



The Strong Performance of the Sports Tourism Sector and Rising Resident Sentiment of Sport

*Co-Authored by Longwoods International
and Sports ETA*

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The Strong Performance of the Sports Tourism Sector and Rising Resident Sentiment of Sport

A white paper*

BACKGROUND

One of the fastest growing sectors in tourism, sport tourism has been one of the few bright spots in the post-pandemic economic landscape. As of 2021, sports events and tourism accounted for \$39.7B in direct spending, \$12.9B in tax revenue, and a total economic impact of \$91.8B in the United States (Sports ETA, 2021). Additionally, over 650,000 people are employed within this industry in some capacity. Although the economic totals continue to impress, an increasing amount of research has focused on additional metrics of success, such as community awareness and participation, resident quality of life, brand exposure, and health-related benefits. Recent studies (Steinhoff, 2021; Stoll et al., 2020) have examined the balance between customary performance indicators (i.e., heads in beds) and more community-based elements (i.e., event support) to provide a comprehensive look at total return on investment. “Sports events and tourism has been positive force for the tourism sector and destinations across the country are increasingly leveraging its strong performance to enhance their community development value proposition,” commented Al Kidd, President and CEO of Sports ETA.

RESEARCH

In 2017, Longwoods International pioneered the first research designed to investigate resident sentiment towards tourism. “Understanding residents’ level of support for tourism and sports events in communities is critical to the continued growth of sport tourism,” remarked Longwoods International President and CEO Amir Elyon. Data collected over the past five years has provided immeasurable benefits to destinations and industry professionals seeking to strategically develop sport tourism events and initiatives. As Park et al. (2022) noted, “Hosting a recurring local event and sustaining its continual development is not possible without residents’ participation and support” (p. 353).



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Sports Tourism Industry 2021

39.7B
in direct spending

\$12.9B
in tax revenue

\$91.8B
total
economic impact

*This whitepaper is based on a 2022 study conducted by Longwoods International.

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Leading the Pack

The 2021 State of the Industry report published by Sports ETA clearly noted how the sport tourism sector bounced back from the pandemic in dramatic fashion, outpacing many other industries (including pharmaceuticals, oil & gas extraction, etc.) in the process. Over 175 million Americans journeyed across the nation for sport-related reasons in 2021, just 2.6% fewer than the high-water mark set in 2019 (Sports ETA, 2021). Simply put, the sports events and tourism industry established the blueprint for pandemic recovery. More importantly, many industrial sectors such as construction, transportation, lodging, gaming, and retail owe much of their recent economic success to their close association with sporting events and other tourism-related travel.

PURPOSE

Longwoods International expanded their 2022 National Resident Sentiment Study in order to determine how the general public perceived various factors related to sports events and tourism, including: Economic development, quality of life, opportunities for exposure, health and wellness, and “over-tourism.”

METHODOLOGY

During July 2022, a self-completion survey was completed by 4,000 adults across the four regions (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West) of the United States (1,000 respondents from each region). Survey respondents were members of a major online consumer panel, and the sample was drawn to be proportionate to the nationwide population using U.S. Census divisions, age, and sex. Participants were asked to identify their level of support when it came to hosting and/or attending, participating in, or watching various types of sporting events (outdoor, youth, amateur, collegiate, and professional). The study also sought to assess respondents’ perceptions of local tourism development efforts and overall community impact.

Sports-Related Travel
2021

over
175 million

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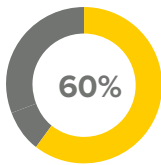
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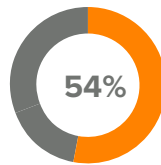
Summary of Findings

THE STUDY BY LONGWOODS INTERNATIONAL REVEALED:

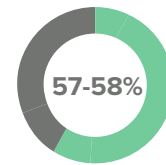
The current report by Longwoods International was very encouraging as public perception of sporting events was stronger than the last iteration of this survey (conducted in 2020) and resident support for all types/levels of events increased. “Resident sentiment is now an essential KPI for every destination,” noted Eylon.



60% of respondents agreed that youth and amateur sporting events benefited their local economy (an increase of 7 percentage points)



54% stated these events improved the quality of life within their respective communities



57% of Americans support hosting college and professional sporting events, and 58% supported outdoor sporting events in their communities.

