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TRENDS

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By Dawn Reico

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Trends in sports tourism fluctuate based on weather patterns and the growth or decline

"That's not going to change," he says. "Most members are in the Midwest and people would rather see green than brown, which is why they prefer Georgia to Arizona."

To get a good pulse on what is happening across the United States, we polled a variety of industry experts. Here are 16 sports tourism trends to watch for in 2016 and beyond according to the pros.

- 1. The industry will keep growing.** "We will continue an industry pattern of steady, sustainable growth," says Schumacher, predicting hotel bookings will increase by 3 to 4 percent in 2016 over 2015. The pattern means key metrics, like the number of event owners and the amount of direct visitor spending, will continue to creep up. Sports tourism had a direct economic impact of nearly \$9 billion in the U.S. last year and Schumacher expects that to increase to \$9.3 or \$9.4 billion in 2016.
- 2. The rebate debate will continue.** Offseason events, such as hockey tournaments in the winter, are still pushing the envelope for rebates... and not everyone is happy about it. Hotels are pushing back, as are parents. "Today we have sporting events where it's \$50 to \$60 a night in rebates. You have a room rate, commission and room rebate on top of everything," says Schumacher. "My concern is: Why are we working so hard to get people to come to our destination and make them sorry they came by charging rebates like that?" Schumacher adds the one exception is when a small-town event like a soccer tournament needs to bring in referees from other states and the host committee has to pay for the referees' food, lodging and travel.
- 3. Paying staff instead of volunteers.** Amid a pending lawsuit against Competitor Group—which is accused of using volunteers as free labor for its for-profit races—Josh Todd, director of sports sales at Visit Mesa (Arizona), thinks tier-one cities may move toward paying for some positions that have relied on volunteers in the past. Jon Schmieder, founder and CEO of Huddle Up Group, adds that the suit could cause costs to significantly rise to the point that smaller events don't survive. "It could change the entire event industry in short order," he says.
- 4. Guaranteeing volunteers in a bid.** With potential changes happening to the pool of volunteers, some destinations are turning to local clubs to serve as bases for events, says Todd. For example, when Mesa hosts a large prestigious swim meet, the local aquatics club contributes the bulk of volunteers from its huge membership of parents and coaches, says Todd. "This can even be part of the bid: guarantees on volunteers," he says.
- 5. The parks and rec role is evolving.** More parks and recreation departments are operating like sports commissions, says Schumacher. As a result, they are increasing the creation of local events, which means more CVBs and sports commissions are partnering together to offer one-of-a-kind events.



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6. Synchronicity. Cities are partnering in hosting multiyear events. Todd says destinations such as [Anaheim, California](#), [San Antonio](#) and [Baltimore](#) are doing this on the meetings side, and sports cities like [Richmond, Virginia](#), are doing this with athletic events.

7. Lacrosse and pickleball are the hottest sports. Schumacher says young people are driving the continued growth in lacrosse while active seniors are turning to pickleball, which can be played on basketball, volleyball or tennis courts. Also growing: girls' fast-pitch softball.

8. Wi-Fi for all. "Decisions are made every day on where to eat, sleep and play based on who has free Wi-Fi," says Lawrence Hamm Jr., sports development manager at [Destination DC](#). All experts say having free Wi-Fi can be a deal-breaker or a moneymaker. Consider it essential to an event like adequate parking, bathrooms and field surfaces, says Schmierer.

9. Effective storytelling. Host committees are key when it comes to knowing what consumers want and how to engage fans, says Hamm. Many are using stories that connect to consumers' emotions. "You're only as good as the people you know, and your host committee should know the right people," he says.

10. Better partnerships with sponsors. Direct exposure will be the only place sponsors put their money, says Hamm. "We will have to educate our clients on how to structure the event so it aligns with the companies that fit their story," he says. "Money will continue to pour in as companies fight to gain market share."



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11. DMOs are playing hardball. "We see that more evolved hosting entities are asking rights holders to participate in a financial partnership with their events, rather than just paying the old-school, up-front, bid-fee model," says Schmierer. "The savvy DMOs and sports commissions are holding the event owners more accountable for their room nights than in the past. Many are withholding portions of their financial commitments until a post-event analysis can be conducted."

How do they hold rights holders accountable? By withholding funds until the hotel rooms or impact reports are provided to them and meet the agreed upon benchmarks, says Schmierer. "If the rights holder doesn't hit the DMOs expectations, they don't receive their funds," he adds.

12. Fan zones are big. And not just for mega-events, says Schmierer, who cites USA Gymnastics as a good model to watch since it properly trains its staff to use new media outlets to drive exposure and engage its fan base. Small events are starting to capitalize on this.

13. A changing focus. Sports departments are expanding into specialty-event responsibilities, a trend Schmierer says is growing because it takes a similar skill set to put on a sporting event as it does to create, plan and host a festival, concert or a Harley Davidson ride. "DMOs and sports commissions likely have the pieces in place to expand into the special events space as well as sports," he says, adding that it's an expanded focus, in most cases, and is becoming more prevalent.

14. Cutting out transportation. "We will continue to see the evolution of events wanting to take out all transportation needs," says Hamm. "This will be accomplished by having a headquarter hotel very close if not attached to the location of the competition."

15. CVBs are rebranding. Schumacher says CVBs are rebranding sports sales teams as a separate department with their own logo to make them sound less like a CVB. "It's a good strategy," says Schumacher, who adds he's advised several NASC members—including Valley Forge, Pennsylvania—to consider doing this.

16. The world is looking to the U.S. Fundraising in the U.S. has generally relied on local sponsorships. That's an anomaly compared to the rest of the world. Countries outside of the U.S. have traditionally relied on government sponsorships. "Government funding is going away worldwide," says Schumacher, who cites the discussions taking place via the International Association of Sport Cities. "Now they want to know how we raise money."