

Destination for Sports & Recreation

Ideal from Baseball to Bocce

With sunshine, surf and sand, the Sarasota area is idyllic for a wide range of athletic tourism. Nearly any contender or organized sport can find a place to play and compete around the county.

Jason Puckett, director of sports for Visit Sarasota County, points out that the area is attractive for event organizers because good weather is generally in abundance.

"It's also attractive for participants and spectators because their trip here

also serves as an enjoyable vacation," he says.

One of the highest profile athletic stages in the community is the Premier Sports Campus at Lakewood Ranch. With 22 fields and more than 140 acres, the venue has hosted soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, rugby, archery, bocce, pickleball, Ultimate Frisbee, Special Olympics, flag football, youth football, Frisbee golf and punt/pass/kick football—all on local, state, regional and national levels.

Photo courtesy of Visit Sarasota



Whether it's professional baseball to Ultimate Frisbee, sports are an integral part of the greater Sarasota region.



U.S. Masters Swimming, a national organization that features clinics, workshops and competitions for adults, is headquartered in Sarasota.

Plans are underway at the complex to eventually accommodate Special Olympics softball and baseball activities, such as tournaments, camps and clinics.

“We have some truly great facilities here,” says Puckett, “and we’re adding new facilities almost every year.”

One of the newest and largest sports campuses being completed in Sarasota is a world-class sprint rowing complex on the lake at Nathan Benderson Park. This 2,000-meter racing course, with an expected completion date of March

2013, will be open to practitioners of all paddle sports, including rowing, kayaking and dragon boating. A track suitable for 5K/10K races, half-marathons and triathlons will surround the facility. The remainder of the lake is open to wakeboarding and waterskiing.

Already at home in Sarasota is the U.S. Masters Swimming (USMS) organization, which moved its headquarters there in late 2009. Founded in 1970, this nonprofit has more than 50,000 members spread throughout 700 clubs nationwide.

USMS was instrumental in bringing the 2013 Pan American Masters Championship to the United States for the first time in the event’s history. Set for June 1-13, 2013, the event is expected to draw up to 2,000 adult swimmers from the United States as well as South and Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico and Canada. It is also projected to be one of the largest sporting events ever held in the region.

If going for a hole in one or just getting par is a golfer’s goal, there are more than 42 courses to select from throughout the area.

And when it comes to America’s favorite pastime, fans have the perfect spot to watch professional athletes gear up for the season. The Ed Smith Stadium has served as the spring training facility for the Baltimore Orioles since 2010. The team set both franchise and spring training attendance records when more than 115,500 fans visited the stadium in 2011.

The team has also made outreach a vital portion of its time in Sarasota. From participating in the Miracle League (which encourages the means for children with handicaps to play the game) to youth baseball clinics to donating portions of parking fees to local charities, players have numerous programs to give back to the community.

In 2012, the greater Sarasota region will have hosted approximately 65 unique sporting events sponsored by the Sarasota County Sports Commission. With such a storied reputation and a beautiful locale, that number is likely to increase in years to come. ■ *By Ryan Newhouse*



Robert Burbeck, Owner
 1342 N. Lime Ave., Sarasota, FL 34237
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