

North Carolina's Sports Economy

From Cultural Identity to Competitiveness Asset

Strategic Supply Chain Assets Series | September 2026

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Foreword

This report started in Gary Salamido's office as I pitched the idea of doing an economic perspective on the Carolina Hurricanes' Stanley Cup playoff run to a man wearing a Canes pullover. A week or so later, I joined thousands of my closest friends and neighbors lining the streets of downtown Raleigh for an epic and fun championship parade. I hit the office on Monday morning excited to dive into this research and figure out just how a Stanley Cup Championship impacts an economy.

Turns out that a lot of other folks were doing this, too. To my excitement as no stranger to economic impact studies, there was lots of talk about direct spend, economic impact, room-nights, and a host of other metrics. So, I started thinking a bit broader as supply chain people sometimes do. At this point, I was just finishing our research on North Carolina's maritime infrastructure and supply chain as a part of our Strategic Supply Chain Assets research series. Through this NC Chamber Foundation research, we have looked at the different dynamics facing our state's economic assets, physical and conceptual, while also asking if there are opportunities where we can lean in.

Perhaps it was recency bias, but it seemed really logical that sports fits that profile. Though you might not think about it at first, a stadium is infrastructure. So is a boat ramp, a community gym, a trail system, or even a machine shop that builds race cars. These are assets that carry economic activity, need capital, people, and good policy to help them thrive. Our state's cultural identity, history, and legacy around sports are also great assets for our economic competitiveness.

Once I started looking at it that way, I went into the sports and event economics literature. The sources, data, and perspectives shift depending on the sport and sometimes on where it is played. Some parts of North Carolina's sports economy have dedicated studies, tracking, and even policy-driven accountability metrics. Others have been taken on at the regional level. What I could not find was anyone looking at this at the state level. So, I tried.

What follows won't boil the state's sports economy into a single number or neat package because that would oversimplify the reality. This research report aims to describe what is actually here, sector by sector, with the sources named and their limits stated plainly. Where the research exists, I used it. Where it does not, I said so rather than filling the gap with estimates and conjecture. Sports is the reason a lot of us know the names of towns and cities we may have never visited, and spending this time on hockey, stock cars, billfish tournaments, ski slopes, cricket pitches, and even preschool soccer was a privilege. The economics turn out to be one more reason to love it all.

Dana Magliola
NC Chamber Foundation
September 2026



Downtown Raleigh fills with Hurricanes fans for the 2026 Stanley Cup championship celebration, turning a sports victory into a major public and economic event for the city and region. Photo courtesy of Jaylynn Nash.

Executive Summary

A Stanley Cup celebration parade actually doesn't look like sports from the curb, shoulder to shoulder with thousands of people, but for Raleigh, North Carolina, it was a slapshot into the net, a slam dunk, and a home run all in one. For the businesses and community infrastructure of the Triangle, it looked like a hotel event, a restaurant event, a public safety operation, a transportation exercise, a media moment, and a test of how a growing city hosts a major league crowd.

The Carolina Hurricanes' 2026 Stanley Cup run filled Lenovo Center, packed watch parties, sent fans into bars and restaurants, moved merchandise, gave sponsors national visibility, and ultimately brought more than 192,000 people to the championship parade in downtown Raleigh.¹ Following the season, the Hurricanes and Visit Raleigh estimated that the full playoff run, including home games, watch parties, and the championship parade, generated more than \$48.1 million in total economic impact in Wake County, including \$1.18 million in tax revenue.² That doesn't include the value North Carolina's sports economy gained from the national spotlight. Even the best measured figure of attendance, economic impact, or tax revenues cannot capture the public energy around it. The celebration gathered many elements of the sports economy into one place at one time. Hotels and restaurants, public safety and transportation planners, and all of the downtown business district concentrated on the same weekend. This was not the Old North State's first big splash in the sports world, just the latest. Yet the economy behind it runs continuously in places where no one is keeping score.

¹ Visit Raleigh. "Stanley Cup Run Surges \$48.1 Million Economic Boost into Raleigh." September 1, 2026., <https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/stanley-cup-run-surges-481-million-economic-boost-into-raleigh/>.

² Ibid.

Professional and collegiate sports are the state's most regularly visible assets, but a full spectrum of sports industries from Stanley Cup championship-level hockey to the participatory preschool soccer thrive across North Carolina and are an important part of our state's economy. The significance of North Carolina's sports economy, and its role in making the state a great place to work, live, and do business, deserves better and more widespread understanding. There are lots of statistics in sports and, fittingly, ample numbers around the impact of sports on our economy. Motorsports registers \$3.82 billion in total economic output. Golf generates \$2.3 billion in direct spending across 549 courses. Outdoor recreation contributes roughly \$17.7 billion in value-added. UNC System athletics carries a widely cited \$1.13 billion impact figure. Some activities are more readily counted, tracked, and analyzed through a host of metrics, but some require a more holistic view to recognize economic and community value.

North Carolina's sports economy runs geographically from Murphy to Manteo. Charlotte has turned car racing into engineering, fabrication, and defense-sector manufacturing. The Triangle carries professional sport alongside one of the deepest participant-event pipelines in the country. The Sandhills holds a permanent national governing body and a championship calendar booked through 2047. The Triad supplies championship venues. The mountains support an outdoor economy large enough to appear in federal accounts, and the coast hosts billfish tournaments, regattas, and working waterfronts that double as competition venues. States usually have to choose between asset concentration and distribution. North Carolina somehow has both.

Scouting our rivals, Virginia has a strong focus on sports tourism whereas Texas recruits events the way it recruits industry. Maryland has focused on facility finance and brought their expertise inside one public institution. Indiana widened its strategy from sports events into sports technology, research, and workforce. North Carolina has flavors of each through tourism, commerce, universities, commissions, and private business, with no single mandate covering all of it.

North Carolina's sports economy touches everything from infrastructure and public safety to workforce and manufacturing. That reach puts sports into the same competitiveness conversation as other assets shaping community and business conditions, but its contributions are often discussed in different silos. Putting a figure on it with a single statewide total would flatten the differences between a Hurricanes playoff game and a preschool soccer franchise. Each creates value in a different way, draws on different assets, and raises different business questions. As a portfolio, North Carolina's sports economy belongs in the same conversation as tourism, infrastructure, workforce, and quality of place. The state does not need to build one. It already has one.

1. How Sports Becomes Economic Activity

Of course, most sports look like entertainment from the stands or the bleachers. From the economy's side, it is a whole frenzy of businesses, facilities, workers, public assets, household purchases, travel decisions, media rights, sponsorships, and community routines. A hockey championship, a preschool soccer class, and a NASCAR race-team fabrication shop belong to the same sports economy, but each converts activity into dollars differently. Grouping them under one line item or an industry summary stat obscures more than it reveals. The significance of North

Carolina's sports economy can however be seen in channels. Each is a distinct path through which a sports activity turns into spending, jobs, tax revenue, or business value. Each carries its own evidence, its own metrics, and its own limits.

Visitor spending tied to events is the most visible. A family that drives from Ohio for a youth soccer tournament in Cary books a hotel room, eats at restaurants, buys gas, and spends money at stores it would not otherwise visit. That spending is new to the local economy in a way that a Wake County family's weeknight practice is not. Nationally, Sports ETA's 2026 industry report puts direct spending from sports-related travel at \$111.2 billion, including \$60.1 billion from participatory sports travel and \$51.1 billion from spectator sports travel. The same report estimates \$274.5 billion in total economic impact, 124.3 million hotel room nights, and 339 million sports travelers.³ The World Economic Forum and management consultant firm Oliver Wyman go further, sizing the global sports economy at roughly \$2.3 trillion a year, with sports tourism the largest component.⁴ Neither figure is a North Carolina total, but together they explain why visitor spending carries the clearest business relevance. It is measurable, it is new money, and it is the reason cities compete to host events and tournaments in the first place. North Carolina's own visitor economy set a record in 2025 at \$37.2 billion in spending, nearly 231,000 direct tourism jobs, and \$9.8 billion in payroll. Tourism employment also influences the size of the pool from which the sports travel economy draws.⁵

Another lesser seen channel starts at home when families pay registration fees, athletics camp tuition, private coaching, and equipment costs creating a steady, non-event revenue base for programs like swim schools, soccer clubs, gyms, and training facilities across the state. NC Triad Fusion Inc., the nonprofit behind the Triad-based soccer and multi-sport training, tournaments, and facility operations, reported more than \$9.7 million in revenue and \$3.9 million in salaries and wages in 2025.⁶ That spending doesn't depend on a big event calendar, but it does show up in payroll for coaches and instructors, in leases for gyms and fields, and in supply purchases for uniforms and equipment, long before a tournament bus ever pulls into a hotel parking lot.

