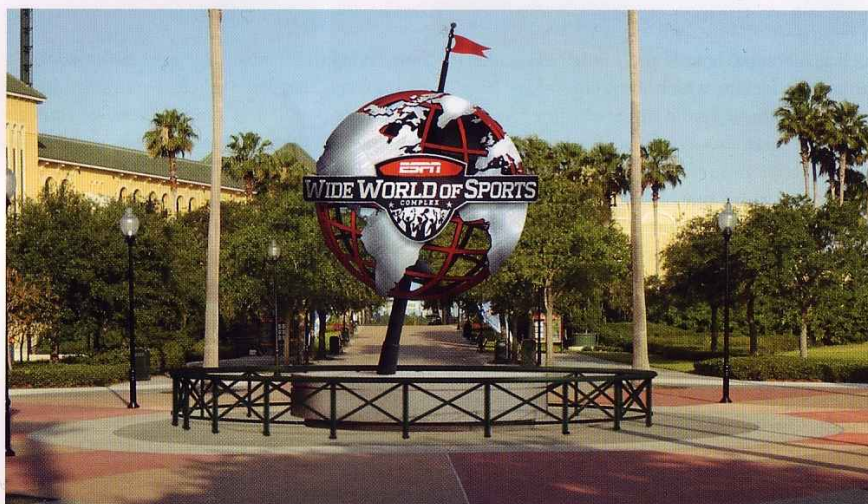




Making tourism child's play

Disney isn't renowned for its investments in athletics, but at the heart of the business model behind its colossal Disney World vacation complex lies a sports facility with 250,000 athletes competing there annually. This is no Mickey Mouse investment says Christian Sylt

Where dreams come true
Wide World of Sports was
initially set up to entice
a new group of people to
Disney World



lessly-clean sweeping archways resemble those found in Mediterranean towns and give visitors a regal feeling of arrival. On close inspection the wrought-iron railings form the shapes of baseball bats and inside the ballpark clubhouse even the light fixtures resemble ballplayers.

The attention to detail gives the game away as the ESPN sports TV network is majority owned by Disney and the Wide World of Sports was designed by the same wizards who build its blockbuster theme park rides. However, there are no cute and cuddly characters in sight and an even bigger surprise comes when the games begin.

THE NEXT GENERATION

The vast majority of the events staged at the Wide World of Sports are youth and amateur oriented. This is the backbone of its business model and it makes it truly unique. Crucial to this strategy has been the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the largest amateur sports organisation in the US.

The AAU announced its support of the Wide World of Sports several years before the complex opened in March 1997 and even relocated its headquarters to Disney World. It committed to staging more than 30 national events annually at the venue and hosts 12 national basketball events alone there each year, as well as others in baseball, gymnastics, inline hockey, track & field and wrestling.

The AAU's support has acted as a magnet for collegiate events and three top college leagues have also held conference championships at the Wide World of Sports. This collection is crowned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which hosts its Leadership Conference there every year.

The top managers and scouts from the National Basketball Association (NBA) even come to the AAU national championships to draft the best college talent before each season begins. As Alex Vergara, Disney's sports marketing and technology director says, "we have 800

coaches that come here. A lot of these athletes get scholarships on the spot and we provide the coaches an opportunity to see them all in one place."

Getting these extra guests to Disney World was one of the key reasons for the creation of the Wide World of Sports. "It was a great opportunity for Disney to expand its brand into a space of sports where it wasn't in," says Vergara, adding that "the brand mantra was to get a new population of guests who wouldn't normally consider coming to Walt Disney World". The strategy has paid off.

Vergara says that "a good two-thirds to three quarters of our athletes when they are here will be going to the parks" and this in itself benefits the Wide World of Sports' offering. "Once the games are over, as we like to say, from the ballparks to the theme parks, you can celebrate your athletic achievement, your championship, by going to the parks. It is a very integrated approach to what we are doing," says Vergara and it goes deeper than that.

"By staying at our property and leveraging all that Disney has such as the dining programme, the transportation and the hotel rooms, it becomes a seamless experience for the athletes," adds Vergara. "By doing that they can focus more on the competition, on having a good time while they are here and making sure that it becomes an experience they will remember forever." Disney even creates bespoke packages for competitors. So, for example, they can get park tickets valid after 2pm, which is useful if they have been training in the morning.

The next step is making the experience even more authentic. Enter ESPN.

