



*The ESPN Wide World of Sports in Orlando, Florida is spread across 220 acres and comprises facilities for hosting 60 different sports*

# A magical partnership

Disney World does not immediately spring to mind when thinking of sports destinations. However the Disney-owned ESPN brand is hoping to change that perception, and has lent its name to one of the world's most unique venues to pull it off.

*By Christian Sylt and Caroline Reid*

On striding through the giant entrance gates of the ESPN Wide World of Sports in Orlando, Florida, it soon becomes apparent that this is no ordinary sports complex. Its tall yellow 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.

The same attention to detail is found throughout the complex, which is no mean feat given its sprawling size. Its 220 acres comprise facilities for hosting 60 types of sports. There's an 11,500-seat retro-style baseball park, four baseball diamonds, four multi-sports fields, a track and field complex, a six-field softball complex, 10 tennis courts and two indoor fieldhouses with the flagship venue big enough to accommodate 12 regulation-size volleyball courts.

David Schwarz, who designed the Rangers Ballpark in Arlington, was the architect of the buildings in the Wide World of Sports but it is the intricate touches to its fittings which give the game away about what makes it unique.

The complex was the brainchild of ESPN's majority owner, the Walt Disney Company, and it was designed by the same wizards who build its cutting-edge theme park rides. Perhaps surprisingly, its purpose was to drive guests to nearby Disney World – the world's most-visited theme park

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complex. If ever there was an example of the power of sports to drive tourism then the Wide World of Sports is it.

It hosts more than 300 events annually and, remarkably, its baseball park is the busiest stadium in the US. “More games are played here than anywhere else,” says Ken Potrock, senior vice president of Disney Sports Enterprises.

Since its doors swung open in March 1997 the Wide World of Sports has welcomed two million participants and, Potrock adds, “85 per cent of the people that come here for a sports competition would not have come to the resort otherwise. 15 years ago the company had the idea that destination travel for sports could be a complement to our normal leisure travel business here at Disney World. They figured that somebody coming for a softball game would be an incremental visit. That was the basis of what all this was about.”

There are no cute and cuddly characters to draw in guests to the Wide World of Sports. Instead it has a selling point which truly sets it apart from other venues. The backbone of its business model is that the vast majority of the events it stages are youth and amateur oriented. 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 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 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. It acts as a honeypot for talent.

In December every year the venue hosts Disney's Soccer Showcase, the biggest youth soccer tournament in the US. The

tournament features more than 500 teams from over 20 countries. It can act as a launchpad for athletes' careers since more than 800 college coaches attend the event to look for future stars. However, even this isn't the biggest prize on offer.

The tournament is sponsored by Chelsea Football Club, and Potrock explains, “we put together an all-star team which is comprised of the best players from the Soccer Showcase and they go to Stamford Bridge, all expenses paid, and practice for a week with Chelsea's first team.” He explains that Chelsea sponsors the event for two reasons: “Penetrating the US market and developing loyalty. They are scouting for talent or new fans that will buy Chelsea jerseys.”

Likewise, the top managers from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) come to the AAU national championships to draft the top college players before each season begins. Many National Basketball Association (NBA) superstars, including LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Dwight Howard, played in the tournament early in their careers and this sets a grand goal for competitors in the event today.

“The idea of being able to play in the spike or sneaker marks of professional athletes is a big deal,” says Potrock and the Wide World of Sports certainly has a prestigious patronage. The list of young athletes who competed there and went on to reach the top of their games reads like a roll call of sports stars.

They include former Wimbledon champion Lleyton Hewitt and Chinese 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, Amar'e Stoudemire and Darius Miles all competed in AAU basketball tournaments there too. Antonio Gates, now an All-Pro tight end with the San Diego Chargers, played for the Michigan Mustangs at the Wide World of Sports and American soccer star Freddie Adu played in the Soccer Showcase when he was just 12 years old. But aspiring to these lofty

heights is only the first of four hooks which lure kids to the complex.

The Wide World of Sports has hosted practice events for teams in the three primary American professional sports leagues and in February every year the Atlanta Braves Major League Baseball team holds its spring training there. “All the other teams come to play them, so the Yankees will be here, the Red Sox will be here and the New York Mets will be here. We will have 18 major league games and they are all near sell-outs,” says Potrock. He stresses that “less than 20 per cent of our events are on sale to the public,” but superstar athletes are nevertheless frequently found at the complex.