Fixed infrastructure plays a different role. An arena or stadium is a capital asset that produces value through leases, concessions contracts, adjacent development, and year-round staffing. Venues turn sports demand into repeatable activity when they are maintained, staffed, and connected to the rest of the community. Beyond the arena or stadium, soccer complexes, tennis centers, pools, golf courses, tracks, marinas, trail systems, lakes and rivers, or indoor training facilities become economic assets *through* sports.

The motorsports supply chain is another powerful part of the sports/economy connection. Performance Racing Industry's 2025 Economic Impact Report estimates North Carolina's

³ Sports ETA, "Sports ETA Unveils 2026 State of the Industry Report, Defining a \$274.5 Billion Sports Tourism Economy," *Sports ETA*, April 22, 2026, <https://www.sportseta.org/blog/2026/04/22/sports-eta-unveils-2026-state-of-the-industry-report-defining-a-2745-billion-sports-tourism-economy>.

⁴ World Economic Forum and Oliver Wyman, "Sports for People and Planet," *World Economic Forum*, February 2026, <https://www.oliverwyman.com/our-expertise/insights/2026/feb/sports-economy-for-people-and-planet.html>.

⁵ Visit North Carolina and Tourism Economics, "N.C. Tourism Hits Record Spending, Loses Market Share in 2025," 2026, <https://www.visitnc.com/media/news-release/nc-tourism-hits-record-spending-loses-market-share-2025>.

⁶ ProPublica. "Nc Triad Fusion Inc." *Nonprofit Explorer*. Accessed July 12, 2026. <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/830687947>

motorsports industry at \$3.82 billion in total economic output, supporting 19,775 jobs and \$1.35 billion in wages and benefits.⁷ Race teams buy engineering services, fabrication work, and specialized components from suppliers who would have little reason to locate in North Carolina without the industry. This turns sports spending into manufacturing and technical-services activity with a very different footprint than a weekend hotel stay.

Broadcasters and media coverage generate value through a channel that runs independent of fans in seats. Global sports media-rights spending is projected to exceed \$78 billion by 2030, with the United States expected to account for more than \$36 billion of that market. This helps explain why sports visibility is prudently treated separately from room nights, ticket sales, or local tax collections.⁸ A company that buys arena signage, a jersey patch, or offers a biscuit giveaway for missed free throws is purchasing exposure to whomever is watching, in the building or on a variety of screens elsewhere. That exposure carries real value for the sponsor and, indirectly, for the market being showcased, but it doesn't register in a room-night count. That market extends from national broadcast advertising and venue naming rights all the way down to community sponsor signs on the little-league outfield fence. It makes sports one of the few parts of the economy where commercial visibility operates at nearly every level of competition.

Sports wagering has added another revenue channel. During FY2026, North Carolina accounts placed \$7.62 billion in paid and promotional mobile wagers, producing \$794.8 million in gross wagering revenue for operators and an estimated \$143.1 million in state tax under the 18 percent rate then in effect. Of the revenue, \$6.78 billion went back to bettors as winnings.⁹ Wagering's relevance to the state's sports economy is growing as wagering-tax proceeds have helped fund college athletics, amateur sports, and major-event recruitment.



*Fans board NCDOT's U.S. Open Express to Pinehurst during the 2024 championship, existing transportation infrastructure adapted to serve a major sports event.
Photo courtesy of NCDOT*

Public operations for hosting a major event require public safety staffing, transportation planning, sanitation, and permitting. All of that operational cost is real. The 2024 U.S. Open at Pinehurst showed this clearly. Alongside the tournament's visitor and hospitality activity, the state and local partners had to manage event mobility, parking, shuttle operations, and special transportation service, including the U.S. Open Express rail

⁷ Performance Racing Industry, *2025 Economic Impact Report: North Carolina State Table*, 2025.

⁸ Ampere Analysis, cited in George Winslow, "Global Sports Rights Spending to Top \$78 Billion in 2030," *TVTechnology*, Dec. 2025.

⁹ North Carolina State Lottery Commission. *Monthly Revenue Report: June 2026*. July 2026. <https://ncgaming.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/NCSLC-Monthly-Revenue-Report-June-2026.pdf>

option serving the Sandhills.¹⁰ Those operating demands are real costs, but they also build practical hosting capacity. When a community gets better at moving spectators, coordinating agencies, serving visitors, protecting public spaces, and keeping local businesses functioning during a major event, it strengthens its ability to compete for the next one.

Harder to price, and easier to under-rate, is what a market's sports presence signals to the people and companies deciding where to live, work, invest, and grow. A championship parade downtown, a golf resort with national reach, college rivalries that transcend borders, a soccer club with international ties, or a youth tournament that fills a community's fields can each say something about a place's energy, confidence, and capacity. Those signals do not replace the harder numbers, but they help explain why sports keeps showing up in business decisions, visitor strategies, downtown plans, sponsorship budgets, facility investments, and workforce conversations. The economic activity starts with spending, jobs, facilities, media, visitors, public operations, and suppliers. The longer-cycle asset is what remains when those pieces make a place more visible, more active, more capable, and easier to sell to residents, visitors, employers, recruits, students, entrepreneurs, and event owners. Sports gives people reasons to gather, gives families routines, gives alumni and visitors reasons to return, and gives employers another way to describe the community around the job. It cannot substitute for wages, housing, schools, infrastructure, or safety. It can however still shape how a place *feels* to people deciding where to live, work, study, start a business, or even host an event. That is why the sports economy belongs in the same conversation as tourism, infrastructure, workforce, development, and competitiveness.

2. Reading the Numbers without Losing the Story

Sports is full of numbers. North Carolina's sports economy produces a wide range, and not all of them measure the same thing. A \$48.1 million economic-impact figure for a Stanley Cup celebration and a \$1.13 billion figure for UNC System athletics don't sit on the same scale. They describe different concepts, built from different methods, and reading them side by side without knowing the difference produces bad business conclusions. Contextualizing what they measure and why helps to better understand the state's sports economy.

The cleanest of these economic numbers is direct visitor spending. It counts money that changes hands because of an event, such as a hotel room booked, a meal purchased, or a tank of gas filled by a visitor who wouldn't otherwise be in the county. Total economic impact builds on that base by modeling how the first round of spending ripples through local suppliers, payrolls, and household income, adding indirect and induced effects that never show up on a single receipt. The \$16.4 million figure for Raleigh's 2025 NCAA men's basketball first and second-round games is a direct-spending estimate built from visitor counts and 20,804 room nights.¹¹ The Hurricanes full 2026 Stanley Cup run was later estimated at \$48.1 million in total economic impact, including \$23.1 million from seven home games during the playoffs, \$13.6 million reported from finals-

¹⁰ Richard Stradling, "'Just Much Easier.' Hundreds Ride Special Trains to the US Open in Pinehurst," *News & Observer*, June 13, 2024.

¹¹ Visit Raleigh, "2025 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament First and Second Rounds in Raleigh," *Visit Raleigh*, 2025, <https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/2025-ncaa-mens-basketball-tournament-1st-2nd-rounds-in-raleigh/>.

related events, and \$11.4 million from the parade.¹² The NCAA figure measures direct spending while the Hurricanes figure includes direct, indirect, and induced effects. Comparing them without accounting for that difference skews the relative scale of the events.

Athletic department revenue is a different concept again, measuring an institution's operating receipts, not visitor spending or regional economic output. The UNC System's \$1.13 billion athletics figure includes capital investment and fan spending layered on top of an operations-only estimate closer to \$807 million, and the study behind it covers public UNC System institutions only.¹³ Duke, Wake Forest, Davidson, Elon, and the state's other private programs sit outside that figure entirely, and Duke and Wake Forest alone bring major-conference athletic scale that a state-only total leaves out. So, while an IRS 990 form or an Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA) report shows operating scale, employment, procurement or overall budget, it doesn't show how much new visitor spending game weekends bring into Durham, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Raleigh, or Charlotte. The public-facing value of college sports and the financial health of athletic departments are related, but they answer different business questions.

Attendance and tax revenue measure something narrower still. Attendance counts spectators, and a spectator isn't automatically a visitor. A local season-ticket holder and a family that flew in from Connecticut count toward the same number, even though only one of them represents new money for the region. The Hurricanes' full Stanley Cup run reported more than 439,000 total attendees including nearly 190,000 visitors from outside Wake County. Tax revenue is cleaner in one respect and murkier in another. The \$1.18 million collected from those same events is a defensible public-return number, but it means little without knowing what the public spent on security, transit, and crowd management to host the events in the first place, a financial comparison that state and local reporting rarely makes explicit.

That caution is shared by people working directly in sports tourism. Richard Beard, president and CEO of the Greensboro Sports Foundation, comes to the field from economic development, site selection, and commercial real estate. "I don't like economic impact numbers," Beard said. Asked what he considers more useful, he pointed first to attendance and contracted hotel room nights, where bookings made through the convention and visitors bureau can be directly tracked.

