



FAIRYTALE VENUES

Disney's Wide World of Sports complex in Orlando is used by all the US major leagues and has helped pioneer the use of sport as a magnet for tourism and business. **Christian Sylt** discovered the magic ingredients.

Disney's retro baseball park Getty Images Sport

DISNEY IS RENOWNED for its colourful characters and fantasy-inspired theme parks rather than its investment in sport. But sports facilities are at the heart of the business model of its holiday haven in Orlando, Florida, and, like its innovative theme parks, its sports venues are far from run-of-the-mill.

Disney's leisure complex in Orlando is colossal. It spans 47 square miles and includes four theme parks, around 37,000 rooms in 22 Disney owned hotels and over 100 Disney owned restaurants. With the luxury of space, it's no surprise that it also comprises a huge sports complex but the scale of its Wide World of Sports venue is still staggering.

Centrepiece

Spanning 220 acres, the Wide World of Sports has state-of-the-art facilities for hosting around 40 different types of sports on one site and attracts around 180 events annually. Its centrepiece venues are a 7,500-seat retro-style baseball park and the Milk House - a 5,500-seat indoor fieldhouse which has four full-size collegiate basketball courts on its ground level and another two on an upper level. Complementing these are the 20-acre Hess Fields which include four baseball diamonds and four multi-sports fields. In addition there is

a baseball quadruplex, track and field complex, six-field softball complex, 10-court tennis facility and five further sports fields. And it doesn't stop there.

Disney Sports & Recreation, which is responsible for the Wide World of Sports, also runs the Walt Disney World bass fishing facilities, the world's top two water parks - Blizzard Beach and Typhoon Lagoon, a one-mile tri-oval speedway and five championship golf courses.

But, beyond its sheer size, perhaps the most surprising aspect of the venue is its focus. The professional events it attracts are world-class. The speedway hosted the first ever round of the Indy Racing League (IRL) in 1995 while the PGA Tour's Funai Classic is held annually at the Palm and Magnolia golf courses.

However, the vast majority of the events staged at the Wide World of Sports are youth and amateur oriented. This is the backbone of its business model and it makes it truly unique.

"There is not a larger destination venue complex that has the multitude of youth sporting events anywhere in the world," says Mike Millay, Disney's director of sports events. Crucial to this strategy has been the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the largest amateur sports organisation in the US, which announced its support of the Wide World of Sports several years before

the complex opened in March 1997 and even relocated its headquarters to Disney World.

The AAU's support has acted as a magnet for collegiate events and three top college leagues have also held conference championships at the Wide World of Sports. This collection is crowned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) which hosts its Leadership Conference there every year. But it's the venue's connection to professional sports which brings its biggest allure.

Best talent

The top managers and scouts from the National Basketball Association (NBA) come to the AAU national championships to draft the best college talent before each season begins. Similarly, the Pop Warner Super Bowl & Cheer and Dance national championships have been held there since 1997. This tournament is a youth version of the National Football League (NFL) and is not only a honey-pot for talent-spotters from its big brother but also naturally attracts the children of famous NFL players whose parents come to watch them compete.

Getting these extra guests to Disney World was one of the key reasons for the creation of the Wide World of Sports. "It was a great opportunity for Disney to expand its brand into



"We were the first to really capitalise on destination sports but we have a lot of people now trying to copy the concept."

REGGIE WILLIAMS,
VP DISNEY SPORTS ATTRACTIONS

an area of sports where it wasn't in," says Alex Vergara, Disney Sports marketing manager adding that "it was really a brand extension to get incremental guests to come to the resort that normally wouldn't."

Driving force

The driving force behind the project was Reggie Williams, vice president of Disney Sports Attractions. A former Cincinnati Bengals linebacker, Williams played in the 1982 and 1989 Super Bowls and was elected Sports Illustrated's Co-Sportsman of the Year in 1987. He joined Disney in 1993 after a chance meeting with the company's then-CEO Michael Eisner who brought him on board to spearhead its investment into youth sports. Williams was the ideal choice. The Wide World of Sports is the only sports facility in the US to host training

events for teams in the three primary American professional sports leagues. The Orlando Magic NBA team trains there, as does the Atlanta Braves Major League Baseball team, and in summer it is home to former NFL Super Bowl champions the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The team is particularly at ease since the NFL's top trainer Tom Shaw is also based at the venue.