Speed and conditioning coach Tom Shaw is based at the Wide World of Sports, where he has trained top NFL players including Deion Sanders and the New York Jets' Antonio Holmes, who was MVP at last year's Super Bowl for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Team USA trained at the Wide World of Sports when it was preparing for the Olympic basketball events. Pete Sampras and Serena Williams have played on its tennis courts, Marion Jones has trained on its track and the British Olympic Association (BOA) has even made the transatlantic journey for warm-weather training.

The professional endorsement gives great credibility to the quality of the facilities at the Wide World of Sports and this is the third draw for kids. The majestic entranceway sets the scene and the theme of pampering the participants is continued throughout the complex.

The Wide World of Sports is covered with 105 acres of Tifway 419 Bermuda sports turf. This isn't any old grass. With daily downpours common in Orlando's clammy climate, the turf has a one per cent 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 which could affect play. ►



*The venue's baseball park is, astonishingly, the busiest stadium in the USA*

Inside is similarly state of the art. The Connor sports flooring in the HP fieldhouse is made from two types of imported environmentally protected hardwood incorporating a shock absorption system and the venue is cooled by two of the largest air conditioning units in Disney World. Just one thing was missing in Disney's bid to make athletes at the Wide World of Sports feel like superstars, and this is the fourth attraction for kids: enter ESPN.

In February this year ESPN completed a rebranding of the complex, which was previously simply known as Disney's Wide World of Sports. It was much more than a name change. The rebranding is a multi-million dollar project which took nearly two years to complete and brings with it touches such as 40 digital boards and Jumbotron screens around the facility which show clips of action there, narrated by personalities from ESPN's programmes.

"If you have come here, you have made it to the big time. Figuratively, and maybe literally, you have made it onto ESPN," says Potrock. It is no exaggeration. Visitors can view action

from the complex on a dedicated TV channel in any one of Disney's 27,000 hotel rooms at the nearby resort. This alone is believed to reach up to ten million people annually.

The feed is put together by a team of around 40 staff in the 2,500 square-foot onsite broadcast centre but they are aided by a wealth of high-tech touches. Littered around the complex are 42 robotic HD-quality cameras which can be remotely controlled from the broadcast centre. It eliminates the need for multiple camera operators at each event, which makes it very cost efficient to produce shows.

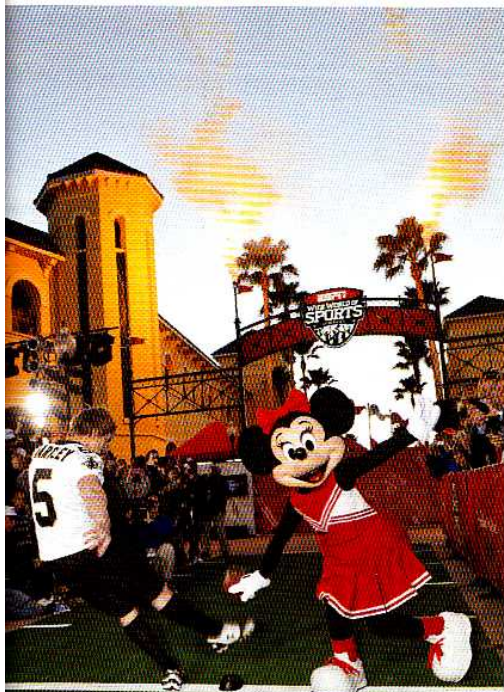
"The cost of production here is easily half of what it would cost if ESPN went somewhere else and brought in the staff. So ESPN wants to produce more and more here," says Potrock, adding: "We will produce broadcast packages of well over 100 events here this year. That is up from 40 last year." But the Wide World of Sports isn't just providing footage to ESPN, it is influencing the future of its production techniques.

"ESPN has moved an R&D facility here and they are developing the newest in

broadcast technologies," says Potrock. This Innovation Lab consists of around 12 staff who use the myriad of different events at the complex to hone their skills and test new technology before it is unleashed on an international television audience. "They are practising here so that when they go on air they are as close to flawless as they can be," explains Potrock.

With such a wide range of facilities at the Wide World of Sports ESPN does not have to travel far to hone its skills at different sports. A big focus of the lab is the production of 3D footage which can require very different camera locations and angles to make the most of the effect, depending on the sport being filmed.