The absence of standard metrics is part of the issue here. Local impact figures come from tourism bureaus, sports commissions, event owners, and universities, each working from its own definitions and models, and nothing requires attendance, visitor origin, room nights, public cost, and tax return to be recorded the same way twice. That makes comparisons across North Carolina markets unreliable in a way that has nothing to do with the quality of any single study. Recipients of state event-recruitment money are the practical place to begin, since the state is already writing those checks and can ask for the reporting that comes with them. Inconsistent methods are one gap. Coverage is another. A swim school, an officiating association, a sports medicine practice, and an equipment retailer may never appear in any statewide sports impact total no matter how

¹² Visit Raleigh. "Stanley Cup Run Surges \$48.1 Million Economic Boost into Raleigh." September 1, 2026. <https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/stanley-cup-run-surges-481-million-economic-boost-into-raleigh/>

¹³ Econsult Solutions, Inc., "The Economic and Social Impact of UNC System Athletics," 2023, <https://econsultsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UNC-System-Athletics-Economic-Impact-Study-2023-02-02-FINAL.pdf>.

carefully the methods are standardized, because no lens is pointed at them. What gets counted in the sports economy is largely what someone had a reason to commission a study about.

These numbers also come from different *kinds* of research, and understanding what's behind each helps provide a clearer picture of the state's sports economy. The UNC System's athletics impact rests on public, methodology-disclosed study. The Charlotte Sports Foundation's reported \$118.25 million portfolio impact for 2025 is a self-compiled annual total, the kind of figure most event-marketing organizations produce for their own reporting.¹⁴ The Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament's estimated \$440,000 in direct visitor spending is a reasoned proxy built from boat counts and purse size, filling a gap where no formal study exists. The oft-repeated \$5 billion to \$6.2 billion figure for North Carolina motorsports is a legacy estimate, now roughly two decades old.¹⁵

Each number does real work for the organization that produced it, and knowing what produced it, and why, is what turns a figure into something a business or policy reader can actually use. North Carolina's sports economy is just too varied to be captured in one number, and reading it right means keeping direct spending, total impact, departmental revenue, attendance, and public cost in their own lanes rather than trading one for another. A tourism bureau, a college athletic department, a fishing tournament, and a motorsports trade group each produced *their* number for their own purpose. Just like sports, some count in points, some count runs, touchdowns, goals...

3. The Existing Sports Economy Network in North Carolina

North Carolina already has many organizations needed to build, host, measure, and promote sports activity. The network is distributed across tourism, economic development, universities, local governments, venue authorities, sports commissions, event owners, teams, nonprofit organizations, parks and recreation departments, as well as private companies. North Carolina's sports economy isn't managed by one organization, and it was never going to be. Visit North Carolina and SportsNC handle statewide tourism marketing, and the North Carolina Sports Association coordinates amateur-sports interests, while the Department of Commerce's Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund gives the state a dedicated incentive tool for recruiting high-profile competitions funded through sports wagering proceeds rather than the general fund.¹⁶ That funding structure creates its own loop as sports wagering helps finance the tool used to recruit more sports activity.¹⁷

That loop changed shape in July 2026 as the enacted budget raised tax on wagering operators from 18 to 23 percent and capped the MEGA Fund's annual share at \$30 million, against a Fiscal Research projection of \$45.3 million reaching the fund in 2026-27. The state's General Fund absorbs most of the difference. For anyone recruiting events, the cap trades upside for

¹⁴ Charlotte Sports Foundation, "CSF Posts Record Economic Impact of \$118.25 Million in 2025," *Charlotte Sports Foundation*, 2026, <https://charlottesports.org/csf-post-record-economic-impact-of-118-25-in-2025/>.

¹⁵ Connaughton and Madsen, "The Economic Impacts of the North Carolina Motorsports Industry," 2005, https://localdocs.charlotte.edu/Urban_Institute/Reports_Studies/Motorsports/2005_Motorsports_Industry.pdf.

¹⁶ North Carolina Department of Commerce, "Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund," 2026, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/major-events-games-attractions-fund>

¹⁷ North Carolina General Assembly, N.C. Gen. Stat. § 143B-437.112, current, https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/BySection/Chapter_143B/GS_143B-437.112.pdf.

predictability and puts more weight on award criteria and honest post-event reporting than on the size of a strong wagering year.¹⁸ The fund has been busy in the meantime. Commerce announced \$13.5 million in support for the 2026 lineup in January, and by early June the state had awarded more than \$15 million, including \$984,850 for the Professional Pickleball Association National Championships in Cary, with another \$21 million committed to events still being recruited. More than \$48.9 million has gone out in grants since the program began. (Awards, recruitment commitments, and money *actually* spent are three different figures.)¹⁹

North Carolina Amateur Sports and similar organizations occupy another lane. Their work ties amateur competition, participation, events, grants, and community access together. NCAS has published funding opportunities that support equipment, facility, travel, and event-related needs for youth and amateur sports.²⁰ This is a different kind of sports-economy infrastructure as it reaches the base of participation and helps the state keep amateur sports growing.

The North Carolina High School Athletic Association occupies a lane of its own at the base of that structure. The NCHSAA sanctions interscholastic competition across 446 member schools and administers state championships in more than two dozen sports, making it the largest organized participation system in the state by a wide margin.²¹ Its role in the sports economy is mostly indirect but substantial. School gymnasiums, fields and tracks, and stadiums built for interscholastic play carry club practices, youth leagues, and community recreation the rest of the week. Championships the NCHSAA administers drive spending into host communities on a recurring calendar. The association also registers and assigns the officials who work those games, a workforce that youth and amateur sports draw from as well.

Layered underneath those statewide organizations is a set of local sports commissions and convention and visitor bureaus, each built around its own market's strengths. The Greater Raleigh Sports Alliance is organized around a large participant-event pipeline and repeat hosting, and Cary has turned that pipeline into a long-term hosting identity of its own with a standing NCAA and amateur-sports calendar rather than a one-event bid strategy. Durham adds another Triangle piece through collegiate athletics, Durham Bulls baseball, Carolina Blaze professional softball, and youth sports, and a growing recruited-event portfolio. Executive Director Marcus Manning describes sports tourism as playing "a centralized role in bringing regional, national, and international visitors to Durham," supporting local businesses while showcasing the community's sports facilities and the city itself as a destination. In the Queen City, the Charlotte Sports Foundation works the high-profile end of the market, building an annual portfolio around college showcases and marquee events. Greensboro's strength runs through a long association with college basketball and indoor-event capacity, while Wilmington's is through races, triathlons, and

¹⁸ N.C. Session Law 2026-41 (Senate Bill 257), signed July 7, 2026; N.C. Fiscal Research Division, fiscal note to S.B. 257, <https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewBillDocument/2025/10154/3/S257-FDFM-NBC-18061>.

¹⁹ Office of the Governor of North Carolina, "North Carolina Celebrates 'Summer of Soccer' with Major Events Investments Across the State," June 3, 2026; N.C. Department of Commerce, "North Carolina Announces Action-Packed 2026 Lineup of Major Events Across the State," January 29, 2026. (Special thanks to Dan Gerlach for helping the author better understand these budget implications/context.)

²⁰ North Carolina Amateur Sports, "Funding Opportunities," accessed July 2026.

²¹ "North Carolina High School Athletic Association." *Wikipedia*. Accessed August 14, 2026.

water sports suited to a coastal destination. Pinehurst flexes its might through golf and a recurring U.S. Open hosting cycle unmatched anywhere else in the state.

Outdoor and coastal sports activity runs through a different office altogether. The North Carolina Outdoor Economy Office, housed inside the Department of Commerce's Rural Economic Development Division, connects paddling, mountain biking, fishing, and similar activity to public lands, rural business development, and a federal accounting system built to treat recreation as its own measurable slice of the state's economy.²² The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported that outdoor recreation accounted for approximately \$17.7 billion in value added for North Carolina in 2024.²³ A second state agency holds the physical assets. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission manages boating access areas, game lands, and public fishing sites across the state, with much of that work supported by hunting and fishing license revenues and federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration funds from excise taxes under the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson programs.²⁴ These assets are the starting line for a substantial share of the competition from bass tournaments and coastal fishing events to paddling races and collegiate rowing. The Commission's mandate is conservation and public access, not event recruitment, but the infrastructure it maintains for licensed hunters and anglers supports competitive activity.



Aerial view of the U.S. National Whitewater Center in Charlotte, where purpose-built whitewater courses, trails, and event space support recreation, competition, and a year-round visitor economy. Photo courtesy of ACA Paddlesports.

Below that level, the organizing is mostly local and event-specific. The U.S. National Whitewater Center in Charlotte serves as an anchor facility and organizer for paddling and outdoor recreation. The Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament in Morehead City runs as its own independent annual tournament. Wilmington's marathon, Ironman 70.3 Wilmington, and the area's other races and water-sports events are organized through the local convention and visitor bureau

rather than a dedicated sports body of their own. Surfing is the exception along the coast. The Eastern Surfing Association, the largest amateur surfing association in the country, maintains three North Carolina districts, and its national championship, *the Easterns*, is held annually at Jennette's Pier in Nags Head, putting the state at the center of competitive surfing.

