

## Disney magic not just for the kiddies

By RICHARD OLIVER STAFF WRITER



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**ORLANDO, Fla.** — Paul Berry walked through the gates of Disney's Wide World of Sports complex and found himself overcome with childlike wonder.

Mickey and Goofy were nowhere to be seen. But for the adult-league baseball player, here for a national tournament, it was a magic kingdom nevertheless.

Spread out in a 220-acre green landscape before Berry were dozens of playing fields, all immaculately landscaped under brilliant sunshine.

It was, the San Antonio businessman said, "a place where you relive your dreams."

It's a familiar theme at Disney, which in just more than a decade has established the largest amateur athletic venue in the world, tapping into an exploding sports tourism market not far from the storied Walt Disney World.

Since the Wide World of Sports opened in 1997, more than 2 million athletes of all ages and from more than 70 countries have competed in more than 50 sports. And most of the 120,000 or so competitors at the 180 annual events are accompanied by coaches, parents and other supporters.

The athletes compete, but Disney scores.

By hosting youth, high school, college and adult tournaments, many created by Disney itself, the vast entertainment empire helps fill its four nearby theme parks and 22 hotels. The organization encourages participants to purchase comprehensive packages that include event registration, spectator tickets, hotel rooms and theme park admission at hefty discounts.

Disney views the package deals as a further enticement for athletes young and old to bring family and friends along for the experience.

"It's a great intersection," said Michael Millay, director of sports events for the properties. "We deliver Disney's core values, including quality service, and we think we're getting a great profit in return."

Disney offers sports as diverse as soccer, basketball, football, dodgeball and volleyball in facilities that include spectacular amenities and personal touches designed to make the athlete, and those on hand for support, feel as if they've hit the big time.

For Berry, an infielder for the San Antonio Bombers 45-and-older baseball team, the difference was apparent the first time he stepped to the plate at one of the Baseball Quadraplex fields, located in the shadow of the 9,500-seat Champion Stadium that is home to Atlanta Braves spring training.

As the Texan readied to hit, an announcer intoned, "Now batting, No. 26, second baseman Paul Berry!"

The effect was an ego stroke that will last a lifetime for Berry, a USAA spokesman. "It's a feeling that you're doing something greater than you really are," he said.

### **Cashing in on dreams**

For Berry and fellow players who did not bring their families, the registration fee of approximately \$275 included the playing fee, use of fields, umpires and a single-day pass for any one park. Hotel costs were separate.

"Most of the guys were thinking, if we had our families with us, taking the Disney option was a pretty good deal," said Berry, who didn't visit the theme parks on his trip.

On the mid-January weekend that he competed, the Wide World of Sports hosted nearly 20,000 athletes and spectators for the Disney Holiday Classic baseball tournament, a 100-team volleyball competition, a college cheerleading invitational and a massive three-on-three junior soccer tournament.

"You think about it," Millay said. "At one time, you had on one field weekend warriors still doing what they love, playing baseball, and one field over there are 6-year-olds from Iowa."

In coming days, the professionals will take center stage. The Braves will prowl the Quadraplex through most of March, playing their home spring-training games at Champion Stadium. The Houston Astros, who train in nearby Kissimmee, will play the Braves at Champion Stadium three times in coming weeks. Game tickets range from \$15 to \$28.

This summer, the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers will again hold training camp at Disney's Hess Sports Fields. Fans can attend the workouts for free.

All of it unfolds adjacent to indoor facilities such as the recently completed Jostens Center, a 44,800-square-foot building that houses basketball, volleyball and inline hockey year-round. Earlier this year, men's basketball teams from Baylor, Michigan and Alabama were among the eight entries in the Disney-created Old Spice Classic, which was televised by ESPN from the Jostens Center.

Already the home for the Amateur Athletic Federation and many of its championships, the Wide World of Sports is about to begin construction on a massive, 100-lane bowling center to host U.S. Bowling Congress events. Seventy-five lanes will be set aside for casual bowlers.

When it's opened, bowling will become the 54th athletic enterprise hosted by the complex.

"It truly is," Millay said, "a wide world of sports."

### **Total sports package**

But the Wide World of Sports landscape isn't the only Disney destination for athletic enthusiasts.

In addition to golfing at Disney's four 18-hole courses, two of which host an annual PGA Tour stop, visitors can enjoy parasailing, a surfing school and catch-and-release bass fishing at several stocked

lakes. Or drive speed boats and learn how to race stock cars or open-wheeled Indy vehicles at the Richard Petty Driving Experience.

“It’s great if you’re planning something like a guys’ total sports weekend,” said Darrell Fry, Disney’s sports media director. “You can pretty much find it all.”

Later this year, ESPN assumes title sponsorship and oversight of the entire operation. The cable behemoth is owned by the Walt Disney Company.

What will become the ESPN Wide World of Sports will include an aggressive rebranding of nearly all offerings at the facility and more created events for all ages — some televised on ESPN or one of its affiliated networks.

Soon enough, perhaps, players like Berry will find themselves not only feeling like they’ve hit the big time, but competing under a big-time spotlight.

“When you take vacations, it’s the stuff of memories,” Berry said. “But for some reason the Disney experience is special because they take the extra steps that nobody else takes.”

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