

SUMMER 2024

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Pictured, Aerial view of Wicks Family Field at Joe Davis Stadium in Huntsville, Alabama. Photo Courtesy of Wicks Family Field

FEATURE STORY

SPORTS CITY



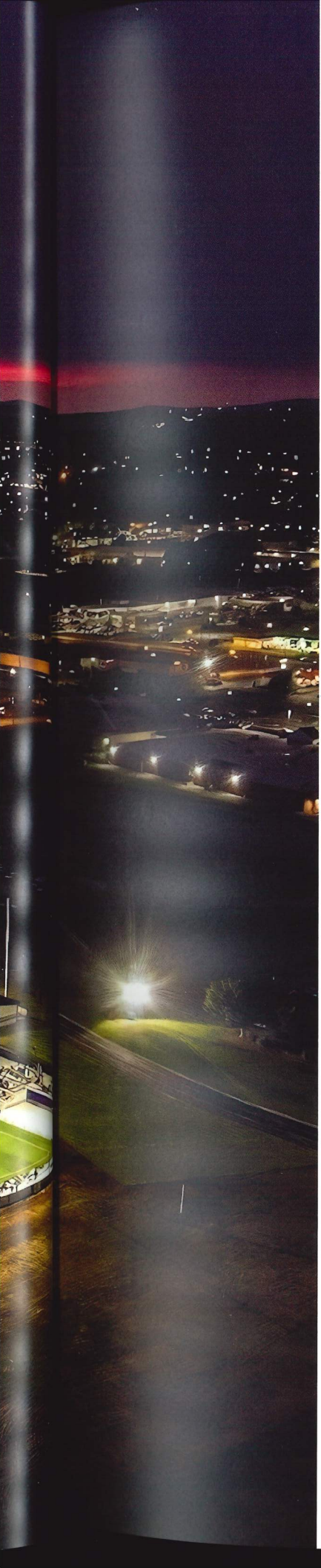
UNCOVERING THE
EMERGING & THRIVING
ECONOMY OF **SPORTS**
IN THE ROCKET CITY

BY ERIN COGGINS

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- JOEL LAMP, HUNTSVILLE/MADISON COUNTY CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU



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Huntsville's moniker, the Rocket City, is well-supported by the city's history in the making of the nation's space program. It is seen in the names of schools, streets, and the Saturn V rocket that stands tall on the campus of the U.S. Space & Rocket Center. But for a city, just named the number seven place to live in the country by U.S. News & World Report, there just may be room for another catchy title. How does "Sports City" sound?

Huntsville's foray into the sports world started years ago with the Huntsville Stars minor league baseball team. Then, there was the arena football team, the Tennessee Valley Vipers. And don't forget the Huntsville Channel Cats hockey team. Now, locals can enjoy an ice hockey game at the Von Braun Center, cheering on the Havoc, watch the Trash Pandas hit it out of Toyota Field or witness the Huntsville City FC defend their goal.

The Huntsville/Madison County Convention and Visitors Bureau's Convention Sales Manager, Joel Lamp, says when it comes to sports and the Rocket City it's all about the fit. "We are looking to find the right events that fit Huntsville to

provide an economic impact, improve the quality of life in the Rocket City and have broadcast opportunities for us to share the story of how great Huntsville is," states Lamp. "Our mission is to find those events and build multi-year partnerships that enable the city and the event to grow in the future." Besides the professional sports teams, the Convention and Visitors Bureau secured a partnership with Conference USA, hosting both the men's and women's 2024 conference basketball championships at the VBC in March. The conference drove \$3.1 million in economic impact, with more than 3,500 hotel room nights throughout the week.

"Once we got the Conference USA tournament last April, we got all the stakeholders and city leaders together on what we wanted to present and how we were going to present it to the visitors," says Lamp. "We created fan blocks at the hotels near the VBC to create the buzz of everyone in Downtown within walking distance of the arena. As part of that, we created a discount pass at local restaurants

and bars to help guide them around Downtown, along with a concert series at Mars Music Hall each night showcasing some of our top local talent."