²² North Carolina Department of Commerce, "North Carolina Outdoor Economy Office," 2026, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-outdoor-economy-office>.

²³ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics, U.S. and States, 2024," news release BEA 26-13, March 5, 2026, national table 2 and state-level tables, <https://www.bea.gov/news/2026/outdoor-recreation-economic-statistics-us-and-states-2024>

²⁴ North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. "Conservation Access Pass." Accessed August 7, 2026. <https://www.ncwildlife.gov/conservation-access-pass>

Professional teams and venue operators add a commercial layer to this network. The Hurricanes, Panthers, Hornets, Charlotte FC, and the NC Courage each manage their own calendars, sponsors, media rights, and capital needs. They operate alongside the local governments and destinations that host them. Unlike the tourism bureaus, commissions, and public offices described above, these are private, revenue-driven organizations, and the sports-tourism, workforce, and public-investment activity built around them exists because of the business they generate.

Altogether this is a wider network than any single sector label could capture. A state tourism office, a rural economic development program, a handful of city and county commissions, national governing bodies with their own North Carolina chapters, professional franchises, and the transportation and public-safety agencies that keep events running all touch the same underlying economy from different angles. Each was built for its own purpose, and each measures success differently. A stronger motorsports supply chain, a fuller tournament calendar on the coast, and a bigger college athletics weekend all draw on the same hotels, roads, and workforce, whether the organizations behind them ever compare notes or not.

4. Raleigh, Wake County, and the Canes Championship Moment

The Hurricanes' championship run did more than fill a summer with parades, although the downtown celebration alone accounted for more than 192,000 people.²⁵ Scott Dupree, executive director of the Greater Raleigh Sports Alliance, put the return of the Finals in market terms, calling it "a great number for any market, but a big, big number for this market." It landed in the middle of a broader shift already underway in how Raleigh thinks about its home arena. PNC Arena's transformation into Lenovo Center, alongside the surrounding Raleigh Sports & Entertainment District, reframes the project from a single building that hosts games into a mixed-use district meant to generate activity on nights nothing is being played.²⁶

The closest proof-of-concept may be The Battery Atlanta, where the Braves paired Truist Park with a mixed-use district of restaurants, retail, office space, apartments, hotel rooms, and entertainment venues that has become a year-round revenue source beyond baseball games.²⁷ The district averaged 9 to 10 million visitors annually and turned taxable property values around it from \$5 million in 2014 to more than \$700 million a decade later.²⁸ Raleigh's district is still early in that progression, a developing story with year-round programming, transportation access, and the balance between its public and private partners all still taking shape. Raleigh-Wake hospitality-tax revenue, generated through hotels and restaurants, supports arena renovations meant to extend the building's competitive life while the district around it is a privately-led development. A

²⁵ Visit Raleigh. "Stanley Cup Run Surges \$48.1 Million Economic Boost into Raleigh." September 1, 2026.

<https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/stanley-cup-run-surges-481-million-economic-boost-into-raleigh/>

²⁶ Carolina Hurricanes, "Raleigh Sports & Entertainment District First Look," *NHL.com*, 2025,

<https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/raleigh-sports-entertainment-district-unveils-first-look-at-mixed-use-development>.

²⁷ Rachel Bachman, "They Have a Losing Record—and Everyone in Baseball Is Trying to Copy Them," *Wall Street Journal*, July 2025.

²⁸ Cobb County, Georgia, "2026 Truist Park and The Battery Update," May 2026, <https://www.cobbcounty.gov/news/2026-truist-park-battery-update>

phased master plan of more than 4,000 residential units and nearly 3.7 million square feet of commercial space is proposed for buildout.²⁹

“We’ve been thinking for several years about sports as an economic development driver,” said Adrienne Cole, President and CEO of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce. “It creates economic activity and spin-off opportunities, but it also becomes part of how we think about development, infrastructure, and the growth of the region.”

As in communities across the state, the Triangle’s Greater Raleigh Sports Alliance and Visit Raleigh have built one of the state’s deepest participant-event pipelines, spanning NCAA championships, Olympic-sport competitions, and youth and amateur tournaments across Wake County’s venues. Spectating is a factor, but the driver is participation leveraging purpose-built assets. Cary is the clearest example of what repeat hosting looks like once it matures into actual infrastructure. The town was chosen in 2024 as a long-term host site for multiple NCAA national championships, a designation built on years of hosting USA Baseball and NCAA soccer and baseball championships across Division I through III, plus recurring youth tournaments at WakeMed Soccer Park and Cary Tennis Park.³⁰ That kind of standing arrangement changes the economics. A market competing for every event carries more uncertainty than one with a standing calendar to spread out those fixed costs.



USA Baseball’s National Training Complex in Cary, a purpose-built venue supporting national-team development, championship events, and NC’s broader amateur sports tourism economy. Photo courtesy of Town of Cary.

WakeMed Soccer Park also carries a permanent professional sports business. The North Carolina Courage enter their tenth season in the Triangle in 2026 as the winningest club in NWSL history, with two league championships, three NWSL Shields, and two Challenge Cups. The business has been growing along with the success on the field. The Courage drew a club record of 107,931 fans during the 2025 regular season.³¹ That puts professional women's soccer inside the same Cary sports infrastructure that hosts NCAA championships, youth showcases, TST, rugby, cross-country, and other events throughout the year. One facility is supporting several very different pieces of the sports economy.

Raleigh’s 2025 NCAA Men’s Basketball Tournament first and second-round games illustrate the infrastructure at work with millions of dollars in direct economic impact and thousands of hotel

²⁹ City of Raleigh, *Ordinance No. (2025) 738 ZC 901, Z-38-24: 1400 Edwards Mill Road*, adopted April 15, 2025, effective April 20, 2025, attached Planned Development Master Plan, sheet C03.0, PDF p. 6.

<https://cityofraleigh0drupal.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/drupal-prod/COR22/Z-038-24-ORD.pdf>

³⁰ Visit Raleigh, “Cary Chosen as Long-Term Host for NCAA National Championships,” *Visit Raleigh*, 2024,

<https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/cary-chosen-as-long-term-host-for-ncaa-national-championships/>.

³¹ North Carolina Courage Communications. “NC Courage, Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Announce Two-Year Partnership Extension.” *North Carolina Courage*, December 15, 2025. <https://www.nccourage.com/news/nc-courage-blue-cross-blue-shield-of-north-carolina-announce-two-year-partnership-extension>

room nights filled. A single early-round tournament weekend is the kind of visitor-driven number that justifies continued investment in tournament-ready venues. The pipeline behind weekends like that one shows up earlier in the bookings ledger. Visit Raleigh and the Greater Raleigh Sports Alliance closed 137 groups in the first quarter of 2026 representing more than 66,000 *future-room-nights* and a projected \$46.5 million in direct impact. Conventions and meetings sit in that total alongside sporting events, so it measures selling capacity rather than sports demand, and none of it has happened yet.³² Layered on top of championship-level events is a fast-growing youth soccer “showcase economy.” NCFC Youth’s *visitRaleigh.com* Showcase Series draws more than 1,600 teams and an estimated 72,000 visitors across four weekends, generating roughly 32,000 room nights and an estimated \$34 million in economic impact, a scale that rivals some of the region’s professional sports weekends and runs on traveling families rather than season-ticket holders.³³



The participation base beneath the professional game with Carolina Hurricanes youth hockey. Photo courtesy of Nicole Niwa

The Hurricanes have also spent years building the participation base underneath their professional game. Youth-hockey programs tied to the club introduce first-time players to the sport, support local organizations and facilities, and increasingly invest in girls’ hockey and other pathways intended to keep players on the ice after their first season. The club has put equipment in schools, branded local rinks and programs, funded two outdoor rinks in partnership with the NHL, and runs a First Goal program that introduces roughly 650 children to hockey each summer. “The organization and its players

understand how important the larger hockey community is to the success and identity of this sport,” said Shane Willis, director of youth hockey and community outreach for the Hurricanes. “It is about building relationships, creating opportunities, and bringing families together around a shared passion for the game.” That work expands the hockey economy beyond tickets at Lenovo Center. More players mean more ice time, coaching, and everything that goes with it, while the Canes gain a whole family of fans.³⁴

Wake County’s sports economy works as an interlocking set of assets rather than a single venue or event. Lenovo Center gives the region a major indoor venue with NHL, college basketball, concerts, and touring-event capacity. Carter-Finley Stadium adds a large outdoor stage that can host events well beyond NC State football when the right opportunity comes along. Cary’s facilities carry the bulk of the participant, NCAA, and youth-event demand, and downtown Raleigh adds

³² Visit Raleigh, “Wake County 2026 First Quarter Tourism Industry Report,” 2026, <https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/wake-county-2026-first-quarter-tourism-industry-report/>.

