

CASE STUDY

RELATIONSHIPS TO RESULTS

AS CVBS, SPORTS COMMISSIONS AND PARKS & REC DEPARTMENTS
ALIGN THEIR GOALS, EVERYONE WINS



HOW TO WORK WITH YOUR PARK DISTRICT TO SCORE BIG WINS!



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By: Nick Povalitis

It's 4:38 a.m. on a brisk December Friday in Huntley, Illinois. By dismissing the blaring sound of an alarm, Scott Pilkerton has essentially punched the clock.

In his 11th year as a facility supervisor with the Rockford Park District (RPD) and fifth early morning workout in as many days, Pilkerton is at the gym living out one of several mottos that remain important to him. A healthy employee is a happy employee.

Pilkerton is on the cardio by 4:50, hitting the weights at 5:25, and on his way back home by 6 a.m. Shortly after 7, this jovial and athletic individual who carries a Mr. Clean look is out the door for a 40-minute drive to the Mercyhealth Indoor Sports Center in Loves Park, Illinois.

"I have a passion about my work; I can't wait until it's time to put my feet to the pavement," says Pilkerton. "It takes a lot of preparation and planning, and all of that builds up until it's showtime."

The Rockford, Illinois, region (90 miles northwest of Chicago) has long been a leader in the sports tourism

industry. Since the early 1980s, the Rockford Park District and the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (RACVB) have worked hand-in-hand while welcoming a multitude of outside groups for tournament play.

While soccer and softball reigned supreme for many years, the partnership has successfully diversified into other spaces, including rugby, lacrosse, 7 on 7 football, Quidditch, ultimate, BMX and water skiing.

"Regarding the CVB and parks and rec department, we want to identify a community that fits the need," says Byron Hicks, manager of events at USA Ultimate. "Do you have the right venue, is it accessible and do we have a local organizing committee (LOC) to work with?"

"Working with parks and rec can be difficult. If the CVB or sports commission has a good relationship with the parks and rec department, that's where they can come in to help. And in Rockford, you have the CVB and someone like Scott (Pilkerton) at the Park District who makes things very easy."

THE GLUE

To begin to realize the benefits from a strong relationship between a CVB/sports commission and the parks and recreation department, it is imperative to consider the broad challenges and search for industry best practices on behalf of the customer—in this case, the national governing bodies, rights holders and event owners of the sports business world.

John David is chief operating officer at USA BMX/BMX Canada, where he's worked since 2000. David brings a distinctive expertise to this conversation. As a student at Louisiana State University, David worked at BREC's

BMX Track—a parks and rec facility—where he was eventually hired full time to manage the BMX program in Baton Rouge, LA.

“There seems to be a disconnect between parks and rec and BMX facilities, and the CVB or sports commission can be the glue to that relationship,” David says. “I ask a lot of questions to DMOs (destination marketing organizations) I don't know. My intent is to find out how they relationship-build because I need to know if they have the relationships it takes to solve problems as they arise.”

Relationship building is at the apex of what event owners prioritize and it refers to one of the most difficult challenges when entering a market: the method of access. Park district



Rockford BMX has hosted the USABMX Midwest Nationals for more than 30 years.

facilities are commonly reserved and purposed for local constituencies, and are often funded through tax revenue generated from a community’s residents.

The Rockford Park District reflects this model, and even outlines its four priority results for residents within its values and mission page. Despite no mention of visitors, outside users or sports tourism, the park district and CVB are able to coexist with an understanding of each other’s significance within those spaces, thus ensuing positive impact on the region.

“We have the infrastructure, we’re the engine,” Pilkerton says of the Park District. “The RACVB provides the fuel for us to showcase what makes our tournament experience different. We embrace and entrust interested agencies with accountability. We want tournament directors to come visit so they get a gut feel for the value that we can each bring to the table.”

UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF SPORTS TOURISM

There are a myriad of methods that CVBs and sports commissions can engage with parks and recreation, all with the thought in mind of building and nurturing that relationship. Recognition luncheons, strategic sales meetings, golf play days, trade show co-attendance, and site visit co-hosting are all commonplace and yield immeasurable benefits.

Moreover, an ongoing dialogue between the DMO and parks and rec helps educate local users of the value of sports tourism. Revenue and marketing opportunities help position parks and rec departments for facilities upgrades

and long-term funding, benefits that residents will experience firsthand.

Lou Mengsol, a 21-year veteran of the hospitality industry, is entering his 11th year as president of the U.S. Sports Congress, a national sports event trade show that Pilkerton attended as a guest of the RACVB in 2014. The Congress, as it’s known in the sports tourism sphere, brings together CVBs, sports commissions, industry experts including parks and rec departments, NGBs and event owners to learn best practices and get to know each other on a personal level. The latter is predicated on the notion of quality over quantity. It also dictates that Mengsol qualifies attendees before the Congress, keeping the number of attendees to a healthy balance.