REGIONAL DATA

A quick look at regional data indicated that residents from the West and Northeast are significantly more receptive to hosting sporting events than they were in 2020, as each of these regions outpaced their peers in the South and West by a notable margin over this timeframe. For example, 60% of residents in the Western United States recognized the economic benefits of youth and amateur sports, an 11-percentage point increase since 2020 (49%). Concomitantly, the South and Midwest regions only enjoyed a 3 to 6 percentage point improvement.

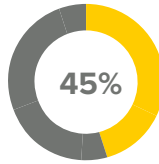


Photo courtesy of April Walker on Unsplash

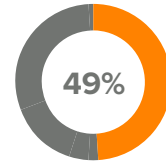
GENERATIONAL DATA



Older Americans were generally more amenable to hosting sporting events



Generation Z (ages 18-25): supported hosting collegiate or professional sporting events



Generation Z (ages 18-25): supported hosting sporting events outdoors

In addition to regional comparisons, generational differences among respondents were also assessed within the current study. Overall, older Americans were generally more amenable to hosting sporting events, which follows the trend seen in 2020. However, younger Americans (Generation Z and Millennials) saw their numbers soar in many areas. In the 2020 resident sentiment report, only 30% of Generation Z supported hosting collegiate or professional sporting events and 28% championed sporting events hosted outdoors in 2020 (Stoll et al., 2021). These totals rose to 45% and 49% in 2022, which is a tremendous development for an industry relying on younger participants to strengthen the three pillars of long-term tourism sustainability (economic, social, and environmental) referenced by Gibson et al. (2012).

ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY-BASED ASPECTS OF TOURISM

Longwoods also delved into additional community-based aspects of tourism such as health and wellness, participation opportunities, and increased exposure. Respondents over the age of 77 (Silent Generation) posted the strongest numbers in these areas, at approximately 70% agreement. The middle generations supported these event-related aspects between 55%-61% of the time, while Generation Z (ages 18 to 25) hovered in the 44%-53% range. Regional results were essentially even, with the majority of Americans agreeing that sporting events: Improved health and wellness (56%), created participation opportunities (59%), provided exposure at the community level (57%), and were deemed assets for the local community (56%).

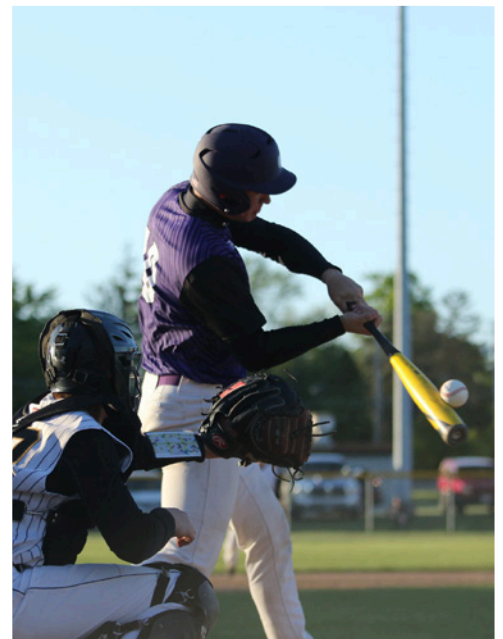
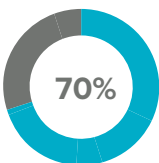
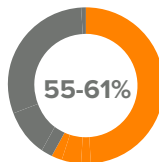


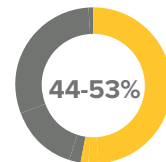
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Silent generation (over 77): 70% supported community-based aspects of tourism



Middle generations: 55%-61% supported community-based aspects of tourism



Generation Z (ages 18-25): 44%-53% supported community-based aspects of tourism

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Action Steps



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1. EXPAND EVENT AWARENESS AND PRIORITIZE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

According to Park et al. (2022), “residents who are satisfied with event participation become strong supporters of the event” (p. 351). As a result, sports events and tourism professionals should always be seeking ways to strengthen community relationships (residents, businesses, etc.) in addition to promoting events to outside visitors. Residents who are informed and involved are far more likely to have a positive perception of an event because they will better understand the factors affecting quality of life. Steinhoff (2021) noted this trend and stated there is “a concerted shift of focus among destinations from visitors to residents” that has developed from finding the optimal balance between sustained visitor numbers and overtourism (p. 8).