³³ North Carolina FC Youth, “visitRaleigh.com Showcase Series,” 2026, <https://www.ncfcyouth.com/showcase-series/>; Gary Buete, chief executive officer, North Carolina FC Youth, email to author, August 19, 2026.

³⁴ Ruff, Walt. “Canes Continue Community Presence On & Off The Ice.” *Carolina Hurricanes*, November 21, 2023. <https://www.nhl.com/hurricanes/news/canes-continue-community-presence-on-off-the-ice>

the restaurants, hotels, public spaces, and parade routes that turn any of these into a citywide moment rather than one behind a turnstile.



ACC Women's Rowing at Lake Wheeler in Raleigh, where a public recreation asset doubles as a recurring collegiate competition venue. Photo courtesy of Duke Athletics.

Underneath the marquee events sits a layer of smaller, steady activity that doesn't always show up in a headline economic-impact report, even when it does put visiting teams and families in hotel rooms. The area's lakes carry a good share of that layer and Visit Raleigh's reach extends even here. The organization co-sponsors the ACC Rowing Championships at Lake Wheeler alongside the ACC, UNC, and Duke. For wind and waves, the GRSA also

supports the region's collegiate sailing community through events at Lake Crabtree. Neither lake was built for this. Both are county or municipal parks that happen to double as competition venues a few weekends a year, adding paid parking, hotel stays, and restaurant spending on top of infrastructure Wake County funds for its own residents. Rugby follows a similar pattern, with competitive youth and adult clubs, including the Raleigh Redhawks and Raleigh Rugby Football Club, regularly hosting matches that draw traveling teams to fields and facilities across the Triangle.

Further outside the beltline, the Town of Holly Springs adds a different kind of activity to the mix. Ting Stadium is home to the Salamanders, a summertime Coastal Plain League wooden-bat team featuring collegiate players from around the country. The 'Manders draw a predominantly local more than visitor crowd. Interestingly, the venue doubled as a public drop site for the town's drone and UAS food delivery pilot, one of the country's first long-term programs of its kind,³⁵ before the service wound down in 2025 as the company ran into issues with airspace limits.³⁶

The Stanley Cup parade was the moment when everyone noticed Wake County's sports economy. The venues, the standing event calendar, the participation pipeline, and the smaller, steadier activity running underneath it had already been working for years before a single banner went up downtown. The Lenovo Center, Cary's facilities, youth and amateur events, and recurring activity across the county show that the region's sports economy is built on more than one championship crowd.

Raleigh's championship-summer seemed to throw fuel on another fire simmering in North Carolina. Just moments after the Hurricanes clinched, owner Tom Dundon was on the ice in Las

³⁵ WRAL TechWire, "Holly Springs Drone Program Is 'First in Flight' of Its Kind," May 2020, <https://wraltechwire.com/2020/05/15/holly-springs-drone-program-is-first-in-flight-of-its-kind/>

³⁶ WRAL, "NCDOT, Flytrex Officials Response to Ending Food Delivery Services in Holly Springs," July 2025, <https://www.wral.com/news/local/flytrex-ends-drone-delivery-holly-springs-july-2025/>

Vegas talking about bringing Major League Baseball to Raleigh. A grassroots organization, MLB Raleigh, has been building the case since 2019, State Treasurer Brad Briner has spoken publicly in favor, and in June 2026 Marc Lasry, already an investor in the North Carolina Courage, said he wants in, as well.³⁷ Market figures lead the argument as North Carolina is the most populous state without a MLB franchise, the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill metro passed 2.1 million with the highest median household income of any metro area without a team, and the state has three top-50 media markets.³⁸ Dundon's 2024 lease extension at Lenovo Center carries development rights across roughly eighty acres alongside a \$300 million arena renovation backed by hospitality tax revenue, which means an experienced major league operator is *already* holding land, entitlements, a district plan, and a working relationship with the county's tourism financing structure.³⁹

Major League Baseball has not yet seated an expansion committee, and league leadership has tied that step to resolving the Athletics and Rays stadium questions and to the next collective bargaining agreement. Commissioner Rob Manfred has said he intends to identify two expansion markets before his term ends in January 2029, with reported fees of \$2 billion to \$2.5 billion per market and ballparks unlikely to open before the early 2030s.⁴⁰ Competition is fierce and includes Nashville, Salt Lake City, Portland, Austin, Sacramento, and Vancouver. Whether Raleigh is picked or not, the community has a sports district under construction, a productive hospitality-tax structure, and proven experience hosting a couple hundred thousand people safely while making it all look routine.

5. Charlotte's Major-Event and Professional Sports Platform

Charlotte's got a lot. The Queen City is North Carolina's most complete major-event sports market, and its sports economy is anchored by professional franchises, major venues, global motorsports, college football, international soccer, basketball, touring events, and a downtown district adept at handling large crowds. Charlotte and Mecklenburg County can host the Panthers, Hornets, Charlotte FC, NASCAR, a neutral-site college football game, an international soccer match, and a major concert inside the same broad hospitality and public-operations system.

The Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority gives the system an operating backbone. The CRVA is an independent authority created under the City of Charlotte's charter, responsible for destination marketing and venue management across the Charlotte Convention Center, Spectrum Center's back-of-house operations, the NASCAR Hall of Fame, and the Bojangles Entertainment Complex.⁴¹ CRVA's visitor economy work reaches well beyond sports with conventions and

³⁷ WRAL Staff. "Courage Investor Marc Lasry: Bring a Major League Baseball Team to Raleigh, Bet on Continued Growth." *WRAL*, June 25, 2026. <https://www.wral.com/sports/courage-investor-marc-lasry-bring-major-league-baseball-team-bet-on-raleigh-continued-growth-june-2026/>

³⁸ MLB Raleigh. "The North Carolina Data." Accessed August 18, 2026. <https://mlbraleigh.com/the-north-carolina-data/>

³⁹ Lenovo Center. "Mixed-Use District & Arena Enhancement Coming to Lenovo Center." June 27, 2024.

<https://www.lenovocenter.com/news/detail/mixed-use-district-arena-enhancement-coming-to-pnc-arena>

⁴⁰ rown, Maury. "MLB 32 Team Expansion Timeline and Cities Best Positioned to Land a Franchise." *Forbes*, April 29, 2026. Updated April 30, 2026. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maurybrown/2026/04/29/the-definitive-mlb-expansion-guide/>

⁴¹ Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, "Who Is Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority?," accessed July 2026, <https://www.charlottesgot alot.com/about-crva>; Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, "What We Do," accessed July 2026, <https://www.crva.com/what-we-do>.

leisure travel also contributing to the city's record \$1.1 billion in reported FY2024 economic impact.

Inside that \$1.1 billion figure are specific, line-item numbers worth highlighting. The 2024 ACC Football Championship generated \$17.1 million in direct spending. The Duke's Mayo Classic and Duke's Mayo Bowl added a combined \$22.3 million. Amateur sports events across the region, gymnastics meets, youth tournaments, and similar competitions, totaled \$128 million in aggregate economic impact, while a single NCAA Tournament appearance contributed another \$5 million.⁴²



The NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte turns North Carolina's racing heritage into a year-round visitor attraction, extending the motorsports economy beyond race weekends and the track. Photo courtesy of Visit NC.

The NASCAR Hall of Fame gives Charlotte a heritage attraction built directly into its motorsports identity. Managed by CRVA and licensed by NASCAR, the Hall posted a record \$74.9 million in economic impact for fiscal year 2024, drawing 201,840 visitors, nearly 80 percent of whom traveled more than 100 miles to see it.⁴³ That reach turns motorsports history into its own visitor draw, distinct from a race weekend at Charlotte Motor Speedway and distinct from the supplier and fabrication work that keeps the industry running. That supplier and fabrication work is heavily concentrated in

and around Charlotte itself. Race teams, machine shops, engineering firms, component suppliers, and specialized workforce pipelines cluster around Charlotte Motor Speedway in a way that has little to do with any single race weekend, closer to an automotive manufacturing hub than a stadium district. It gives Charlotte a piece of its sports economy that looks nothing like the Panthers, Hornets, or a marquee bowl game, less visible on a Sunday, but steadier and harder to relocate than any single ticketed event.

Also in the CRVA portfolio, the Bojangles Entertainment Complex shows another side of the same venue system. The complex, which includes Bojangles Coliseum and Ovens Auditorium, gives Charlotte a middle-capacity sports and entertainment asset outside the largest uptown venues. Recent reporting, citing CRVA, says annual revenue at the complex has grown from \$2.9 million to \$19.2 million over the last decade, while the event calendar has grown from 140 events in 2015 to more than 300 events a year.⁴⁴ The City Council's 2026 approval of \$25 million in maintenance funding reflects the less glamorous side of sports economy work that older venues can still produce meaningful activity, but only if their roofs, mechanical systems, restrooms, pedestrian access, hospitality spaces, and basic building systems keep up with the calendar.

