



Sports ETA
SPORTS EVENTS & TOURISM ASSOCIATION

Unlocking the Global Sports Market:

*United States Opportunities
with International Sporting Events*

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Executive Summary

International sporting events represent one of the fastest-growing sectors within global tourism, economic development, and destination marketing. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization and industry research from Sports ETA, sports tourism generates more than \$600 billion globally each year, with international events serving as a primary driver of visitor travel, global media exposure, and economic investment in host destinations.

The United States already hosts many of the world's largest sporting events and possesses a deep infrastructure of stadiums, arenas, universities, and multi-use sports complexes. However, global sports federations continue expanding their event calendars and geographic reach, creating new opportunities for American cities to attract international competitions beyond traditional mega-events such as the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cup.

There are more than 100 recognized international sports federations governing sports worldwide. These organizations collectively stage hundreds of international competitions each year, including World Championships, continental championships, youth events, and international federation series events. Many of these competitions rotate host destinations annually or every few years, creating a dynamic marketplace for cities capable of delivering world-class event experiences.

For United States destinations, the opportunity is substantial. Hosting international sporting events can generate:

- Significant visitor spending
- Global media exposure
- Tourism growth during non-peak seasons
- Community engagement and civic pride
- Long-term sport development and youth participation

However, competition for these events is increasing as global cities invest heavily in sports infrastructure and event hosting strategies. To remain competitive, American destinations must adopt a strategic approach that blends infrastructure readiness, federation relationships, community engagement, and data-driven decision-making.

Sports ETA research identifies three major forces shaping the future of international sports event attraction:

1. Globalization of venue investment and event mobility
2. Rising interest in niche and emerging sports
3. Changing expectations among local residents and communities

Together, these trends define how destinations can position themselves to attract international sporting events while ensuring that hosting benefits both visitors and local residents.

**Sports tourism
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The Global Sports Event Landscape

The international sports ecosystem is expansive and continuously evolving. At the highest level, global multi-sport organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) oversee the Olympic and Paralympic Movements, setting the framework for the world's largest and most complex international sporting events, such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Within this structure, major international sports federations organize competitions across multiple levels, ranging from elite professional championships to youth and amateur competitions that build participation pipelines worldwide.

Examples of major international governing bodies include:

- FIFA (football/soccer)
- World Athletics
- FIBA (basketball)
- World Aquatics (formerly FINA)
- International Ice Hockey Federation
- International Skating Union
- International Volleyball Federation
- World Rowing
- International Federation of American Football
- World Lacrosse
- International Surfing Association
- International Padel Federation

**High-impact sports
are globally recognized
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Each federation maintains an annual calendar of global events designed to grow participation, expand fan engagement, and build the commercial value of their sport. Sports ETA's analysis of international rights holders shows that the global sports event ecosystem can generally be categorized into three tiers based on economic impact and audience reach.



TIER ONE: HIGH-IMPACT GLOBAL SPORTS

High-impact sports are globally recognized competitions that generate massive broadcast audiences and tourism demand. These events typically require significant infrastructure and logistical coordination but can deliver substantial economic impact to host destinations.

Examples include:

- FIFA World Cup
- Olympic Games
- World Athletics Championships
- Figure Skating World Championships
- FIBA Basketball World Cup
- Formula One Grand Prix
- World Aquatics Championships

The 2026 FIFA World Cup, which will be hosted across the United States, Canada, and Mexico starting June 2026, represents one of the most significant global sporting events in history. The tournament will include 48 teams and 104 matches, with 11 host cities in the United States. According to FIFA and independent economic studies, the tournament is expected to generate billions of dollars in economic activity across North America, including hotel occupancy, transportation spending, tourism visitation, and international media exposure. Importantly, the economic benefits extend beyond official host cities. Numerous additional destinations across the United States will serve as team base camps, attracting international fans, training delegations, and media coverage. This distributed model illustrates how international sporting events can create regional economic ripple effects far beyond the primary competition venues.

TIER TWO: ESTABLISHED INTERNATIONAL SPORTS

Moderate-impact sports represent an important category of international events that offer substantial participation and fan engagement while requiring less infrastructure investment. These sports often have strong participation bases in the United States and align well with American facilities and youth development systems.

Examples include:

- Lacrosse
- Rowing
- Wrestling
- Cycling
- Triathlon
- Equestrian
- Archery
- Rugby

The 2023 World Lacrosse Championships in San Diego demonstrated the growing global popularity of lacrosse and the United States' capacity to host large international competitions. The event featured teams from more than 30 nations and drew global attention as the sport prepares for its return to the Olympic program at the LA28 Games.

Similarly, the IRONMAN triathlon series, governed by World Triathlon and affiliated organizations, continues to expand internationally while regularly selecting United States destinations for championship events due to strong infrastructure and tourism appeal.

