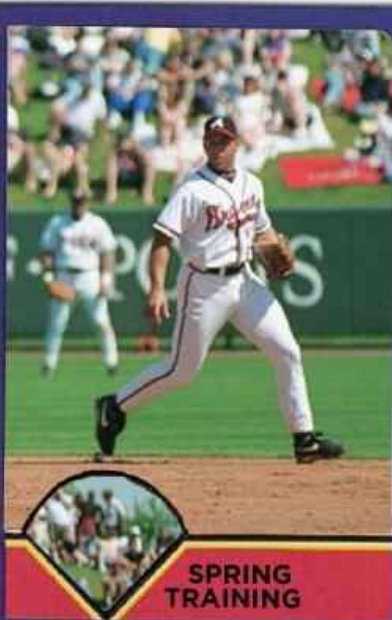


# IT'S A SPORTS WORLD AFTER ALL



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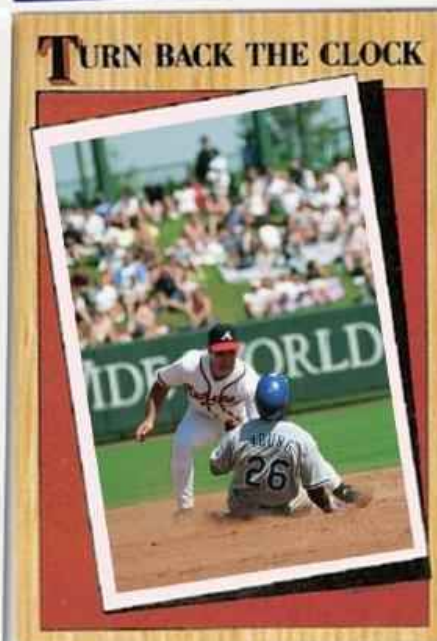
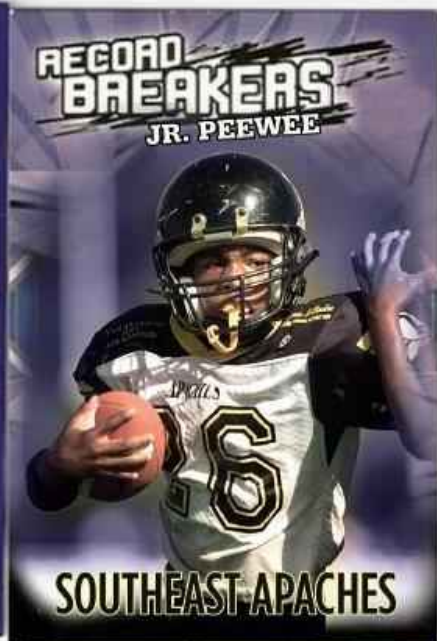


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When one  
thinks of  
Disney,  
images  
of black  
mouse ears,  
animated  
films and  
amusement  
parks come  
to mind.

Think  
again.

BY CHRISTIAN SYLT

If there's one thing Disney is not commonly known for, it's investing in athletics. So it's surprising to discover a 220-acre sports facility at the heart of the business model behind Disney's colossal vacation complex in Orlando. Celebrating its 10th anniversary, with 150,000 athletes competing annually, the Wide World of Sports Complex is no Mickey Mouse investment.

Striding through the gates at the entrance to the Wide World of Sports in Orlando, it becomes rapidly apparent that this is no ordinary leisure center. Its tall towers and spotlessly clean sweeping archways resemble those found in Mediterranean towns and give visitors a regal feeling of arrival. On close inspection, the wrought-iron railings are found to form the shapes of baseball bats. And inside the ballpark clubhouse, even the light fixtures resemble ballplayers. But there isn't a single cute and cuddly character in sight.

Instead of focusing on blue ribbon events, Wide World of Sports hosts mostly youth- and amateur-oriented activities; this focus is the backbone of its business model and what makes it truly unique. "There is not a larger destination venue complex that has the multitude of youth sporting events anywhere in the world," says Mike Millay, Disney's director of sports events.

The range of sports available is staggering. The venue's flagships are a 7,500-seat retro-style baseball park and the Milk House—a 5,500-seat indoor fieldhouse with four full-size collegiate basketball courts on the ground level and another two on an upper level. Complementing these are the 20-acre Hess Fields, which include four baseball diamonds and four multisport fields. Finally, there is a baseball quadraplex, track and field complex, six-field softball complex and 10-court tennis facility.

With such sumptuous grounds, it's not surprising that construction costs were a cool \$120 million, making it Disney's single biggest sports investment after its ownership of the sports TV network ESPN. And the effort has paid off.

"It was a great opportunity for Disney to expand its brand into a space of sports it wasn't in," says Alex Vergara, Disney Sports marketing manager. "The brand mantra was to get a new population of guests who wouldn't normally consider coming to Walt Disney World."

