



NO MICKEY MOUSE OPERATION

Could the ESPN Wide World of Sports in Orlando teach stakeholders in the 2012 London Olympics how to fully maximise the venues built for last summer's Games? **Christian Sylt** reports.

LONDON'S OLYMPIC PARK is a bit of a ghost town than a theme park at the moment.

Some of the venues, such as the basketball and water polo arenas, are in the process of being dismantled and many of those that remain, including the aquatics centre, are under renovation.

The biggest hurdle with the 2012 legacy process has been in the way the £430 million, 60,000-capacity centre-piece stadium, where athletes like Mo Farah and Usain Bolt captivated the world with their performances last summer, will be operated long-term. Its future was finally agreed last month when English Premier League football club West Ham United agreed a 99-year tenancy deal with the London Legacy Development Corporation having been chosen as the preferred bidder in 2011. The original deal collapsed due to a legal dispute.

The stadium, however, is still not expected to re-open before 2016 at the earliest - and even then, the most the public will be doing is

watching football matches. Allowing the athletes of tomorrow to train on the same hallowed turf that their heroes competed could have been a big legacy draw for London. However as good as that sounds, it is somewhat of a pipe dream because instead of opening up the venues for public use, most have been sold off to commercial operators to recoup some of the £8.9 billion cost of hosting the Olympics.

All of which has raised the question of whether there could be a better way to keep up momentum following the success of the Games. A novel solution may come from the most unlikely of locations: Disney World in Florida.

The ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex, located at Disney World, the most-attended theme park complex worldwide with 47.4 million visitors in 2011, is no ordinary sports venue. Its tall yellow towers and spotlessly-clean sweeping archways resemble those found in Mediterranean towns and give visitors a regal feeling of arrival.



An aerial view of the facilities - ESPN World Wide of Sports



FESTIVAL OF SPORT

UEFA, European football's governing body, is one sporting behemoth that will be utilising the Olympic Park post-London 2012 Games with its annual Champions Festival.

The free four-day football event will this year take place in the International Quarter, an entirely new commercial district in the shadow of the Olympic Park and less than 10 minutes away, from May 23-26, encompassing the Champions League Final on May 25.

"The International Quarter will become a vibrant new commercial hub for London. We are looking to attract early investment in the form of exhibitions and events this year and are delighted to work with organisations such

as UEFA to ensure benefits from these events spread beyond their boundaries to communities in the surrounding areas," says Mark Dickinson, managing director of development at Lend Lease, a development partner of the commercial district.

"We are delighted that the UEFA Champions Festival is returning to London and especially that it will take place on the International Quarter close to Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, the scene of our biggest sporting moment," says Boris Johnson, mayor of London.

"It will provide a fantastic week-long family event and will revive the spirit of community and celebration that made last year's Olympic Games so special."

The same attention to detail is found throughout the complex, which covers more than 270 acres. It has facilities for hosting 70 different sports, including an 11,500-seater baseball park; four multi-sports fields; a track-and-field complex; a six-field softball complex; 10 tennis courts; and two indoor arenas with the flagship big enough to accommodate 12 volleyball courts.

The complex swung open its doors in 1997 and was the brainchild of ESPN's majority owner, the Walt Disney Company, to drive guests to the destination. If ever there was an example of the power of sports to drive tourism then the Wide World of Sports is it, and Ken Potrock, senior vice-president of Disney Sports Enterprises and Downtown Disney at Walt Disney Parks & Resorts, told *SportBusiness International* that there is no reason why London's Olympic Park can't emulate the Wide World of Sports.

Although the remaining venues have different operators, crucially, they are all on one site and could easily be re-purposed for use by amateur

athletes. The unique selling point would be that it was previously home to Olympians.

"There are several key determinants of what makes us successful," says Potrock. "Those determinants would be similar strategically, not in terms of execution, to what potentially London could do with the facilities they built for the Olympics.

"The first is point of differentiation. What makes the ESPN Wide World of Sports complex different from facilities anywhere else in the world is the diversity of facilities that we have - from baseball, softball and soccer to race car driving, golf, tennis, rugby and lacrosse. That is really important because it allows our facility to be busy nearly all-year-round.

"To create a level of continuity for any facility, which is important to making it operationally efficient and viable, you need to have a diverse number of sports.

"The second determinant is that you look very hard to have a competitive advantage. Why

is your destination and facility different to any other facility? This is where I think there might be some parallels to the London Games in that our competitive advantage is we are located at the number-one vacation destination in the world, the Walt Disney World resort.

"People want to come here anyway. We talk about what we call the 'double dip', which is that our athletes compete at a great facility for their sport but they also get to experience Walt Disney World."

Disney isn't renowned for its investments in athletics, but the Wide World of Sports is at the heart of the business model behind its colossal vacation complex in Orlando. With more than 300,000 athletes competing there annually, it is no Mickey Mouse operation.

"Being able to play in the spike marks of professional athletes is a big deal for kids," says Potrock.

The custodians of London's Olympic legacy should take note.