plenty of heart specialists around for those getting chest pains," Jack Ferguson, executive vice president of the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau, says with a laugh.

Your Competition

Like more than 300 cities today, Philadelphia has a CVB division, its Sports Congress, devoted to promoting and selling its sports venues, for a sound business reason. It's competing in a nationwide, growing, year-round market, with many events moving from place to place annual-

ly. The industry's trade group, the National Association of Sports Congresses, has more than 500 members.

According to a 2008 Market Report sponsored and published by SportsEvents magazine, there were roughly 40,000 tournaments across the country in 2007, with direct spending on them exceeding \$6.1 billion. About 500 of the events have what the magazine said is "a mammoth economic impact, mostly measured by television revenues." Those include mega-events such as the Super Bowl, Daytona 500, the Masters golf tournament and college bowl games whose locations don't change, or if they do, are known years in advance.

The Market Report concentrated its analysis of economic-impact data, based

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on separate surveys of event planners and destination-marketing officials, on the 37,000-plus sports events that can and often do move from one region or venue to another. The report estimated that overall spending per event grew in 2007 to more than \$261,000, a 6.7 percent increase from the year before; spending per individual athlete per event grew 5.5 percent in 2007, to almost \$800.

Travel planners can learn when larger tournaments, special events and professional games are scheduled by checking sports calendars on city or regional CVB web sites, although those are not always complete listings. The NCAA's web site [www.ncaa.com] has details of its 88 different championships in 23 sports, but you must search by sport to see if one is headed your way. The National Association of Collegiate Athletics [naia.org], which has 350 smaller schools as members, has similar information. Dozens of tournaments are usually staged on or near the campuses of one of the colleges involved, but those sites aren't selected until after the competing teams are known.

When the teams and locations for NCAA events are chosen, the first thing team managers do is contact Shorts Travel Management, the Waterloo, IA-based agency that handles many NCAA events. If a team has to travel 500 miles or more to reach a site, the NCAA pays for airline tickets for players and coaches. Host schools or organizing committees are usually responsible for finding lodging, often turning to local CVBs for help.

"The biggest challenge we face is with last-minute bookings," said Kris Fratzke, Shorts' director of NCAA travel. "With the state of the airline industry, reducing capacity, it's more challenging to find seats from one point to another... We've never had a problem of getting them to the competition, and we have gotten them home, but we do have to be creative. At times, we have had to use charter aircraft."

Mystery Dates

Anthony Travel, based in Dallas, a partner-company of the NAIA that also handles arrangements for several large universities, says among its challenges each December is that a football team may be certain it's going to be invited to a bowl game, but it doesn't know which one.

For the University of Utah, for instance, Anthony created special web pages for the teams and fans to plan travel to either Miami, New Orleans or Phoenix, depending on whether it was going to play in the Orange, Sugar or Fiesta bowls, says Maggie Frantz, Anthony's chief financial officer. "We have to be prepared for any scenario to play out," she says.

Finding hotel space quickly and efficiently is clearly a serious concern for sports-event organizers. In the SportsEvents magazine's Market Report, one of the key findings was that more than 70 percent of the organizers say the number and price of available hotel rooms was either the most important or an important factor in choosing a site for a competition. No other factors except the quality and availability of venues ranked higher in importance to the organizers.

Those lodging needs put upward pressure on room rates and often make it difficult for corporate travel managers and meeting planners with short booking windows to find availability, according to officials in several cities.

The Greater Raleigh (NC) Convention & Visitors Bureau, for

instance, which estimates Wake County gets upwards of \$50 million a year in sports-event spending, helps block space for a big youth soccer tournament each December. How big? It involves 422 teams and requires 14,000 hotel room nights.

"It would be very difficult for another meeting to come in at that time," says Scott Dupree, the Raleigh bureau's vice president of sports marketing. "Other groups might have luck with finding single [king or queen] rooms, but there will be no double-doubles, because that's the type the teams want."

Future Congestion Sites

Dupree adds that anyone needing rooms or meeting space in the Raleigh area in the years ahead should also know that the NCAA has named a suburb, Cary, NC, as an inaugural member of its "NCAA Championship City" pilot program. Other cities in the program are Cleveland, Indianapolis, St. Louis, San Diego and San Antonio. That means those cities will have multiple chances to host NCAA championships of all shapes and sizes through the year 2012.

In many small and mid-sized cities where college football is king, schedules of

When late demand from special events grows, a property can only push up rates so far without damaging its relationship with travel managers and meeting planners who are steady customers.

home games are released at least a year or two in advance, enabling planners to know what they're up against.

"Every home football game we have at UT [University of Texas] is a huge ordeal," says Matthew Payne, executive director of the Austin Sports Commission. "It cuts way down on the availability of hotel rooms. I'm sure a lot of people make decisions on meetings based on that. We even make recommendations that people want to stay away on football weekends."