It has been a kind of "if you build it, they will come" outcome for Huntsville when it comes to bringing in sporting events. This year's calendar included the second consecutive Sunbelt Beach Volleyball Championship held at John Hunt Park, the 23rd hosting of the Alabama High School Soccer Championships and the Rocket City will welcome the USA Table Tennis Nationals on July 3-7.

"We've only just begun to tap into what Huntsville can do from an event standpoint," Lamp says. "I think you will continue to see us bring in more regional and national events as the word continues to spread about how great our city is."

In the meantime, the Huntsville Havoc's impact on the city's economy and its fandom continues to excel. With 28-30 home games each season and a

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Pictured, Huntsville FC team members huddle mid-game; Photo by MLS Next Pro, Huntsville FC

growing attendance, Downtown businesses like restaurants and bars benefit from the extra foot traffic.

"A lot of our 3,700 season-ticket holders come from outside the city, so they're likely spending money on dining and entertainment while they are here," President of the Havoc Organization Justin Strickland says. "We're grateful for the support and hopeful that we're helping to boost the local economy and bring the community together."

Fan engagement is vital to continuing the success of the Havoc. In 2015, the organization shifted their focus from traditional marketing methods like TV, radio, and billboards to digital marketing. By reallocating the budget to social advertising on platforms like Meta and Google, the organization saw a steady increase in attendance each year. Recently, they expanded marketing efforts to include TikTok ads and experimented with Hulu and connected TV marketing.

"We are always looking for new ways to reach potential fans in a growing city like Huntsville. Going forward, we plan to increase our presence on digital platforms such as YouTube and connected apps like Spotify and Pandora. These new strategies and platforms will help us continue to enhance fan engagement and grow our community of supporters," Strickland says.

"Platforms aside, the heart of our marketing strategy is selling family fun and entertainment. We encourage fans to come for the show and they end up falling in love with hockey."

Although ice hockey has had time to flourish in Huntsville, professional soccer is new to the city. The Huntsville City FC, a professional development league in the third tier of the United States soccer pyramid, had its inaugural season in 2023 where they welcomed tens of thousands of guests to home matches and other events.

The team plays all games at the newly

renovated Wicks Field at Joe Davis Stadium which has already become an anchor for new development such as Stadium Commons and new adjacent hotels.

"We like to say that, while we play soccer at the stadium, Wicks Family Field is truly a community gathering place. From small gatherings to large events, we've worked hard to create a great guest experience for everyone who visits," Managing Director of Business Operations, Chad Emerson states. "Whether it's a seat right next to the pitch or a relaxing time with friends and family in the expanded north fan plaza, every seat in the house provides a great view."

Joe Davis Stadium is not just home to the Huntsville City FC. The 6,600-seat venue hosts Huntsville City Schools football games, lacrosse, rugby, ultimate frisbee events, concerts and more. The team is committed to helping spread the wealth by partnering with other organizations as well.

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Pictured, Huntsville Havoc hockey players celebrate; Photo Courtesy of Huntsville Havoc

"Two good examples include our work with the University of Alabama Huntsville's Athletics Department for our matchday parking program plus having our local soccer clubs for our concessions," Emerson shares. "All these partners are able to use these opportunities for fundraising purposes."

When the Huntsville Stars left in 2014, the future of professional baseball was left in limbo until the stars aligned for the arrival of the Rocket City Trash Pandas in 2020. A Double-A affiliate of the Los Angeles Dodgers, the team averages about 5,000 fans per game at Toyota Field. This season the team plays 69 games at home, and these games serve as a boost to the local economy.

"Local merchants have certainly noticed an increase in sales when we have a game or event," says Trash Pandas Executive Vice President Lindsey Knupp, who adds that when the Trash Pandas host at Toyota Field, our area hotels and restaurants also experience the economic benefits.