⁴² Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, "CRVA Generates \$1.1 Billion in Economic Impact for Fiscal Year 2024," December 2024, <https://www.crva.com/press/crva-generates-1-1-billion-in-economic-impact-for-fiscal-year-2024>.

⁴³ Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, "CRVA Generates \$1.1 Billion in Economic Impact for Fiscal Year 2024," December 2024, <https://www.crva.com/press/crva-generates-1-1-billion-in-economic-impact-for-fiscal-year-2024>.

⁴⁴ Sands, Alexandria. "Bojangles Coliseum, Ovens Auditorium Get \$25M Tune-Up amid Soaring Revenue." *Axios Charlotte*, March 23, 2026. <https://www.axios.com/local/charlotte/2026/03/24/boplex-25m-repairs-approved>

The city's largest venue is working through a much bigger version of the same problem. In July 2026 Tepper Sports & Entertainment pushed the Bank of America Stadium renovation past \$1.3 billion, matching public funding in private money to take on every optional element it had put in front of the city.⁴⁵ Charlotte's commitment stays fixed at \$650 million, and Tepper Sports carries the overruns, the owner-elected upgrades, *and* the ongoing maintenance obligation. Interior work is underway in 2026, fan-facing construction starts in 2027, and completion is targeted for 2030. In the end, there will also be a 4,400-seat music venue planned alongside the stadium. David Tepper described the goal as "transforming this corridor into a weekend destination," reminiscent reasoning behind the district taking shape around Lenovo Center three hours east. Bank of America extended its naming-rights agreement the same day on undisclosed terms, a relationship running back to 2004 and one of the longest in the league. The \$1.3 billion is a project budget rather than an impact estimate, and only \$650 million of it is public.⁴⁶

Uptown's other major venue, the Spectrum Center opened in 2005 and is owned by the City of Charlotte. Hornets Sports & Entertainment, parent company of the city's NBA franchise, operates the building under a management agreement. In 2022 city council approved \$275 million toward the arena and a new practice facility, extending the Hornets' lease from 2030 to 2045. The \$215 million arena share came from hotel and rental car tourism taxes restricted to tourism purposes, the practice facility was funded separately through naming-rights and related revenue.⁴⁷

"Spectrum Center is not only the home of the Hornets – it's a year-round community asset," said Hornets Sports & Entertainment Chief Business & Revenue Officer Mike Behan. "Over the past 20 years, Spectrum Center has hosted more than 2,500 events and welcomed 25 million guests. Today, it generates an annual economic impact exceeding \$350 million and supports approximately 3,200 jobs."⁴⁸ The Hornets also agreed to cover cost overruns at the facility, pay rent across the extended term, and continue an annual capital contribution that ramps up over time. "North Carolina is home, and we're proud to be part of its rich basketball tradition," Behan continued. "The recent renovations of Spectrum Center ensure it will remain a world-class destination that brings people together, attracts premier sports and



Spectrum Center in Uptown Charlotte serves as the year-round home of the Hornets while also hosting college sports, concerts, tournaments, and other major events that extend its economic role well beyond the NBA season. Photo courtesy of City of Charlotte.

⁴⁵ Business North Carolina. "Panthers Add Cash; Bank of America Stadium Renovation Plans Now Total \$1.3 Billion." *Business North Carolina*, July 23, 2026. <https://businessnc.com/panthers-add-cash-bank-of-america-stadium-renovation-plans-now-total-1-3-billion/>

⁴⁶ Carolina Panthers, "Bank of America and Carolina Panthers Extend Naming Rights for Bank of America Stadium," July 23, 2026, <https://www.panthers.com/news/bank-of-america-and-carolina-panthers-extend-naming-rights-for-bank-of-america-stadium-reinforcing-long-term-commitment-to-charlotte-and-the-carolinas>; Reuters, "Panthers Extend Naming Rights Deal, Reveal Reimagined Stadium," July 23, 2026.

⁴⁷ WBTV. "Charlotte City Council Approves \$275 Million Spectrum Center Renovations." *WBTV*, June 14, 2022. <https://www.wbtv.com/2022/06/14/charlotte-city-council-approves-275-million-spectrum-center-renovations/>

⁴⁸ Mike Behan, chief business & revenue officer, Hornets Sports & Entertainment, email to author, August 2026.

entertainment to North Carolina and drives economic growth across Charlotte and the Carolinas for years to come.”

The economics for the Spectrum Center don't have to rely on forty-one basketball dates alone. The arena carries concerts, the CIAA tournament, ACC and NCAA basketball, graduations, and touring events across when NBA basketball is dormant. The city's transportation infrastructure investments further support the area with direct light rail service.

Quail Hollow Club adds another major-event asset to Charlotte's sports economy. The 2025 PGA Championship hosted there generated an estimated \$192 million in regional economic benefits, a PGA of America/CRVA study found, including as much as \$116 million in direct spending, \$16.3 million in tax revenue, and a host of other local and regional economic impacts.⁴⁹ Financially, the event surpassed projections, however, compared to Quail Hollow's 2017 figures, attendance was actually below expectations. Charlotte's major event value depends on more than crowd size and hospitality, merchandise, corporate spending, operational spending, and visitor mix all shape the final impact and ROI for the host asset and community.

The Charlotte Sports Foundation is a narrower, sports-specific partner that recruits and hosts a portfolio of college events, the Duke's Mayo Classic, the Duke's Mayo Bowl, the ACC Football Championship, the Jumpman Invitational, and the Ally Tipoff among them. CSF reported record 2025 results, with total event attendance rising to 362,612 fans and estimated economic impact reaching \$118.25 million, based on figures compiled by the CRVA.⁵⁰ Its 2025 reporting also cited \$3.2 million in tax revenue and 74,100 hotel room nights across its event portfolio.⁵¹ Those figures are useful because they describe a portfolio, not one isolated event. A sports economy grows stronger when it can repeat, package, and sell events across a calendar.

The clearest example of a new kind of sports *property* arrived in Charlotte in June 2025, when the Savannah Bananas brought *Banana Ball* to Bank of America Stadium for the first time. Two sold-out nights drew 148,000 fans, more than 54,000 of them from outside the region, and generated an estimated \$38.6 million in economic impact, a figure CRVA and CSF put ahead of the prior year's ACC Football Championship and Duke's Mayo Classic combined.⁵² The event required Tepper Sports & Entertainment to convert an NFL stadium into a baseball field for the weekend, a logistical undertaking closer to a touring concert than a conventional ballgame, and it worked because Charlotte already had the venue, the visitor infrastructure, and the organizations able to coordinate a stadium-scale conversion on short notice. The Bananas' owners, Jesse and Emily Cole, live in Belmont, just outside Charlotte, which makes the booking less an outside act passing through than a homegrown entertainment brand finding its biggest stage close to home.

⁴⁹ Erik Spanberg, "PGA Championship at Quail Hollow Generated \$192M for Region, Study Finds," *Charlotte Business Journal*, July 20, 2026. <https://www.bizjournals.com/charlotte/news/2026/07/20/pga-championship-quail-hollow-golf-club-golf.html>

⁵⁰ Charlotte Sports Foundation, "CSF Posts Record Economic Impact of \$118.25M in 2025," March 3, 2026.

⁵¹ Charlotte Sports Foundation, "CSF Posts Record Economic Impact of \$118.25M in 2025," March 3, 2026.

⁵² WCNC, "Two-Night Savannah Bananas Visit Generates \$38.6 Million for Charlotte," August 2025, <https://www.wcnc.com/article/money/savannah-bananas-economic-impact-charlotte-bank-of-america-stadium/275-371e7103-3a6c-44fa-975d-c6de8693056e>; Business North Carolina, "Savannah Bananas Generated \$38.6 Million over Two Nights at Bank of America Stadium," August 2025, <https://businessnc.com/savannah-bananas-generated-38-6-million-over-two-nights-at-bank-of-america-stadium/>.