ESPN's 3D channel launched simultaneously with the 2010 World Cup and the Wide World of Sports is ESPN's official 3D development centre. "They are still learning how to shoot it and create new content for it," says Potrock and he identifies one example of how it has already benefited from work at the lab: "There was a 3D camera moving across the top of a court



*Disney's involvement is evident but the ESPN brand has been crucial in the venue's development*

above a Harlem Globetrotters basketball game here but because it got bouncy it didn't work. They learned, and now ESPN uses a different kind of cable and camera weight." Potrock adds that one of the latest developments being tested in the lab is, "putting a coloured comet on-screen on the tail of a baseball as it flies through the air. This changes colour depending on its velocity so you could know it is going to be a home run before it becomes a home run."

ESPN also benefits from the partnership in Orlando in a more traditional sense. "They want to reach youth athletes because they are just south of their core demographic and will become the next people coming into this," says Potrock, adding that ESPN, "recently announced they are creating a woman's sports brand called ESPN W and more than 50 per cent of our athletes are female, which is not typical."

Having the ideal target market is ideal but whether ESPN actually needs to market to them remains to be seen. In May this year ESPN was ranked by *Forbes* as the second most valuable brand in sports, after Nike,

with a value of US\$10.5 billion. With this level of recognition one would imagine that the majority of visitors to the Wide World of Sports are already well acquainted with ESPN. That said, it would not be prudent for ESPN to become complacent and the long list of Wide World of Sports' sponsors is testimony to the power of a partnership with it.

Its partners include HP, Sony and the Amerada Hess oil company. They get naming rights of the facilities, extensive branding throughout them and the opportunity to install their own guest services inside them. For example, the Wide World of Sports photo imaging centre is provided by HP and Sony supplies Playstation games consoles complete with sports games for the area where athletes wait between games. The big return is building early bonds with consumers.

"The idea for sponsors is to develop a lifetime relationship with an athlete. When they become parents themselves the cycle begins anew," explains Potrock. He adds that the association doesn't just complement but can amplify the sponsor's brand values:

"One of the things we talk to with our sponsors is that there is no chance this venue is going to get run down or be unkempt because it is Disney standard." The other key reason why it is in Disney's interests to keep the Wide World of Sports in top condition is that the company is the ultimate beneficiary through more guests coming to its parks. "With other facilities, local hotels and restaurants are the beneficiaries. Here, a lot of that stays within Disney so there is a logic for keeping it in this standard," says Potrock.

The Wide World of Sports is thought to have revenues in the region of a couple of hundred million dollars and its initial construction costs were around US\$120 million, making it Disney's single biggest sports investment after its ownership of ESPN itself. The facility's revenue streams come from event registration, gate sales, merchandise, food and beverage and event and facility sponsorship. "It makes a nice profit," says Potrock.

Expansion on-site is either funded by Disney and cashflow, sponsorship or third parties who then own the relevant facility and pay rent. Potrock says that despite its size, the Wide World of Sports is still growing:

"What you will see over the course of the next five years is a very aggressive growth strategy in both facilities and capacity. We have access to another 200 to 300 acres so we could theoretically double." He adds that a swimming facility is under consideration, as are more fields and "a performance zone where we could put camps, academies and clinics about developing talent."

The first expansion will be a 100-lane bowling alley which will be one of the largest worldwide. There is good reason for its size. "The United States Bowling Congress controls the two biggest bowling tournaments in the world and we will have those on a rotational basis for the next 20 years," says Potrock. He adds that this will attract around 85,000 spectators and take five months to execute so, since each participant attends with several family members, "it will bring to central Florida probably a quarter of a million people that would most likely not have come otherwise."

True, Disney World already has huge market penetration but the sports audience has different purchasing priorities to the traditional leisure travellers which visit its theme parks. The sports audience can even be used to keep Disney's business buoyant during a downturn. "If you have a young athlete in your household, you may have five tournaments over the course of the summer all over the country," says Potrock. "This gets very expensive so, especially with the rough economy, families were having to make choices. They were saying, 'we aren't going to do five tournaments, we are going to do three but we have to do Disney because it is a great facility and we can do a Disney vacation at the same time since we are already paying for airfare and the hotel room.'"

However, Potrock isn't resting on his laurels. "Disney World is a 365-days-a-year business but we are about 250 days a year," he says, explaining that, "our highs are when kids are out of school." To balance this out he is bringing in robotics competitions and ballroom dancing tournaments. This presents even more avenues for growth. "Our single biggest challenge is how to prioritise all the opportunities that have materialised," he says. With ESPN and Disney in charge, managing that should be child's play. ■