Adds Millay, "We built facilities, put the right team in place, found the right partners, found the right events and put them on, knowing that if you bring them into town, they'll spend." And the venue lives up to this goal. "Eighty-five percent of our guests are what we call incremental guests to Walt Disney World—they would not be coming for that particular





**THE FIELDS OF DREAMS** The Wide World of Sports Complex celebrated its 10th anniversary in March.

vacation unless they were competing in sporting events," Vergara says.

As a global media giant, Disney would have had a sporting chance promoting the venue on its own; however, it soon secured a crucial partner in the form of the Amateur Athletic Union, the largest amateur sports organization in the U.S.

The AAU announced its support of the Wide World of Sports several years before the complex opened and even relocated its headquarters to Disney World. It committed to holding 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 and 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. But it's the venue's connection to professional sports that brings its biggest allure.

The top managers and scouts from the NBA come to the AAU national championships to draft the best college talent before each season begins. Similarly, since 1997, the complex has hosted the Cheer & Dance National Championships and the Pop Warner Super Bowl, a youth version of the NFL's signature event. It's not only a honey pot for talent-spotters, but it also attracts famous NFL players.

The events are a breeding ground for the future of athletics. Stars who have competed at the Wide World of Sports include Wimbledon tennis champion Lleyton Hewitt and NBA star Yao Ming. Fellow ballplayers Richard Jefferson, Amare Stoudemire and

Darius Miles competed in AAU basketball tournaments as well. MLS star Freddy 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 lure kids to the complex.



**Since opening, the venue has hosted nearly 2,000 events, bringing in a total of 1.2 million participants.**

**T**he Wide World of Sports is the only sports facility in the U.S. to host training events for teams in the three primary American professional sports leagues. The Orlando Magic trains there, as do the Atlanta Braves. During the summer, it is home to the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

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 Olympic basketball events, and Tiger Woods has hosted instructional sessions.

The star quality brings spectators through the turnstiles. The Bucs' training camp alone attracted 23,000 spectators in 2005, and a total of 112,000 have visited in the four years since the team began training there in 2002. Even so, the participant numbers are also staggering.

Since opening, the venue has hosted nearly 2,000 events, bringing in a total of 1.2 million participants. And, as Vergara proudly points out, this is more than "if you add up all the athletes that have competed in both the winter and summer Olympic games since they started, the NFL, MLB, and the NBA."

The attraction is simple, as Reggie Williams, vice president of Disney Sports Attractions, points out: "We are the only sports complex that I know of that allows kids to play on the very same fields as world-class athletes." There is no compromise on quality.

Speaking of the fields, the complex is covered with 105 acres of Tifway 419 Bermuda sports turf, which isn't any old grass. With daily downpours common in Orlando, the turf has a 1% slope to enhance drainage systems, which can remove five to seven inches of rainfall per hour. It even has two data-tracking weather stations to provide up-to-the-minute information about meteorological activity that could affect play.

The staff glides around on two-wheeled Segway transporters, and the entire complex is in the process of becoming Wi-Fi enabled. As





Vergara explains, the ultimate goal is to drive even more revenue to Disney World. "Long term, we'd love to have a scoreboard network out there that tells the guests where to go and what time the next game is so they can go to the park," he says.

In sticking to this goal, the Wide World of Sports encourages its athletes to stay in the on-site hotels. "You're closer to the venue, and you're going to be able to get to the parks faster," Vergara says. Despite this advice, more than half of its visitors still stay in non-Disney hotels. And although this is a number that Disney is trying to decrease, it adds to the economic impact that the Wide World of Sports has on the local area.

The Wide World of Sports was initially subsidized by Disney on the basis that it would diversify the revenue stream of the entire leisure complex. A decade later, this has come to fruition, with revenue in the region of \$200 million.

The facility's revenue streams come from event registration, gate sales, merchandise, food and beverage sales, and event and facility sponsorship. Disney's ownership of ESPN is a big boon for sponsors, since it televises seven of the top events at the Wide World of Sports, which gives immense coverage to naming rights partners such as Hess Petroleum and Funai. In January, stationery company Jostens was added to the list when it became the sponsor of a new 70,000-square-foot indoor development. Opening in 2008, it will house six collegiate basketball courts, 12 regulation volleyball courts and two roller hockey rinks.

Millay says that the five-year goal is to continue to grow the brand. "There are a lot of places in the United States that don't even know we exist," he says. Expanding international awareness has also been defined as a growth area. The complex has attracted athletes from around 75 countries, but its participation base is still around 95% domestic.

Vergara reveals that the likely expansion strategy will be partnering with travel agencies specializing in sports tourism. This should yield significant return on investment since, he adds, "International visitors will stay here a bit longer, so that's going to drive the business."

Truly, a wide world of sports exists at this complex, providing diversified revenue streams and giving new meaning to the champions' refrain: "I'm Going to Disney World." ❧

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Jeffrey Life, MD, age 67, after CeneGenics  
As featured in *GQ* magazine  
This photo is not digitally enhanced



Dr. Life, age 57, before CeneGenics

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