A list of the other professionals regularly visiting the facility reads like a roll-call of international sports. Team USA trained at the Wide World of Sports when it was preparing for the Olympics' basketball events. Tiger Woods has hosted instruction sessions there. The British Olympic Association (BOA) has even made the trans-Atlantic journey for warm-weather training at the Wide World of Sports.

"We mostly look at the professional athletes as bringing credibility to the quality of the facilities," says Reggie Williams.

The star quality brings spectators through the turnstiles. "Tampa Bay Buccaneers training camp remains one of the most popular events on our annual schedule," says Williams. It alone attracted 23,000 spectators in 2005 and a total of 112,000 have visited in the four years since the 'Bucs' began training there in 2002. However, the participant numbers are where the biggest gains have been made.

Investment

Over 150,000 athletes compete at the Wide World of Sports annually and, since opening, it has hosted nearly 2,000 events bringing in a total of 1.2 million participants. And, as Vergara proudly points out, this is more than "if you add up all the athletes that have competed in both the winter and summer games since the games started, the NFL, MLB and the NBA."

The Wide World of Sports is thought to have revenues in the region of a couple of hundred million dollars and its initial construction costs were around \$120 million making it Disney's single biggest sports investment after its ownership of the sports TV network ESPN.

Around 40 per cent of the Wide World of Sports' calendar is comprised of Disney owned and operated events such as its annual marathon which attracts around 20,000 competitors. Scheduling events in the morning has the added benefit that it leaves the afternoon free for guests to spend in the theme parks. Estimates suggest that around 80 per cent of competitors at the Wide World of Sport go on to visit the theme parks. The Disney touches on the complex are unmistakable. On a macro level, every event can have customised merchandise and most have opening and closing ceremonies co-ordinated by the complex's entertainment team.

But it's the attention to detail which impresses most.

"The Disney brand for us stands for great

guest service, good experience, memories and quality feel," says Vergara and the Wide World of Sports is awash with impressive touches to comfortably accommodate spectators. Of the 7,500 seats in the ballpark, 80 per cent are between first and third base and in the Milk House, the highest row of seats is only 35 feet off the ground allowing up close viewing of the action. But the most pampered guests are the participants.

The drive to attract amateur sports naturally affects the type of new facilities that the Wide World of Sports is looking to incorporate and, despite the impressive range it already has, there are still some areas where it can develop further. "If you look at our design in terms of the types of facilities, I think it satisfies 85 per cent of the sports base out there," says Millay adding "we don't do anything with equine, we don't have anything to do with aquatics."

Expanding awareness

Millay says that the five-year goal is to continue to grow the brand. "There are a lot of places in the United States that don't even know we exist," he says.

Expanding international awareness has also been defined as a growth area. The complex has attracted athletes from around 75 countries but its participation base is still around 95% domestic. Vergara reveals that its likely expansion strategy will be partnering with travel agencies specialising in sports tourism. This should yield significant return on investment since he adds that "international visitors will stay here a bit longer so that's going to drive the business."

Looking back on the complex's first decade of opening, Williams says "we were the first to really capitalise on destination sports but we have a lot of people now trying to copy the concept."

Prospective venues frequently visit the Wide World of Sports for research because of its organisational expertise. However, repeating its success is a tough task.

Millay highlights the three key reasons for its success as being the quality of the facilities, its focus on youth sports and its partnerships with leading sports leagues and associations. Undeniably, the Disney name and backing has played a big part in all three areas acting as a magnet to kids and professionals alike.

"We've really reaped the benefits of all the hard work that went into making it come true," says Williams adding "we've been able to drive significant incremental visitation to the Walt Disney World resort and we've expanded the diversity of guests who enjoy this world-class resort destination but who also prioritise sports as a passion."

Achieving any one of these goals would be tough enough for your average sports specialist but in Disney's hands it seems like child's play.