Seventy miles south of Austin, event and meeting planner Dayne Sullivan's

firm, Adventures in San Antonio, has had experiences that can be instructive. He has taken incentive groups to the Super Bowl, where he had to block hotel rooms two years in advance, and managed nine events earlier this year when the NCAA men's Final Four was played in San Antonio.

Sullivan has often had disappointed clients, however, when they make last-minute requests to find tickets to a San Antonio Spurs game when the team has been in the NBA playoffs. The problem is that companies with active sponsorship deals with the Spurs always get their first choice of seats for those games, he explains.

"For me to come in as a corporation, since I'm not one of those that has been there all season, is not beneficial," he says. "The only seats you can get are in the nosebleed section. There's nothing wrong with [the Spurs doing] that. But regular-season games are much easier to do."

Philadelphia's Story

Sullivan adds that he can relate to what Philadelphia officials and suppliers went through in the days just before the World Series. He once planned an incentive trip to Boston that coincided with the Celtics making the NBA playoffs. His hotel kept anxiously calling, saying "We need a final room count," as they anticipated being able to sell any empty rooms to basketball fans.

In Philadelphia, the CVB's Ferguson says that when the major league baseball playoffs began in early October, alerts were sent to hospitality officials that rooms and event space could be in short supply should the Phillies survive all the way to the World Series. Sure enough, it happened, eventually boosting the local industry with \$20 million-plus in direct spending and an equal amount of free media exposure when games were in the city.

"Sports and high-profile events can do wonders for a city," says Bill Walsh, general manager of the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown.

But industry suppliers say it wasn't easy:

They had to scramble as big social events for Major League officials, the media, VIPs and ordinary fans were planned a week or less in advance.

Among others, Max & Me, one of the region's larger caterers, put together a menu for 2,000 guests at a World Series party hosted by the Phillies, mostly featuring food they had prepared before. But, in keeping with the baseball theme, the offerings included its own variation of those little steamed sandwiches called "sliders," says marketing director Stacy Schulist.

One of the busiest planners was Sharon Moore, whose Moore Events of Downingtown, PA, ran eight official Phillies social gatherings over three weeks during the National League playoffs and the World Series. Moore said the good relationships she developed with vendors over 22 years in business proved invaluable in being able to call on them for services on short notice. "In early October, I told them they needed to think about this," she said. "It was a challenge. You had to be quick on your feet."

Mike Lyons, president of Global Event Partners, a major destination-management firm, says he had three to five days notice from groups needing event space and ground transportation, with some willing to pay a premium to get it. But the firm's staff is accustomed to last-minute requests, and knows, for instance, when a combination of big spring sporting events and other group business is going to increase demand.

"In May, it's graduation time at all the colleges around here, and it fills all the hotels and uses all the buses," he says. "When you get meeting requests for May, we look at all those factors. We don't just say 'Oh sure, we can do that.'"

The Philadelphia hoteliers' "perfect storm" played out on October 27, the night of the fifth game of the Series, which was suspended by rain after five innings. The Tampa Bay team had checked out of the Philadelphia Westin, expecting to fly home that night, either in defeat or to play again in a sixth game. The Devil Rays had to find rooms at the Hotel DuPont in Wilmington, DE, 30 miles away, because the Westin was booked solid by conventioners, Westin general manager Mike Manzari says.

But hotel managers and rev-

enue-management specialists don't count on many such days. They say that increasingly, they consult calendars of not only sports events but other big public happenings such as festivals when they are setting group, corporate and last-minute room rates.

Looking For Compression

It's vital, for example, that Jim Rozelle, head of revenue management for Radisson Hotels & Resorts, knows when

The Devil Rays checked out of the Philadelphia Westin before game time, expecting to fly home that night, either in defeat or to play at home in a sixth game. But the game was called on account of rain. The team slept in Wilmington.

his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin, will play home football games in Madison. In 2006, it was three times, but in 2007, only once. Using a program developed by JDA Software Group Inc., the Radisson Hotel Madison knew that weekend demand wouldn't be as strong in 2007 as it was in 2006, and set rates accordingly, Rozelle says.

At the same time, he adds, Radisson knows that when late demand from special events grows, a property can only push up rates so far without damaging its relationship with the travel managers and meeting planners who are its steady customers.

Finally, the answer to where the NCAA Division III field hockey tournament was held: Collegeville, PA, on the campus of Ursinus College, one of the four schools competing. It's typical of a competition that has a relatively small number of players and fans but whose location isn't known until the teams are determined.

And the Division I women's soccer tournament this month is at Wake Med Soccer Park in Cary, NC, where thousands will gather — and probably create a shortage of double-double rooms. **BTE**