According to Longwoods’ findings, only 57% of Americans agree that sporting events provide exposure to their respective communities and 59% feel that local participation opportunities are created by events. Industry leaders, local officials, and tourism organizations must make a concerted effort to go beyond the “heads in beds” approach to event procurement to purposefully drive resident involvement, expand awareness of how events benefit communities and ultimately generate a stronger buy-in from all stakeholders involved in hosting sporting events (Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2018).

2. DEVELOP A PORTFOLIO OF EVENTS THAT ARE TRUE ASSETS

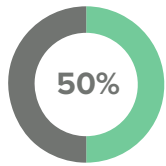
It is easy to see the massive revenue and marketing exposure created by major events such as Super Bowls, Final Fours, and World Cups (Steinhoff, 2021). However, Gibson et al. (2012) urges those in the sports events and tourism industry to develop events that are “compatible with principles of sustainable community development” (p. 161). The ability to utilize existing infrastructure, target events that are appropriate for the size of the community, generate consistent visitor numbers, and use sporting events to increase the quality of life for residents is the ultimate goal.

Approximately 56% of survey respondents characterized local sporting events as “community assets,” while 17% conversely disagreed. A strategic effort to shift residents’ perceptions of sporting events must become a priority in the coming years. Residents need to understand that sporting events provide far more benefits than entertainment value and are a vital part of a community’s portfolio, not a drain on its resources.

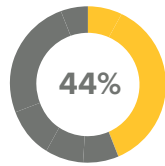
3. GENERATIONAL DATA: Z IS STILL THE KEY

In the previous resident sentiment study, research findings painted a troubling picture of Generation Z (measured in ages 18-23 for the 2020 study and updated to ages 18-25 in the current study) and its lack of support for sporting events, particularly those at the youth and/or amateur level. The 2022 numbers have been phenomenal as young Americans made the largest jump of all the generational groups, with double-digit gains in the following areas: Economic benefits of youth/amateur sporting events (50%, increase of 19 percentage points), community quality of life related to youth/amateur events (44%, up 12 percentage points), support for hosting collegiate and professional sporting events (45%, up 15 percentage points), and support for hosting outdoor sporting events (49%, increase of 21 percentage points). As this generation becomes more established within their respective communities (purchase homes, have children involved in organized sports, join local clubs and organizations, become engaged in local civic efforts, etc.), they will drive overall resident sentiment numbers to new heights. Therefore, making the youngest generation a focal point in sport and event tourism initiatives and education is crucial for the industry's long-term success.

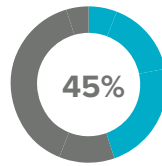
The 2022 numbers have been phenomenal as young Americans made the largest jump of all the generational groups



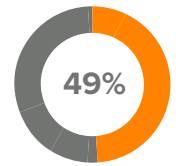
50% realize economic benefits of youth/amateur sporting events