The city's event calendar keeps expanding as well as building on its past. CSF added the Meck Mile, a road race presented by Albemarle, to its Mecklenburg County portfolio in 2024, the kind of smaller, homegrown addition that fills the calendar between marquee weekends.⁵³ Charlotte was also awarded the 2027 Military World Summer Games, a multi-day international competition that will test venue capacity, lodging, transportation, and public safety coordination at a scale closer to an Olympic-style event than any single game or tournament the city has hosted before.⁵⁴ Whatever it draws in visitor spending, the bigger return may be what it proves about the region's readiness to host at that scale again. Charlotte's major-event calendar also benefits from the state's newer event-recruitment tools. Commerce's 2026 "Summer of Soccer" release cited the U.S. Men's National Team send-off match and the MLS All-Star Game in Charlotte as part of MEGA-supported activity, along with Scotland using Charlotte as a World Cup training base camp.⁵⁵

All-Star Week arrived that July, and the league spread it across four venues instead of concentrating it in the stadium. A free, two-day festival in Romare Bearden Park opened the schedule, the MLS NEXT youth all-star game went to the Mecklenburg County Sportsplex, the skills challenge to Truist Field, and the MLS–Liga MX match to Bank of America Stadium on July 29. Splitting the week puts paid and unpaid activity into more of the city than a single ticketed date, and it uses venues the region maintains for other purposes.⁵⁶ Charlotte FC's own contribution draws from a City of Charlotte analysis putting the club's 2023 impact at \$234.2 million.⁵⁷

State support for the 2027 Military World Games became more concrete in August 2026. North Carolina enacted a \$25 million appropriation for the Games through Session Law 2026-61, including \$7.5 million to reserve facilities at UNC Charlotte and another \$17.5 million subject to event-readiness conditions. Organizers had already reported commitments from 71 nations ahead of an August 1 threshold requiring at least 50 countries and 7,500 participants, but release of the larger share also requires the Games to receive a Level 1 or Level 2 Special Event Assessment Rating from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security before June 25, 2027. Local support remains under negotiation, with organizers reducing an earlier \$23 million request to Charlotte to \$4.5 million in cash and up to \$12 million in city services.⁵⁸ What ties Charlotte's sports economy together is how many different pieces reinforce each other at once, an airport, a convention center, a stadium district, a motorsports cluster, and organizations built to coordinate

⁵³ Charlotte Sports Foundation, "Charlotte Sports Foundation Announces Economic Impact of Nearly \$80 Million for 2023 Events," April 2024, <https://charlottesports.org/charlotte-sports-foundation-announces-economic-impact-of-nearly-80-million-for-2023-events/>

⁵⁴ International Military Sports Council, "Charlotte Awarded the 2027 Military World Summer Games," 2024, <https://www.milssport.one/news/world-summer-games>.

⁵⁵ North Carolina Department of Commerce. "North Carolina Celebrates 'Summer of Soccer' with Major Events Investments Across the State." June 3, 2026. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/06/03/north-carolina-celebrates-summer-soccer-major-events-investments-across-state>

⁵⁶ Major League Soccer, "2026 MLS All-Star Week in Charlotte Kicks Off with Soccer Celebration," July 21, 2026, <https://www.mlssoccer.com/allstar/2026/>; Axios Charlotte, "Charlotte's Guide to MLS All-Star Week," July 22, 2026.

⁵⁷ City of Charlotte analysis cited in Office of the Governor of North Carolina, "North Carolina Celebrates 'Summer of Soccer' with Major Events Investments Across the State," June 3, 2026, <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/06/03/north-carolina-celebrates-summer-soccer-major-events-investments-across-state>.

⁵⁸ Spanberg, Erik. "State Budget Bill Includes \$25M for Military World Games Venue Improvements and Athlete Housing." *Charlotte Business Journal*, July 28, 2026. <https://www.bizjournals.com/charlotte/news/2026/07/28/military-world-games-cism-2027-olympics-events.html>

all of it on short notice when a *Banana Ball* weekend or a Military World Games bid comes along. The scale is already there. Where Wake County built its sports economy around a deep calendar of repeatable participant events, Charlotte and Mecklenburg County built theirs around a smaller number of large, venue-anchored properties, supported by shared infrastructure, stadiums, arenas, a convention center, and a visitor authority built to market all of it. That shared base is what lets a football stadium host an NFL Sunday one week and a sold-out baseball spectacle the next. Both models complement the same economy.

6. College Athletics as the Foundation

College athletics gives North Carolina another, some might say *blue-blooded*, layer that few states can replicate. The University of North Carolina, NC State, Duke, Wake Forest, East Carolina, Appalachian State, Charlotte, North Carolina A&T, North Carolina Central, UNC Wilmington, UNC Asheville, Western Carolina, Elon, Campbell, Davidson, High Point, and many other institutions make sports part of the state's identity and calendar. It's true that the state has professional teams and major events, but college sports still shape the calendar in more families, communities and across generations. College football Saturdays, ample basketball rivalries, baseball weekends, collegiate soccer tournaments, Olympic sports, conference and NCAA championships, alumni travel, media coverage, and a wide range of campus traditions find sports and culture intertwined from Western Carolina to *UNC-by-the-Sea*, and everywhere in between.



College sports have long been intertwined with North Carolina's culture, traditions, and sense of place. "What It Was, Was Football!" Andy Griffith at UNC's Kenan Stadium in 1954. Photo courtesy of Hugh Morton, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

College athletics also gives North Carolina an economic engine that would be the envy of many other states. Capturing or articulating the college sports economy starts with its highest profile network, the UNC System. A 2023 analysis of the athletics impact of the UNC System estimated that the 15 public intercollegiate athletics programs generated \$807 million in annual operations-related impact within North Carolina and an additional 6,340 annual jobs supported by operations. When capital investment and event attendee spending were added, the study estimated an approximately \$1.13 billion annual economic impact, more than 9,400 jobs, \$393 million in earnings and \$22 million in state tax revenues.

Another significant part of the state's sports economy includes private colleges and universities active in collegiate athletics. Duke and Wake Forest are both national brands with major media exposure, high-value basketball and football inventory, Olympic sports, facilities, and visitor demand. Davidson, Elon,

Campbell, High Point, Queens, Gardner-Webb, and others add to an overall aggregate private-college athletic-department revenue and expense at roughly \$450 million to \$550 million a year.⁵⁹ Duke and Wake Forest dominate that total with the rest forming a long tail of Division I, II, III, and NAIA programs with far smaller budgets.⁶⁰

The value of North Carolina's best-known college sports brands also travels beyond athletic-department budgets or visitors arriving in Chapel Hill and Durham. ESPN's February 2026 Duke-UNC basketball game averaged 3.5 million viewers and peaked at 4.8 million, the network's largest men's college-basketball audience since retired Duke Coach Mike Krzyzewski's final home game in 2022. A 2025 enterprise-value analysis by Indiana University finance professor Ryan Brewer estimated UNC men's basketball at \$378 million and Duke at \$370 million, the two highest values in college basketball.⁶¹ Although hypothetical business valuations, not economic-impact figures, they measure what a buyer might value and companies do spend real money to be associated with these brands. In 2026, Edward Jones selected Duke and UNC for new national sponsorship agreements aimed at brand visibility and building client connections.⁶²

Many of the leading collegiate athletics programs in the state compete in the Atlantic Coast Conference. The ACC was founded in Greensboro in 1953 and called the city home for nearly 70 years before its board voted in 2022 to relocate the league's headquarters and nearly 50 employees to Uptown Charlotte's Legacy Union complex.⁶³ The move shifted the conference's own institutional center of gravity away from the Piedmont Triad city most associated with ACC basketball history and toward the state's largest sports-event market. North Carolina's college-sports ecosystem also includes smaller conference systems that rarely receive the same attention as the ACC. The CIAA is headquartered in Charlotte and includes several North Carolina HBCUs, while the Big South is also headquartered in the Queen City and includes Gardner-Webb, High Point, and UNC Asheville.⁶⁴ Conference Carolinas extends across several southeastern states but retains a strong North Carolina footprint through colleges like Barton, Belmont Abbey, Chowan, Lees-McRae, Mount Olive, and UNC-Pembroke.

In Boone, the value of a football weekend does not necessarily end when the last visitor leaves Kidd Brewer Stadium. "You might not be in the right frame of mind on a football Saturday to go on a long shopping trip downtown, but those folks that have a great experience are likely to return at other times of the year," said David Jackson, president and CEO of the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce and a former longtime broadcast voice of App State athletics. Jackson sees gameday as an opportunity to introduce tens of thousands of

⁵⁹ Data Note: The U.S. Department of Education's Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act data is useful for understanding the operating scale of college athletics programs, including athletic-department revenues and expenses. More information follows in Data and Methodology Notes.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Beaton, Andrew. "The Most Valuable Team in College Basketball Is..." *Wall Street Journal*, April 8, 2025.

<https://www.wsj.com/sports/basketball/ncaa-tournament-march-madness-ncaa-team-value-98c44e14>

⁶² Learfield. "Edward Jones Announces College Sports Sponsorships with Duke, UNC and Oregon." June 30, 2026.

<https://www.learfield.com/2026/06/edward-jones-announces-college-sports-sponsorships-with-duke-unc-and-oregon/>

⁶³ Atlantic Coast Conference, "ACC Board of Directors Announces Relocation of League Office to Charlotte," September 2022, <https://theacc.com/news/2022/9/20/general-acc-board-of-directors-announces-relocation-of-league-office-to-charlotte.aspx>.