When the Trash Pandas play out of town or during the off-season, the organization

utilizes the Toyota Field facilities to host a variety of events, including concerts, summer movie series and the annual Rocket City Christmas Light Show which welcomed over 65,000 families to the ballpark in 2023.

"All events are successful for different reasons. Some are more family oriented like our Free-On-Field movie nights and others are more about networking and enjoying time with friends, like our Beer and Wine Festivals and business mixers. Others are just all-around fun community events," says Knupp.

Toyota Field has even turned its diamond into a football field to host a college football game between the University of North Alabama and Jacksonville State University. The game drew 10,000 fans, a mention on ESPN's "Gameday", and an estimated one-million-dollar economic impact.

"We think the event was a big success, as it produced a strong economic impact for Madison County," Lamp says. "It engaged their fans to come to the Huntsville/Madison County area, but also engaged

Huntsville stands out as southern city with a significant interest in hockey, and we are proud to contribute to this growing community."

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our community in coming out to the event."

Like the Havoc and the Huntsville City FC, the Trash Pandas organization contributes to the community in ways other than an economic impact. All three organizations hold youth camps, jersey auctions to benefit local non-profits, and partnerships with local schools. Developing a love for their sport through the community is something the Havoc makes a priority.

"We host a yearly hockey camp by our coaching staff, providing young players with the opportunity to learn and improve their skills. Additionally, we support local junior and adult leagues whenever possible and maintain a strong relationship with the Huntsville Ice Sports Center," Strickland says.

"Huntsville stands out as a southern city with a significant interest in hockey, and we are proud to contribute to this growing community," Lamp says all three professional teams foster a sense of community that goes beyond the economic impact they bring to the area.

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"These teams are 'our' teams—they wear Huntsville, or Rocket City, across their chests and represent our community on a bigger stage," says Lamp. "All three of our teams have greatly contributed to the quality of life in the area. What we've seen through them is the appeal of sports that brings our community together. The Havoc's run to the finals this year, coupled with their sellout streak, flowed over to local restaurants and bars [where fans could] watch the championship series. HCFC and the Trash Pandas have increased the number of events that they host at their stadiums, creating a new revenue stream for each team to connect with the community during their offseason."

Huntsville's investment in the sports enterprise can be credited to the city's leadership. Lamp says they have done a great job in not only investing in facilities, but making them top-notch for use for Huntsville teams and residents, as well as out-of-town teams. "We've built a strong reputation on

our commitment to providing a great experience for everyone coming to Huntsville," shares Lamp. "And we're seeing a number of hotels being built around the area that will help us as we host more events and bigger events."

The success of hosting events like the Auburn University basketball team in a game against UNC-Asheville at the VBC in December has led to more ideas to expand the city's ability to host events. The city is already planning new additions to the Iceplex that will include a curling-only sheet that will allow the ability to host national and international events. According to Lamp, the next big addition is a parks and recreation facility coming to John Hunt Park that will include 25 pickleball courts, giving the city the opportunity to host a PPA Tour event. It's all about making the city known as a great location for sports.

"We can show off our city in an entirely different way on a national or regional stage," Lamp says. "We would be one of the last cities on Earth that you would think has a beach volleyball

community, but we are the inland beach volleyball capital of the U.S., as we have two conference championships and two national championships held each year at the beach courts at John Hunt Park."

The biggest hurdle the city continues to face in recruiting sporting events to the area is the initial conversation. Lamp says once they get people into Huntsville, they come away more than impressed and want to bring their event here.

"We have a central location in the Southeast that is ideal for most event-owners and that is one of the biggest selling points that we have to offer," Lamp says. "After it is said and done, one of my favorite parts of the job is to see the joy on the faces of so many at the end of an event. Seeing smiles makes all the work put into it worthwhile." 📍

LEARN MORE ABOUT
SPORTS IN THE ROCKET CITY



Pictured, Players participate in a beach volleyball match at John Hunt Park Sand Volleyball Complex; Photo courtesy of the City of Huntsville