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“It’s important that event owners know that you as a CVB or sports commission are investing your time locally,” says Mengsol, who worked at the Woodfield (IL) CVB for seven years prior to launching the Congress. “It’s important to have local friends, whether it’s from parks and rec or from hotels. You need that to present a competitive bid and to expand on your relationship with the event owners.

“And, remember, there’s a fraternity of rights holders. Whether the experience is good or bad, event owners are going to share stories. Ultimately, the question to the event owner may become, ‘Who else do you know that can come to our community?’”



UW Health Sports Factory in Rockford, Illinois

A MODEL PROJECT

Because of its long-standing successes with outdoor youth sports tournaments, the Rockford region has recently applied its successful model to indoor sports opportunities. The Reclaiming First initiative—originally discussed in 2009, rolled out publicly in 2011, and now with construction nearing completion 2017—is spearheaded by the Rockford Park District and the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau to retain, regain and grow the amateur sports tourism market. From city officials to rights holders to residents, input for the project is representative of a broad base.

The project includes the construction of the 105,000 square foot indoor UW Health Sports Factory, and major upgrades at Mercyhealth Sportscore Two including the addition of six artificial turf fields and lights. Of the

many highlights of the project related to sports tourism is the passing of a two percent increase in the hotel-motel tax. Another important and intended item to note is that both venues are being programmed locally for residents to enjoy.

In addition to local use of world-class facilities, the Reclaiming First team sought to quantify the project's local economic impact. To that end, project studies yielded the following local impact estimates: \$16.5 million in new annual private sector revenue; \$1.9 million in new annual local government tax revenue; the addition of 210 construction jobs and equivalent of 250 full-time positions to the local economy within five years of the project's completion; and the prevention of competitive losses valued at \$500,000 annually.

The project is already paying sports tourism dividends, as the RACVB and RPD have secured more than 30



tournament bookings between the two complexes, including the 2018 AAU Girls Basketball Sixth Grade National Championships.

“What is most impressive about Rockford is its relationships: they are strong and friendly between all entities,” says Dave Preller, a national AAU girls basketball executive board member who visited the region in early 2015. “Every place we walked into knew why we were there.”

“It continues to be an honor to welcome sports event customers to the Rockford region,” adds John Groh, president and CEO at the RACVB. “Our community and industry partners, including our long-standing partners at the Rockford Park District, are committed to providing all visitors with experiences that exceed their expectations. As a leading sports tournament destination, we understand the needs of tournament directors, and our

goal is to keep event owners—and their athletes—happy and returning to the region. We appreciate that they continue to say yes to Rockford.”

LISTEN TO THE CUSTOMER

Event owners recognize when CVBs and sports commissions are on the same page with their local parks and recreation departments. While a DMO’s collaborative processes may include research and product knowledge, site visits or community wide sports tourism projects, merely listening to the needs of the customer is paramount.

Britt Hoyland is the director of partnerships and marketing at USA Water Ski, the national governing body for multiple water skiing and wakeboarding disciplines. For USA Water Ski, CVBs and sports commissions are all things that connect the dots—from lodging assistance, to parks and rec relations, to vendors, printing services sponsorships. But often times it is within the realm of the unspoken where a DMO can differentiate itself.

“We’re pretty good on a national scale, but we need assistance locally with marketing,” Hoyland says. “We (rights holders) do not have a model for marketing activation locally, so we lean on CVBs and parks and rec to help us market the event.

“Listen to the rights holder for what we need. During a recent site visit, it was clear that this destination had its own priorities. We were shown properties that did not meet our specs. We understand that you may want to take care of preferred partners, but we can help make it a win-win by listening to us.”

The competitive nature of sports tourism is ever-apparent. The industry’s economic impact estimates are hovering above \$8 billion annually, and the membership base at the National Association of Sports Commissions

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(NASC) grew to a record 718 in 2014. Moreover, new facilities—sometimes sports mega complexes that can accommodate multiple events at once—are being built and rolled out monthly.

Despite fierce competition and consistently high turnover rates within the hospitality industry—66 percent (22 points higher than the entire private sector) in 2014 (Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics)—the expectation and need for superior customer service still resonates. Rights holders and NGBs have a limited number of events available to move around, and a limited number of destinations are suited to host a given event. These are mathematics that can make it challenging for any DMO to stand out.

In the eyes of David Hall, vice president of development and former president at Rugby Illinois, a DMO needs to make sure the event owner knows it's there. And while



Rugby Illinois' High School and Middle School State Championships at Mercyhealth Sportscore Two.

there is no all-encompassing formula for the art of follow-up, rights holders agree that you should err on the side of more is more.

