

Voice Column for October 2019

Olympic Table Tennis Trials head fall events lineup

By John Groh

As the busy summer season has faded and we embrace the sights and sounds of fall, we wanted to share some information that highlights the bureau's role as the lead agency for sports tourism in the region and the tremendous impact these events have on the local economy.

Sports tourism is a huge part of the bureau's mission, and we are serious about our role in creating destination defining events, strategically pursuing opportunities and securing contracts and helping manage and service them in progress.

In that vein, we're thrilled about the upcoming North American Olympic Table Tennis Trials at the BMO Harris Bank Center on Oct. 5. The RACVB has been closely involved every step of the way in bringing an Olympic trials event to Rockford for the first time. We invite the public to experience free events leading up to the grand finale event at the BMO Harris Center and, of course, to watch the finals. More information can be found at ROCKFORDOLYMPICTRIALS.COM including prices for the trials with all-day passes starting at just \$15.

Our goal is to provide a positive customer experience at each event. Winning strategies in sports tourism are built on how we play the game, and that means creating great experiences for players and their families, for coaches and for spectators, whether they hail from near or far. We want them to return, and so, we listen to feedback.

Organizers of detail-rich events such as Tough Mudder let us know what we do right and wrong. For the fourth straight year, Tough Mudder was held in August at the Chicago Rockford International Airport. The competition drew some 10,000 participants and pumped an estimated \$1.3 million into local businesses.

Event Director Evert Sers weighed in after this year's Tough Mudder. "It's been an amazingly successful event for us," he said of the Rockford competition. "The RACVB is fantastic every year. We have a tight relationship with them during the planning stage and, even, on the weekend. They are heavily involved and always willing to lend a helping hand."

RACVB works alongside local organizations such as the Rockford Area Venues & Entertainment Authority, local hotels, the Rockford Park District and many others to build relationships and expand the diversity of events held locally. We play well together to showcase some of the industry's finest venues. Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara applauded the synergy of teamwork and great facilities to achieve economic success.

"Adult and youth sports continue to drive our regional tourism economy, and we've made important infrastructure investments in recent years to support that," McNamara says. "The RACVB continues to lead our efforts in this critical area with their team developing regional, national and international relationships that keep our city top of mind for planners and decision makers in a variety of sports."

As noted above, we accomplish our mission when we partner with others. This summer, we were pleased to work with our counterparts north of the state line, Visit Beloit, in securing and hosting the

National Softball Association's Girls Fastpitch North-Central B & C World Series. In total, 5,000 players, coaches and fans from throughout the nation converged on the region spending more than \$1 million while in town. The tournament took place at four facilities; Mercyhealth Sportscore One (Rockford), Harlem Community Center (Machesney Park), Davis Junction Community Park Softball Fields and the Youth Sports Complex – Stateline Family YMCA (Beloit).

Having great facilities is part of our winning formula, for sure. Great marketing – how we share the message and tell our story – is also highly important. Receiving feedback from our peers on our marketing is always gratifying. The National Association of Sports Commissions has twice named RACVB the nation's Sports Tourism Organization of the Year (2016 and 2018) and just this year, we received the award for Destination Branding & Marketing Campaign of the Year in our division (regions under 500,000 in population).

In recognizing the bureau, the Commission cited success in retaining legacy events such as the USA BMX Midwest Nationals, winning six bids with the National Junior College Athletic Association and creating community events with our sports tourism ambassador, Fred VanVleet, such as the FVV FanFest and the watch parties around the NBA finals and FVV homecoming celebration.

In closing, success for our region is a team effort, and we could not be successful without our thriving business community. You support our efforts at hotels and restaurants, at retail establishments and at local attractions that benefit from sports tourism by entertaining and providing service to visitors when they're not playing their games. It all goes together to create great memories that build a positive brand for the Rockford region and keep people coming back here again and again.

John Groh is president/CEO of Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. RACVB is responsible for promoting the Rockford region as an attractive travel destination and enhancing its public image as a dynamic place to live and work. Through the impact of travel, RACVB strengthens the economic position of the region and provide opportunities for people in our communities. www.gorockford.com

The views expressed are Groh's and do not necessarily represent those of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.