44% realize community quality of life related to youth/amateur events



45% support hosting collegiate and professional sporting events



49% support hosting outdoor sporting events

↑
+19 pts
since 2020

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+12 pts
since 2020

↑
+15 pts
since 2020

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+21 pts
since 2020

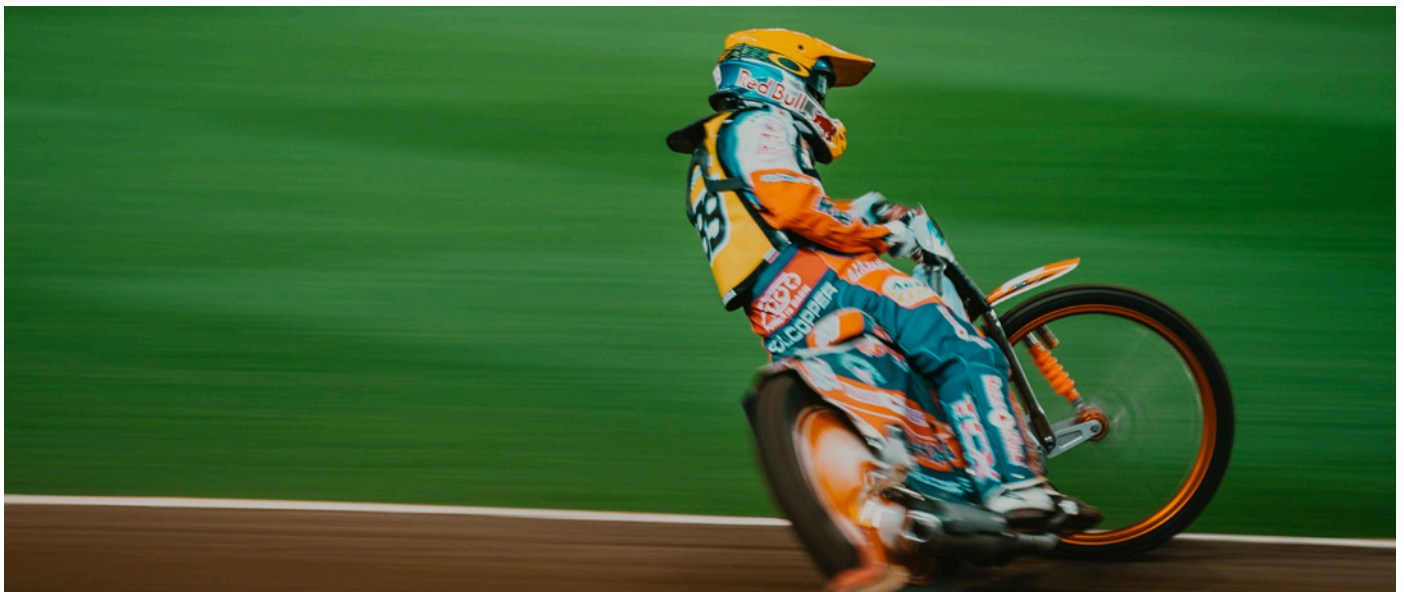
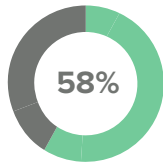


Photo courtesy of Jay Wennington on Unsplash

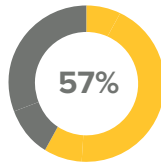
4. UNDERSTAND HOW PANDEMIC PRIORITIES CAN BENEFIT YOUR COMMUNITY OR ORGANIZATION

The COVID-19 pandemic had its share of adverse effects on the industry, but it also brought about new learning opportunities as well as some unexpected benefits. Non-traditional, individual, and outdoor sporting activities became extremely popular, many Americans gained a new outlook on health and wellness, and everyone realized how much they missed live sporting events! Longwoods' survey findings are representative of these trends as 58% of respondents support hosting outdoor sporting events (a 6 percentage point increase over 2020), 57% support collegiate and professional events (up 6 percentage points) and 56% realize that youth and amateur sporting events are crucial to health and wellness efforts. Going forward, industry practitioners should use what they learned over the last few years regarding participation trends, facility usage, outdoor recreation opportunities, grant funding, data collection, etc. to create well-rounded tourism initiatives that: Maximize community resources, enhance quality of life, and provide stakeholders with a clear return on investment.

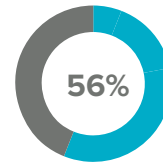
... and everyone realized how much they missed live sporting events!



58% support hosting outdoor sporting events in their communities



57% support collegiate and professional events in their communities



56% realize that youth and amateur sporting events are crucial to health and wellness efforts



Photo courtesy of Chris Chow on Unsplash

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Sports ETA

As the only trade association for the sports events and tourism industry, Sports ETA is the most trusted resource for sports commissions, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), and sports event owners. Sports ETA is committed to the success of more than 850 member organizations and 2,400 sports event tourism professionals. Our promise is to deliver quality education, ample networking opportunities and exceptional event management and marketing know-how to our members, and to protect the integrity of the sports events and tourism industry. For more information, visit sportseta.org.

Longwoods International

Established in 1978 as a market research consultancy, Longwoods International has grown into a respected leader within the travel and tourism industry working with over 175 travel brands and destinations. With offices in Columbus, OH, Toronto, ON, Florida, Wisconsin, Toledo, OH, Indiana, and New York, Longwoods conducts strategic market research for public- and private-sector clients throughout North America, Europe and the Pacific Rim. For more information, visit www.longwoods-intl.com.