“There should be more dialogue with organizations from CVBs and parks and rec,” Hall says. “Organizations like the Rockford CVB have made it known to Rugby Illinois that they want us to be there. And every park district should have a Scott. He’s hands on to the right extent, and he understands that we’re the customer and we’re willing to pay to use the facility.”

“THERE SHOULD BE MORE DIALOGUE WITH ORGANIZATIONS FROM CVBS AND PARKS AND REC.”

Beyond consistent and timely follow-up, another step requires understanding that customer service essentials extend past the present. An events manager at IMG Academy for nearly four years in Bradenton, FL, Josh Pridokas explains that taking a look at the strategic plan of an event owner’s organization adds significant context to the totality of the relationship.

“IMG’s prospecting of an area is based on our business model: we want to get the IMG brand and name out there to draw people to IMG for school or a camp,” says Pridokas, now the basketball program manager with IMG Academy. “With any events we produce our first question is, ‘Are there enough clubs in the area for us to effectively grow our brand?’ It helps to know from the beginning what the customer wants to accomplish in the long term.”

SERVICE AND A SMILE

NXTsports is relatively new to the Rockford sports market, but it represents what all sports tourism professionals strive for: a happy and repeat customer.

NXT's Rock River Cup quickly became the premier lacrosse event at Mercyhealth Sportscore Two. Many factors have contributed to this event's success, including: a meeting with the RACVB at trade show years ago; a follow-up site visit that featured the RACVB, Pilkerton and company; an exclusive Magic Waters Water Park fun night each year for attendees; massages and manicures for NXT spectators at the competition fields; and, perhaps most importantly, the rapport between the RACVB and the Rockford Park District.

Robin Baxter coached lacrosse for seven years at Widener University before joining NXTsports, where she is now the vice president of events. A consistent attendee of industry trade shows, Baxter continues to experience the value that DMOs bring to relationships with parks and rec departments nationally.

"The most important characteristics toward building that relationship include being knowledgeable of what you have," Baxter says. "It seems silly, but a lot of CVBs don't know their product. Being personable is critical too. Because you spend so much time together, it makes for a more pleasant experience. And you certainly need to have attention to detail. There are so many conversations and so much planning that goes into an event, and it needs to be seamless."

"And Scott is just hilarious. He always has a big smile and that means a lot. He knows what we need. Everything is rolled out in its place when we arrive. It's turn-key."



NXT Sports has produced premier lacrosse tournaments in the region since 2013, when it launched the inaugural Rock River Cup.

AUTHENTICITY REVERBERATES

A native of San Diego, CA, Pilkerton proclaims his extroverted style is traced back to his youth when he constantly took the lead in gathering the neighborhood kids to play, bike, skateboard and build wood jumps. That outgoing personality has always come naturally to him.

His athletic background culminated as a college football player at Eastern Illinois University, where he studied parks and recreation. Pilkerton credits his athletic success as the foundation for the work ethic, enthusiasm and spirit necessary to live up to another unwavering mantra: a relationships-to-results philosophy exemplified with Baxter and NXTsports.

“The bond with Robin at NXTsports became relevant in year two,” Pilkerton recalls. “There was a uniform hug that took me back. It was nice, it was personal, and it was unexpected. That bond, that realism: you can’t sell that. It has to be genuine.”

Almost 12 hours have passed since Pilkerton awoke on a now unseasonably warm December Friday. After glancing at the clock above his desk, he is reminded again of why he’s here.



Scott Pilkerton is in his 11th year as a facility supervisor at the Rockford Park District

“I give this place a piece of character, I have a vibrant personality and I’ve been loud my whole life,” says Pilkerton, creating an echo throughout the halls of the Indoor Sports Center.

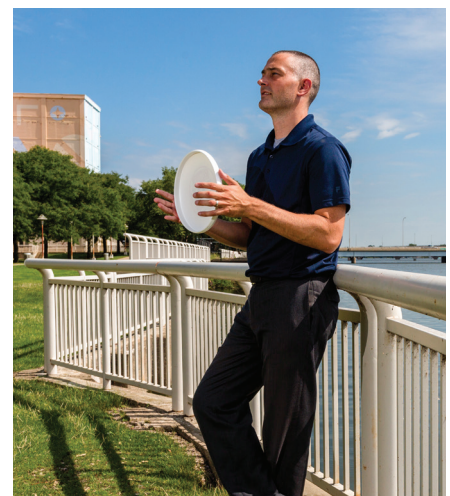
“On event weekend, if it’s Friday at 4 p.m. I’ll get up and yell, ‘It’s showtime, baby!’”