These events often produce high visitor engagement relative to their size, as athletes, families, and team delegations typically travel internationally and stay for multiple days.



TIER THREE: EMERGING AND URBAN SPORTS

One of the fastest-growing segments of the international sports market involves emerging sports that appeal to younger demographics and urban audiences. These sports often require less infrastructure investment and can be integrated into public spaces, making them attractive for cities seeking innovative event activation strategies.

Examples include:

- Pickleball
- Parkour
- Skateboarding
- 3x3 basketball
- Padel
- Drone racing
- Sport climbing
- Esports competitions

Pickleball, for example, has experienced explosive growth in the United States. According to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, pickleball participation has grown more than 150 percent in recent years, making it one of the fastest-growing sports in the country.

The International Federation of Pickleball is now expanding globally and exploring international tournament circuits that could position American destinations as host locations for world championships and professional tours.

Similarly, esports competitions have become major international events. Cities such as Dallas, Atlanta, and Los Angeles have hosted global esports championships, attracting international audiences and generating millions in economic impact.

Emerging sports also align well with urban placemaking strategies, allowing competitions to take place in downtown districts, waterfront areas, and public parks.



2 | The Strategic Advantage of the United States

The United States holds several unique advantages in the global sports tourism marketplace.

WORLD-CLASS INFRASTRUCTURE

Few countries possess the same concentration of modern sports facilities as the United States.

American cities offer:

- Professional stadiums and arenas
- Collegiate athletic facilities
- Convention centers and exhibition halls
- Multi-sport training complexes
- Extensive transportation infrastructure

These venues are often capable of hosting international competitions with minimal additional investment.

For example, SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles represents one of the most advanced sports venues in the world. The surrounding district integrates entertainment, retail, hospitality, and residential development, creating a comprehensive event experience.

This type of mixed-use infrastructure is increasingly attractive to international sports federations that want to deliver immersive experiences for fans and athletes.

Placemaking and Sports District Development

Modern sports tourism increasingly focuses on placemaking, where sporting events are integrated into vibrant districts that combine entertainment, culture, and hospitality. Cities that have invested in these districts are well positioned to attract international events.

Examples include:

- The Battery Atlanta (home of the Atlanta Braves)
- The Nashville Yards development
- The LA Live district in Los Angeles
- The Banks district in Cincinnati
- The Deer District in Milwaukee

These districts allow visitors to experience sporting events alongside restaurants, retail, concerts, and nightlife. For international visitors, this integrated experience often enhances the appeal of traveling to a destination for a sporting event.

Aligning Professional and Youth Sports Infrastructure

Another important trend involves professional sports organizations investing in youth and amateur facilities that support long-term participation growth. Major League Baseball, the NFL, and other leagues increasingly support grassroots programs designed to expand international participation.

Examples include:

- MLB partnerships with the World Baseball Softball Confederation
- NFL initiatives supporting the International Federation of American Football
- FIFA development programs expanding youth soccer worldwide

For destinations, these partnerships create opportunities to attract international youth tournaments and development events, which often generate significant tourism impact. Youth sports events frequently produce higher hotel demand per participant than professional events because athletes travel with families and extended delegations.

Community Sentiment and Resident Engagement

While international sporting events can generate economic benefits, successful hosting requires strong community support. Research from global tourism organizations indicates that residents increasingly evaluate major events based on their perceived local value.

Common concerns include:

- Tourism congestion
- Public spending on infrastructure
- Environmental impact
- Disruption to daily life

Destinations must therefore prioritize transparent communication and community engagement when pursuing international sporting events.

Strategies for Building Community Support

Several best practices have emerged from destinations that successfully host international competitions while maintaining positive resident sentiment.



Transparent Economic Impact Communication

Destinations should openly communicate the economic benefits associated with hosting events.

This includes sharing data on:

- Visitor spending
- Hotel occupancy
- Job creation
- Global media exposure
- Local business revenue

Providing clear economic impact reports helps residents understand how events benefit the broader community.

Legacy Planning

International events should create long-term community benefits beyond the competition itself.

Examples include:

- Youth sports development programs
- Facility improvements that remain available to residents
- Equipment donations to local organizations
- Community sport participation initiatives

For example, after the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, Vancouver transformed the Richmond Olympic Oval into a community sports complex that continues serving residents today. While in Los Angeles, the LA28 Organizing Committee has expanded access to youth sports through the PlayLA Youth and Adaptive Youth Sports Program, providing affordable and inclusive opportunities for tens of thousands of youth to participate in sports in the lead-up to the Games.

Volunteer Engagement

Volunteer programs provide residents with opportunities to participate directly in event operations. Large sporting events often require thousands of volunteers, creating a sense of community ownership and pride. Volunteer programs also provide workforce training opportunities for students and young professionals interested in careers in sports and events.

