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Irvine Ups its Sports Destination Game

New New Facility Makes this SoCal City a Must-See for Sports Event Planners

BY MICHAEL POPKE

DAVE LUCEY REPEATS HIMSELF A LOT THESE DAYS, but he doesn't mind. "The new Orange County Great Park Sports Complex is 194 acres — more than twice the size of Disneyland," the sales manager for Destination Irvine says about the facility that, by this summer, will boast a 2,500-seat soccer stadium, 25 lighted tennis courts, seven softball and baseball diamonds, six lighted multi-purpose fields and five sand volleyball courts.

"When I talk to people, a lot of times I have to repeat those numbers. They're kind of blown away by the size of the facility. This is one-of-a-kind stuff, and it's a big game changer for us."

Irvine, California, has long been a sports destination, welcoming a variety of high-profile events dating back to at least 1984, when the city hosted the swimming competition at the Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games.

More recently, the list of events held

in Irvine includes the 2017 USA Water Polo National Junior Olympics, the 2017 Softball Champions Cup 18-Under Junior Olympics Showcase, the 2016 USA Synchro West Zone Championships, the 2015 World Cup of Softball and the 2014 USA Swimming Junior Nationals.

All told, Irvine is home to more than 80 athletic fields and, as a master-planned community, the city requires five acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents — resulting in miles of jogging trails and



off-street bicycle paths.

With its central location 45 miles south of Los Angeles and 90 miles north of San Diego, Irvine is only seven miles from the Pacific Ocean, which is a big draw for many sports participants and their families who turn the competition into a vacation.

The city also boasts more than 4,700 hotel rooms and averages more than 280 sunny days a year, with temperatures ranging from the mid-60s to the mid-80s and lows from the 40s to the 60s. The annual average high temperature is a near-perfect 72.7 degrees Fahrenheit.

On top of all that, Irvine has been annually recognized by the FBI since 2005 as "America's Safest Big City."

"We try to make people know we really want them here," Lucey says about sports organizations and event participants that come to Irvine. The challenge in recent years, he adds, is that the majority of the city's existing facilities are almost booked to capacity. "The Great Park allows us to take our sports tourism to the next level."

Orange County Great Park Sports Complex

The new city-owned sports complex is part of 688 acres under development on a portion of the site of the former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro, which was decommissioned in 1999. Orange County voters approved the Great Park project in 2002, with the goal of making the area an arts and sports recreational hub.

The first major phase of the sports complex opened in summer 2017, providing opportunities to host high-profile, large-scale events in tennis, soccer, rugby, lacrosse, cricket, beach volleyball and even quidditch. The baseball and softball diamonds are expected to open this summer, followed by a 270,000-square-foot ice facility featuring three National Hockey League-size rinks and one



Olympic-size rink, which will include a 2,500-seat arena.

A variety of ice sports and recreation activities are planned at the new venue, including youth and adult hockey programs; regional and national hockey competitions; and figure skating, speed skating and curling tournaments. The complex also will serve as a backup practice facility for the National Hockey League's Anaheim Ducks.

In November, USA Hockey announced that the Great Park will welcome the Girls Tier I National Championships in April 2019 (hosted by the Anaheim Junior Ducks), and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics will bring its Men's Soccer National Championship to the Great Park Soccer Complex this fall and next (hosted by the Golden State Athletic Conference).

The L.A. Galaxy, Los Angeles' Major League Soccer team, was the first organization to make a long-term commitment to the Great Park's soccer stadium by creating the LA Galaxy Cup for U11 to U19 boys' teams. The inaugural event is slated for late March and early April.

"One of the great things about the Great Park is that it will bring more weekend events to Irvine," Lucey says, adding that the evolution of the complex has been 15 years in the making. "The original soccer fields have been there for years. The space has been constantly and consistently expanded over time, but now we really have some momentum. This is going to be the centerpiece for a lot of youth tournaments for years to come."

The Great Park Balloon, a giant air balloon, quickly emerged as the Great Park's iconic attraction. With the capacity to hold up to 30 passengers and soar as high as 400 feet above the surrounding landscape, the balloon is one of the largest tethered helium (not hot air) balloons in the world and the first of its kind in the



United States. Not only does it serve as a public observation deck, but the balloon also is used to give owners and organizers of prospective events a bird's-eye view of the complex. A walking tour of the park, according to Lucey, takes about an hour.

In addition to hosting sports events, the Great Park eventually will house a 12,000-seat amphitheater, replacing the 35-year-old Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre that closed in October 2016.

More Venues

The Orange County Great Park Sports Complex is far from the only game in town when it comes to Irvine's athletic facilities. In fact, nearly 30 facilities are available to host a variety of events. Highlights include:

- Colonel Bill Barber Community Park, which boasts an 800-seat softball stadium with a full-size scoreboard and adjustable outfield fence, plus three more lighted softball diamonds, three lighted soccer overlay fields, six lighted tennis courts, two concession stands and an amphitheater.
- William J. Woollett Jr. Aquatics Center, which contains two outdoor 50-meter pools that host local, regional and national competition. Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time, competed at the facility in the 2010 ConocoPhillips National Swimming Championships.
- Momentous Sports Center, which offers 15 high school regulation basketball courts and futsal courts that can convert to 22 regulation volleyball courts. The facility also provides on-site parking and dining.

Beyond Sports

Of course, being so close to so many attractions gives athletes and their families visiting Irvine plenty to do, both before and after the competition. Disneyland is



only about 15 miles from the Great Park, and Newport Beach and Huntington Beach (billed as Surf City, USA) are even closer.

Depending on when you visit, the Anaheim Ducks or Major League Baseball's Anaheim Angels might be playing a home game. So might the Orange County Soccer Club or one of the 18 sports teams at the University of California, Irvine.

Additionally, regional parks provide opportunities for biking, hiking, pony riding, paddle boating and disc golfing.

Irvine also offers three golf courses and three major retail and lifestyle centers, as well as other popular attractions such as the Marconi Automotive Museum, which boasts an impressive \$30 million collection of historical and exotic cars; the Giant Wheel, a custom-designed ride featuring enclosed cars that was hand-crafted in Italy; the world-famous Improv Comedy Club; and the temporary FivePoint Amphitheatre at the Great Park, where artists as diverse as One Direction's Niall Horan and Slayer will perform this year.

"We had lots of sports going on in Irvine before the Great Park opened, but now we're ready to make an even bigger impact," says Lucey, adding that he works with 21 area hotels to help educate their employees about the recently enhanced sports opportunities in the city. "And once the ice portion of the facility opens, things will really start cranking!" **SDM**