

NASC works to unlock travel sports equation

BY BILL KING

SENIOR WRITER

When Don Schumacher began working to attract sporting events of national significance to Cincinnati in the mid-1980s, only a handful of cities had formally created sports commissions that would compete with him.

Indiana, which pioneered the modern sports commission when it launched Indiana Sports Corp. in 1979, was the acknowledged leader. Others still were finding their way. But by the end of the decade, enough communities were vying for national events that it made sense for them to come together to share ideas.

So it was that in 1989, the sports commissions and convention and visitors bureaus from about 35 cities gathered for two and a half days in Orlando, where they listened to the likes of Billy Payne, the pie-in-the-sky dreamer who endeavored to bring the Olympics to Atlanta.

“Not only was it a watershed because for the first time so many cities got together in a formal fashion to talk about how you do all this, but also because it connected all of us,” Schumacher said recently, reflecting on the early days of a sports travel industry now estimated to generate more than \$9 billion in visitor spending annually. “Suddenly, we started talking.”

Those conversations soon found their way into a formal setting, thanks to the creation in 1992 of the not-for-profit National Association of Sports Commissions, which



NASC Executive Director Don Schumacher is stepping down after 25 years in March.

Schumacher has led as executive director for 25 years. When he steps down from the role at the end of March, he will leave behind an association that has grown to almost 800 member organizations — mostly commissions and CVBs, but also national governing bodies and event operators. Despite that growth and massive changes in the youth and amateur sports landscape, the NASC still maintains a core mission similar to that which it held at its start.

“From the beginning, we found that we enjoyed learning from each other,” said Schumacher, who in recent years has made professionalization and education priori-

ties for the NASC. “And, from time to time, we found evidence that owners of events were telling different stories to different cities. You know, that’s their prerogative. But we thought that if they learned we were beginning to talk to each other, maybe that would stop.

“You could say we got together to gossip. And to protect ourselves.”

While the latter remains a priority for communities, the role of the NASC has expanded along with the breadth of its membership.

Its signature remains an annual symposium it has hosted since 1994, where commissions and event organizers meet

to exchange data — and digits — in a marketplace format that puts them together for 10-minute sessions that many refer to as “speed dating.” The event also serves as a way for the NASC to explore sports travel issues through panel discussions. This year’s event includes sessions on assessing value beyond the traditional metric of room nights generated, operational practices that help drive economic impact and the trend toward communities and facilities owning events.

The most recent spate of growth of the NASC’s membership — both in terms of size and level of interest in their respective communities — stems largely from a narrative that began during the recession, when youth sports travel chugged forward even as the convention and trade show business softened.

In the last three years, spending on sports travel has grown 20 percent, eclipsing an estimated \$9.5 billion. While the big, ticketed events that originally caught the interest of Schumacher and his counterparts remain largely the purview of metropolitan areas, the growth of youth travel sports has turned suburbs and small towns into aspiring hosts.

“The national organization, in my mind, has got to figure out a way to create relevancy for all of its members,” said Mike Anderson, executive director of the Myrtle Beach Regional Sports Alliance and vice chairman of the NASC. “You’ve got incredible members here that have 20 years of

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experience — some of them in tier-one cities and some of them in small-town USA. You've got members that are just getting into this space and trying to navigate through it. How do we serve both of those types of members?"

That membership includes Super Bowl hosts, such as the Harris County Houston Sports Authority. But it also includes the Amarillo Convention and Visitors Council and the Yakima Valley Sports Commission. The USOC is a member. As is the U.S. Quiditch Association.

"The NASC has been effective at partnering sports commissions with events rights holders and has also been effective at elevating the dialogue around sports travel and challenging flawed assumptions," said Dev Pathik, founder of Clearwater, Fla.-based Sports Facilities Advisory, which since 2003 has produced financing documents for more than \$6 billion in youth and community-based sports projects. "It also has done a very good job of telling the truth and of foreseeing what's coming."

Of late, that forecast has been one of caution.

While youth sports travel spending continues to increase, there are indications that those trends could reverse. Increasingly, the NGBs and pro leagues have banded together to warn parents against the perils of specialization and overuse, which can

carry ramifications that are both physical and developmental. Many of their recommendations swim against the current that has driven youth team travel.

In one of his last presentations as head of the NASC, Schumacher spoke to a tourism conference in Minnesota. Rather than extoll the virtues of putting tourist tax dollars toward complexes that might attract travel teams, Schumacher warned that building solely to fill hotel rooms could increasingly be a prescription for shortfalls.

"Insofar as you use existing facilities to attract events to your community, you can keep this up a long time," Schumacher said. "But there is a zeal to leap ahead and build 10 soccer fields or 12 baseball fields because you heard that if you build it they will come. That was a movie. Some will, but only a few of them. And you will have your 12 soccer fields sitting there with weeds growing Monday through Thursday. Even though you get three or four tournaments a year that bring visitors, it's more money out the door than is coming in."

"The problem is always in the lack of consideration for the amount of use that local or regional users will provide that keeps the lights on. When you see a complex opening that has been planned carefully to emphasize local user groups and also attract visitors, all of whom are taxed, then you've really got something."

3 QUESTIONS WITH...

ALAN KIDD
INCOMING NASC EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR

When the National Association of Sports Commissions' board of directors chose an executive director to succeed longtime head Don Schumacher in January, it looked within its own membership. As president of the not-for-profit San Diego Hall of Champions sports museum and then the San Diego sports commission, Alan Kidd spent a decade innovating and building relationships around the sports travel sector. Kidd spoke with SportsBusiness Journal recently about his new role and the rapidly evolving youth sports travel landscape.



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■ On the No 1 issue facing commissions.

It's about sustainable, recurring revenue. How do we sustain programming? The event acquisition business is part of what sports commissions do. They chase around events. They bid on events. There are all kinds of factors that impact whether you will win events for your city. Being able to repeat that year after year is getting more challenging. That has a direct effect on what they consider to be success. Is it purely bringing in events that create an economic impact? Is it bringing events in and delivering to the community with initiatives around youth sports locally?

■ On the youth facilities boom.

You have to ask what the community is expecting from sports. What I'm concerned about is the sheer number of these massive facilities that are rolling out almost on a monthly basis in markets that want to use it as a magnet to attract people to these tournaments. There is a tipping point. We may see some of those facilities decay because there is a limited capacity of club teams and events. We're not quite there. But it will be reached at some level at some point.

— Bill King

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