AUTHOR BIO

Nick Povalitis integrates quality sports events into his hometown of Rockford, Illinois for GoRockford. Previously an award-winning collegiate sports marketer and public relations professional before a stint in the uniform business, Povalitis values the creative process as a master educator of sports industry and beyond. Connect with him on LinkedIn and Twitter.

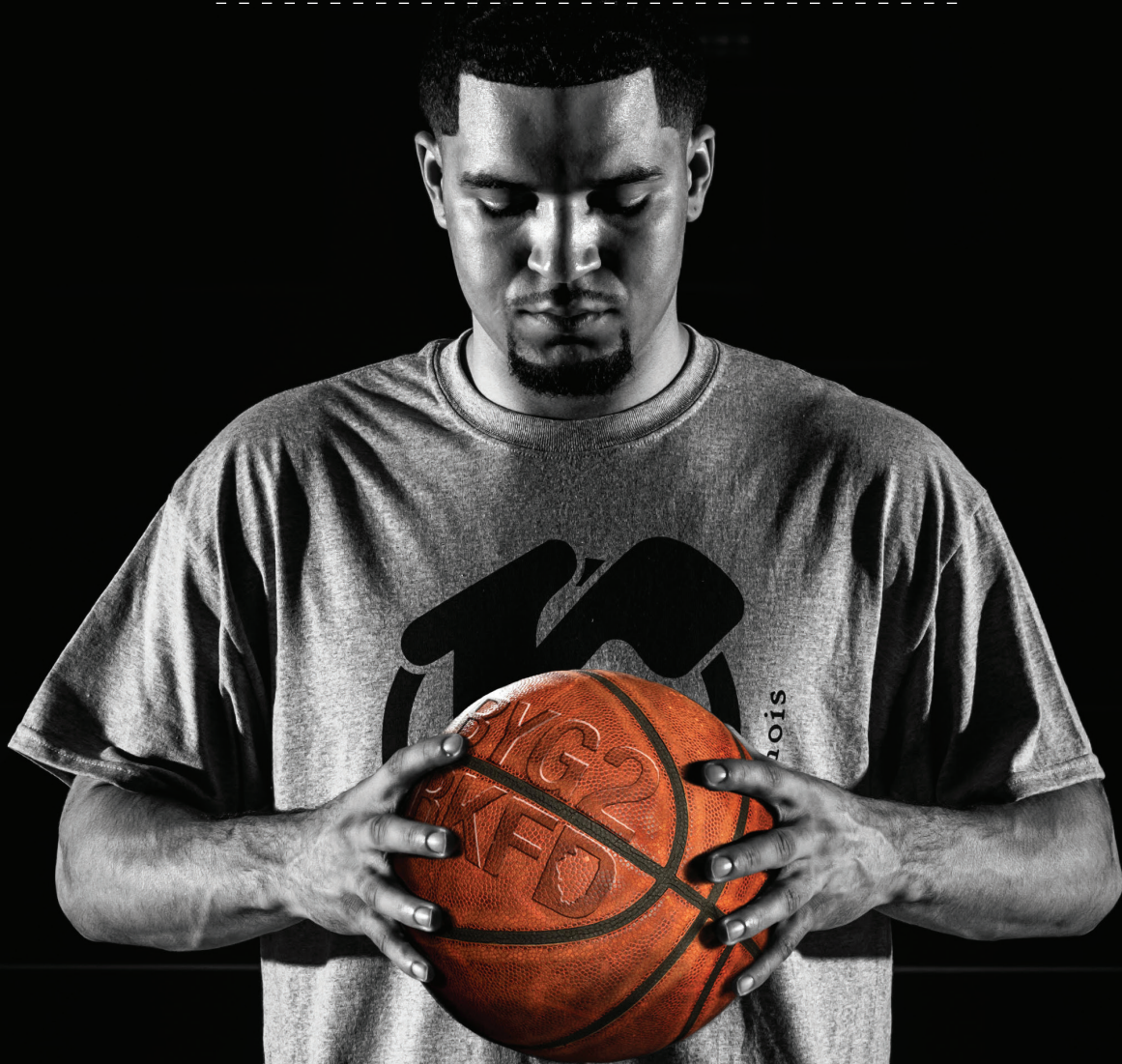
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FRED VANVLEET | ROCKFORD AUBURN KNIGHTS | WICHITA ST. SHOCKERS | TORONTO RAPTORS



Growing up, **Fred VanVleet** of the Toronto Raptors raised his game on the hardwood courts in **Rockford, Illinois** – one 5:45 a.m. workout at a time. Dedication, determination and desire have become VanVleet's hallmarks and those same qualities are synonymous with the **Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau** team that will help to raise your game in Rockford. Learn more at gorockford.com/sports.

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