Cultural Exchange

International sporting events bring athletes, fans, and media from around the world. Highlighting the cultural exchange that accompanies global events can foster civic pride and encourage residents to view hosting as an opportunity to showcase their city on a global stage.



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Case Studies in Successful International Event Hosting

EUGENE, OREGON – World Athletics Championships

Eugene hosted the **2022 World Athletics Championships**, marking the first time the event took place in the United States. The city leveraged its deep track-and-field heritage, the University of Oregon's Hayward Field, and strong community engagement to deliver a highly successful championship. The event attracted athletes from nearly 200 countries and generated global media exposure for the region.

OKLAHOMA CITY , OKLAHOMA – RIVERSPORT Complex

Oklahoma City's RIVERSPORT complex represents an innovative model for combining elite sports infrastructure with community access. The facility hosts international rowing and canoe competitions while also offering public recreational programs for residents. The venue will host the Olympic canoe slalom competition during the LA28 Olympic Games, demonstrating how regional partnerships can extend the benefits of mega-events.

According to Phil Andrews, CEO of USA Fencing:

"There is an international coverage element that helps establish cities as globally known destinations, especially where cities have unique facilities. It is not just the big cities. Sarasota's relationship with World Rowing or international events in Spokane and South Dakota show that smaller markets can succeed."

SARASOTA, FLORIDA – Rowing Events

Smaller destinations can also compete successfully in the international sports marketplace.

Sarasota, Florida has developed a strong relationship with World Rowing, hosting numerous international events at Nathan Benderson Park.



Photo courtesy of Dan Wagner, Herald-Tribune Photo

4 | Action Framework for United States Destinations

To compete effectively for international sporting events, destinations should adopt a strategic approach that includes several key steps.



Audit Infrastructure and Assets

Destinations should evaluate their existing sports venues, natural assets, and hospitality infrastructure to identify sports that align with their capabilities.

Key factors include:

- Venue capacity
- Field of play specifications
- Hotel inventory
- Transportation access
- Climate suitability

Relationship building helps establish trust and increases the likelihood of future hosting opportunities.

Build Relationships with International Federations

Successful event hosting often begins years before a formal bid process and Sports ETA is facilitating these partnerships.

Destinations should build relationships with international federations through:

- Targeted international relations strategy and plan
- Industry conferences
- Trade missions
- Collaboration with national governing bodies
- Hosting smaller federation events

Relationship building helps establish trust and increases the likelihood of future hosting opportunities.

Partner with National Governing Bodies

National governing bodies (NGBs) often serve as intermediaries between international federations and potential host cities.

Examples include:

- USA Swimming
- USA Track and Field
- USA Cycling
- USA Volleyball
- USA Figure Skating

Collaborating with NGBs can help destinations identify opportunities and navigate the international bidding process.



Emphasize Legacy and Community Benefits

Successful bids increasingly include clear plans for long-term community impact.

Destinations should outline how hosting events will support:

- Youth sports participation
- Facility improvements
- Economic development
- Community programming

Use Data and Analytics

Modern event bidding relies heavily on data.

Destinations should use analytics to demonstrate their readiness to host events, including:

- Tourism impact projections
- Hotel capacity analysis
- Transportation planning
- Digital engagement metrics

Data-driven storytelling helps destinations present compelling cases to international federations.

THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL SPORTS EVENT HOSTING

The global sports industry is entering a period of rapid transformation.

Several trends will shape the future of international event hosting:

- Expansion of emerging sports
- Growth of esports competitions
- Increasing emphasis on sustainability
- Greater reliance on temporary infrastructure
- Rising demand for fan experience innovation

Cities that adapt to these trends will be best positioned to compete for international sporting events.

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Conclusion

International sporting events represent a powerful opportunity for American destinations to generate economic impact, global visibility, and community engagement.

With world-class infrastructure, diverse destinations, and strong sports participation culture, the United States is uniquely positioned to expand its role as a global host of international competitions.

However, success will require strategic planning, collaboration with international federations, and a commitment to community engagement.

As Dr. Dave Hutson of Rochester Christian University notes:

“Hosting international sporting events can be a tremendous undertaking, but it is also incredibly rewarding. These events demonstrate the power of sport to unite communities and contribute to the common good.”

By embracing innovation, investing in placemaking, and aligning with the evolving priorities of international federations, United States destinations can unlock a new era of global sports tourism and ensure that sport continues to serve as a catalyst for economic growth and cultural connection.



About Us



Sports ETA

As the only non-profit 501(c)3 trade association for the sports events and tourism industry in the United States, Sports ETA is the most essential resource for sports commissions, sports destinations, sports event owners, and industry partners. We believe sports tourism and the events that our members own and host have the power to transform society for the better. Our passion is to help sports events and tourism professionals achieve previously unimaginable levels of performance. We do this by nurturing a community of smart, creative, and interesting people: our members. Visit sportseta.org.



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