

Greensboro to host national festival for masters athletes in 2016

By Jeff Mills/News & Record jeff.mills@news-record.com Apr 10, 2015



Irwin Belk Track at Aggie Stadium at N.C. A&T is scheduled to host track and field competition at the USA Masters Games in 2016.

GREENSBORO — The next big event in the city’s sports tourism pantheon promises to be just that.

Big.

The Triad will host a new, sprawling, multi-sport, Olympic-style festival the last 10 days of July 2016 with the goal of drawing 10,000 athletes age 25 and older, the event’s chief executive officer said.

The first USA Masters Games will feature competitions by adult athletes in more than 20 sports, said Hill Carrow, the founder of Sports & Properties Inc. and the architect of Greensboro’s successful bids for such events as the 2011 and 2015 U.S. Figure Skating Championships and the USA Gymnastics American Cup.

Carrow, who drew the 1987 U.S. Olympic Festival to North Carolina and created the long-running multisport State Games, now wants to put on the same type of event for older athletes.

“There are people out there who will think, ‘Masters? Isn’t that just re-creating the Senior Games?’” Carrow said. “Well, no, it isn’t. Not at all. Those are only for the 50 and older crowd. The bulk of all masters athletes, 70 percent, are in that 25 to 49 age range. That’s the target demographic.”

It’s an underserved demographic, Carrow said. He has worked with the governing bodies of several sports to bring their athletes to the first USA Masters Games.

Among the sports expected to hold concurrent national competitions here: baseball, basketball, bowling, canoe-kayak, cycling, diving, figure skating, golf, rowing, soccer, softball, swimming, table tennis, taekwondo, tennis, track and field, triathlon, volleyball, water polo, weightlifting and wrestling.

The USA Masters Games will cost “between \$3 million and \$4 million” to stage, Carrow said, a budget similar to January’s nine-day U.S. Figure Skating Championships at the Greensboro Coliseum.

Plans call for funding to come from corporate sponsorships, the various sports’ governing bodies, athlete entry fees and trades for services.

“There’s no taxpayer funding at this point,” Carrow said, “though that would not be an unreasonable investment given this event is potentially the largest sports tourism event in state history, and one that comes with partnerships with 20-plus national sports governing bodies for even more tourism business down the road.”

The scope of the games is gigantic, although it figures to be heavier on participants than spectators.

“It’s definitely a daunting thing, looking at this number of events in so many venues,” said Kim Strable, the president of the Greensboro Sports Commission. “It’s a challenge. But Greensboro has stepped up to those kinds of challenges in the past.

“People love what they’re seeing in Greensboro with sports tourism efforts,” Strable said. “With this one, they see that we can build or enhance relationships with a lot of sports national governing bodies, and that can lead to more events. Folks here get it. That’s pretty cool.”

But will the masters athletes get it? Will the adults who these new games are aimed at buy in?

Greensboro’s Bill Bruffey, who knows about traveling to compete, said he thinks so.

Bruffey, a 49-year-old senior oncology specialist for Millennium Pharmaceuticals, is a former golf pro turned triathlete who competed in his first Ironman World Championship in Hawaii last fall.

“I absolutely think it will appeal to people,” he said. “I love watching the Olympics and the competition. You’re talking about masters athletes, and there are some unbelievable athletes who are in their 30s and 40s and 50s. My experience at Kona last year, I was around the best athletes in the world. To bring people like that from a bunch of different sports to Greensboro, yeah, it’s very exciting.”

The venues for the 10-day event are centered around the Greensboro Coliseum Complex, but also include the Greensboro Sportsplex, Bryan Park, Oak Hollow Lake, Spencer Love Tennis Center, Carolyn Allen Park and more.

Carrow’s group is pursuing arrangements to use municipal and college facilities at little or no cost.

“We’ve got to figure out what that relationship is going to be exactly. I don’t know for sure yet,” said Wade Walcutt, the interim director of the Greensboro Parks and Recreation Department. “But one thing I do know for sure is we want to be a part of it. We’ve seen what a good economic driver something like the figure skating championships can be, and this could be significantly bigger than that.”

The city can accommodate the scope of the games, Walcutt said.

“Because of our facilities, we’re used to bringing in large groups of athletes and large crowds,” he said. “What each site will be used for is not unprecedented, and the staff at each site will be able to handle it. The only thing that’s different is it might be happening all at once, so you might have a national softball tournament at Carolyn Allen Park the same day as a big basketball or volleyball tournament at the Sportsplex and soccer at Bryan Park.”

Carrow’s plan calls for the USA Masters Games to be held every two years — even-numbered years, the same as the Olympic Games. The first USA Masters Games will be held two weeks before the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics.

“There’s a lot of good reasons to do this,” Carrow said. “First of all, adult sports is one of the areas in sports that’s growing. People are concerned about their health and their waistline as they get older ... and they’re exercising more.”

And if they come here to exercise, they’ll spend money.

The nine-day U.S. Figure Skating Championships in January used seven hotels, but the USA Masters Games could fill as many as 20 hotels, said Henri Fourrier, the president and chief executive officer of the Greensboro Convention & Visitors Bureau.

“Our goal,” Carrow said, “is to try to bring in 10,000 athletes, mostly from around the country but it will be open to international athletes as well. All the sports haven’t been finalized yet, in part because we’re trying to determine which sports have the biggest potential of helping us reach that goal.”

“In addition to being a great event for the athletes, we really want it to be something that has some legs to it, something we can continue long into the future, something that can be a good sports tourism event with a lot of nice economic impact.”

Like the Olympics, opening and closing ceremonies are planned for the USA Masters Games. So, too, is an “athletes village” at the coliseum, although it will not house the athletes but rather serve as the social center of the games, with entertainment, vendors, food and drink.

“It’s supposed to be a fun, festive, social event, too,” Carrow said, adding, “There’s a real opportunity here.”

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USA MASTERS GAMES

What: More than 20 sports, open to adult or masters athletes ages 25 and older.

When: July 22-31.

Where: Greensboro, High Point.

Number of athletes: Goal of 10,000, according to Sports & Properties CEO Hill Carrow.

On Twitter: @USAMastersGames

MASTERS PARTICIPATION

The numbers of masters athletes registered with national governing bodies, according to Sports & Properties Inc.:

Athletics: 7,000

Baseball: 50,000

Bowling: 1,600,000

Canoe-kayak: 50,000

Cycling: 6,140,118

Diving: 285

Figure skating: 25,000

Golf: 17,000

Rowing: 16,871

Soccer: 250,000

Softball: 1,500,000

Swimming: 60,000

Table tennis: 7,200

Tennis: 750,000

Triathlon: 100,000

Volleyball: 59,923

Water polo: 2,837

Weightlifting: 12,500

Wrestling: 1,749

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