STARS OF THE SCREEN

In February this year, ESPN completed a re-branding of the complex, which was previously known as Disney's Wide World of Sports. It was much more than a name change. The rebranding is a multi-million-dollar project that took nearly two years and brings with it touches

There's nothing quite like the ESPN Wide World of Sports. Its 220 acres in Orlando, Florida has facilities for hosting around 40 types of sports. There's a 7,500-seat retro-style baseball park, a 5,500-seat indoor field house, four baseball diamonds, four multi-sports fields, a baseball quadraplex, a track and field complex, a six-field softball complex, 10 tennis courts and five further sports fields. Surprisingly, these facilities were built to drive guests to nearby Disney World – the world's most-visited theme park complex. If ever there was an example of the power of sports tourism, this is it.

On striding through the giant entrance gates it becomes rapidly apparent that this is no ordinary leisure centre. Its tall towers and spot-

such as 40 digital boards and Jumbotron screens around the facility, which show clips of action at the complex, narrated by personalities from ESPN's programmes. Visitors will also be able to view action from the complex on a dedicated TV channel in any one of Disney's 27,000 hotel rooms at the nearby resort.

"We want the athletes who come here to feel like they have made it to the big time," says Vergara. "There will be a lot of ways that the ESPN brand is going to come to life here with highlight packages and video monitors. You will be able to see your highlights on the video boards, which gives them a form of their own ESPN experience."

Future developments will include robotic cameras on 50 per cent of the fields, which will film highlights packages that are then given an ESPN look before being broadcast.

Vergara says that there is even an "ESPN innovation lab – a group of ESPN folks housed

here trying to discover the next new broadcast technology. They have this 220 acre stage and the athlete population and the event schedules to work with their engineering people and their broadcast technical people. ESPN is always thinking about what is next so this innovation lab will be like a petri dish."

It should bring even more guests through the gates at the Wide World of Sports to add to its already prestigious patronage.

Some of the young athletes who have competed there have already gone on to reach the top of world sport including former Wimbledon tennis champion Lleyton Hewitt and China's NBA star Yao Ming, who played one of his first US events at the Wide World of Sports with the AAU. His fellow players Richard Jefferson, Amare Stoudamire and Darius Miles all competed in AAU basketball tournaments there too. Antonio Gates, now an all-pro tight end with the NFL's San Diego Chargers, played for

the Michigan Mustangs at the Wide World of Sports and American soccer star Freddie Adu played in the venue's annual soccer showcase when he was just 12 years old. But aspiring to these lofty heights is only half of the hook to luring kids to the complex.

PROFESSIONAL BACKING

The Wide World of Sports also hosts training events for teams in the primary American professional sports leagues. The Orlando Magic NBA team trains there, as does the Atlanta Braves Major League Baseball team.

A list of the other professionals regularly visiting the facility reads like a roll-call of international sports. Team USA trained at the Wide World of Sports when it was preparing for the Olympics' basketball events. The British Olympic Association (BOA) has even made the trans-Atlantic journey for warm weather training at the Wide World of Sports.

This professional endorsement allows young runners to compete on the track used for training by Marion Jones and aspiring tennis players to use the same courts that Pete Sampras and Serena Williams have played on. The pros can often be found strolling through the sparkling silver and black 3,000 square feet weights room. They give great credibility to the quality of the facilities on offer.

They also drive guests through the turnstiles and, since opening, the Wide World of Sports has welcomed nearly two million participants with over 180 events in over 50 sports hosted annually. They come from all over.

For example, the youth football tournament held there is the biggest in the US and a third of the 134 teams competing in it come from over 20 countries. Last year, the under-16 boys division was won by a team from Manchester, UK, and the UK's Chelsea football club has a partnership with the venue to feed winning players into its youth team. This is just the beginning.

"This is phase one of a longer term partnership with ESPN. The first phase is the rebranding," says Vergara, adding that "one new market we are going to go into is the convention space with an ESPN-themed party. So if you're at a convention here or on a business meeting and you want to create some form of function, party or dinner with an ESPN theme we will work closely with our partners to do that".

Kids will, of course, be the focus though and future developments also include "an HD screen for spring training so that will allow us to provide a show you might normally see at a major league baseball match," adds Vergara. He sums up the purpose of the Wide World of Sports neatly: "we like to say that kids walk in loving sports and we want them to walk out knowing that sports loves them back." In the hands of ESPN and Disney, achieving this should be child's play.

Role model
NBA star, Yao Ming, played his first US event at the Wide World of Sports