⁶⁴ National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association," NCAA Directory, accessed July 2026.

visitors to the broader community. *“The businesses closest to the action have found ways to draw people in for a gameday need and remind them through great hospitality why they should return for a future visit.”*



ESPN's College GameDay broadcasts from Appalachian State in Boone, a national spotlight on college sports sharing a community's atmosphere and visibility far beyond game day. Photo courtesy of ESPN Images.

College athletics also supplies event-hosting infrastructure that many communities might not otherwise have at scale. Stadiums and arenas, ballparks or tennis centers, aquatic facilities and all the requisite parking plans, concessions systems, ticketing operations, and public-safety routines are built first and foremost around campus needs. Yet, they often become core civic and regional assets. Greensboro's long association with ACC basketball and swimming, Raleigh's NCAA tournament hosting, Cary's NCAA soccer and baseball events, Durham's baseball and basketball culture, Greenville's football

weekends, Boone's game-day economy, Winston-Salem's tennis and golf history, and Wilmington's coastal sports base all show how college sports connect schools to local business activity. College sports ties schools to hotels, restaurants, vendors, media, downtowns, and local governments. Some of the value is visitor spending, some payroll, facility use, vendor purchasing, and event labor. Both culturally and economically, some of the value is the way a campus team or championship event gives a place a name, a rhythm, and a reason for people to return.

The largest test of shared university infrastructure is still ahead as North Carolina will host the 2029 FISU World University Games in July of that year, bringing an anticipated 10,000+ participants from 150 countries to compete in 18 sports across as many as 40 venues stretching from the Triangle through the Triad.⁶⁵ The event will draw on universities and community facilities across Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, Cary, Elon, High Point, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem, turning North Carolina's concentration of colleges and venue infrastructure into one distributed international sports campus.

The college-sports economy extends well into eastern North Carolina through HBCU athletics. Elizabeth City State's *Down East Viking Football Classic* has been staged in partnership with Rocky Mount since 1998 and draws more than 10,000 fans to the Rocky Mount Athletic Complex. The football game anchors a broader weekend of alumni activity, hospitality and entertainment nearly 100 miles from ECSU's campus. "At Elizabeth City State University, athletics is much more than competition; it serves as an economic and institutional asset," said James DuBose Jr., athletic director at ECSU. He points to game days, Homecoming, and Legends Weekend as drivers of local business activity and opportunities to reach alumni, prospective students, and

⁶⁵ International University Sports Federation (FISU), "18 Sports Venues Under Scrutiny as FISU Technical Committee Chairs Visit North Carolina," May 26, 2026, <https://www.fisu.net/2026/05/26/18-sports-venues-under-scrutiny-as-fisu-technical-committee-chairs-visit-north-carolina/>

communities across northeastern North Carolina. “For an HBCU, that visibility is especially important because athletics helps communicate the university’s history, culture, excellence, and continuing relevance.”

A significant risk to North Carolina’s sports economy stability is, however, the rapidly changing landscape in college athletics. Name-Image-Likeness (NIL), revenue sharing, transfer portals, media and TV contracts, conference realignment, donor expectations, and legal settlements are pushing athletic departments into a more complex operating environment. The House v. NCAA settlement, approved in June 2025, now allows schools to share revenue directly with athletes, and UNC’s athletic department spent a record \$188 million in the 2024-25 academic year, including nearly \$14 million in upfront revenue-sharing payments, against \$173 million in revenue, a \$14 million shortfall covered out of department reserves.⁶⁶ Starting in the 2025-26 year, UNC is distributing \$20.5 million directly to athletes, weighted toward football and men’s basketball, and expects its total athletics budget to grow by about \$30 million as a result.⁶⁷ Beginning in fiscal 2027, both UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State are projected to receive sports-wagering distributions for the first time, a new public revenue stream which will help address deficits.⁶⁸

Other North Carolina programs are operating at a different scale entirely. East Carolina and Charlotte each shared \$10 million or less with athletes in fiscal year 2025, and Appalachian State shared about \$5 million, figures that put the state’s non-flagship programs in a very different financial conversation than the ones UNC and NC State are having.⁶⁹ North Carolina Central’s opt-in on the settlement framework in June 2026 puts revenue sharing on the books for an HBCU athletic department with a fraction of the media, ticket, and donor base behind it.⁷⁰ These figures describe institutional finances, not community economic value. An athletic department can run a deficit in the same year football Saturdays fill hotels, restaurants, and airports across a region. Departmental balance sheets and the visitor activity college sports generate are related, but they are not the same.

Make no mistake, college sports *is* business and the financial models are becoming less like a civic institution and more like industry managing real operational risk, productivity, and competition. North Carolina’s legislature is responding to that shift. A bill approved by the Senate in 2026 would exempt UNC System institutions’ revenue-sharing budgets, including team-by-team and player-by-player allocations, from the state’s public-records law, a change lawmakers described as necessary competitive cover against wealthier conferences rather than a retreat

⁶⁶ WRAL, “UNC Is Spending More Than Ever on Athletics. Here’s Where the Money Is Going,” February 2026, <https://www.wral.com/sports/north-carolina-athletics-spending-fiscal-year-2024-25-february-2026/>.

⁶⁷ Chapelboro.com, “‘A Significant Evolution’: UNC Athletic Director Details New Revenue Sharing, Scholarship Plans,” June 2025, <https://chapelboro.com/sports/a-significant-evolution-unc-athletic-director-shares-open-letter-following-house-settlement>.

⁶⁸ WRAL. “UNC, NC State to Get Millions from Sports Betting; Gambling Deductions Allowed in Budget Proposal.” June 28, 2026. <https://www.wral.com/news/nccapitol/sports-betting-changes-budget-unc-ncstate-gambling-taxes-deductions-prediction-markets-june-2026/>.

⁶⁹ The Center Square, “Cloak of Darkness Creeping into UNC System Athletics Revenue Sharing,” May 2026, https://www.thecentersquare.com/north_carolina/article_1b1051cd-5617-42ba-a0bc-320b24155749.html.

⁷⁰ Data Driven HBCU, “NCCU Finances and the Athletics Opt-In to the House Settlement,” June 25, 2026, <https://datadrivenhbcu.com/2026/06/25/nccu-finances-athletics-opt-in-house/>.

from transparency.⁷¹ Whether that trade-off serves the public interest is a genuine open question, not a settled one.

The state's 2026 appropriation act replaces the equal-share distribution between UNC System programs with tiers tied to competitive classification. UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State join the formula for the first time, and a new category for public universities fielding FBS football caps at \$2.5 million per school beginning in July 2027. NCGA Fiscal Research projected each of the nine other DI programs at roughly \$3 million in 2026-27, several hundred thousand dollars more than before. The shift sends more public money toward the programs already carrying the largest costs, which is a defensible answer to House-settlement pressure while also writing the gap between Chapel Hill and Cullowhee into state law.⁷²

Risk, like in any other economic sector, is always present. North Carolina has four ACC members, more than any other state, and the league's headquarters, its football championship game, and much of its basketball history are here. In 2025, the ACC settled its litigation with Clemson and Florida State keeping the *grant of rights* in place through the end of the current ESPN contract in 2036. Disincentives for departure are built into the agreements and adjustments were made to the television revenue distribution model to benefit the largest brand programs in the conference.⁷³ Turmoil and change in college athletics will undoubtedly continue, and with it one of North Carolina's most robust sports economic assets remains exposed.

To meet that and other risks, North Carolina has a distinctive college sports advantage as the state combines cultural intensity, institutional depth, and geographic distribution. The ACC is part of that story, but the value reaches beyond one conference and well past basketball rivalries. It runs through HBCU campuses, mid-major programs, Olympic sports, and NCAA championship venues in communities across the state. College sports connects identity, higher education, commerce, and national reputation in a way few other sectors can match. Its financial model is rapidly changing, but that might only reinforce its economic relevance. College athletics is one of North Carolina's most visible and



College wrestlers compete at Fort Liberty, now Fort Bragg, where military facilities create a stage for sports and connect campus competitions with North Carolina's military communities. Photo courtesy of Sgt. Daniel Ramos

⁷¹ The Center Square, "Cloak of Darkness Creeping into UNC System Athletics Revenue Sharing," May 2026, https://www.thecentersquare.com/north_carolina/article_1b1051cd-5617-42ba-a0bc-320b24155749.html.

⁷² N.C. Session Law 2026-41 (Senate Bill 257), signed July 7, 2026, <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2025/Bills/Senate/PDF/S257v8.pdf>; N.C. Fiscal Research Division, fiscal note to S.B. 257, <https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewBillDocument/2025/10154/3/S257-FDFM-NBC-18061>.

⁷³ Tasher, Samuel. "Inside the ACC's New Team Payout Models, Record Revenue Year and Settlement with Clemson and Florida State." *The Chronicle*, June 16, 2025. <https://dukechronicle.com/article/250604-football-basketball-acc-revenue-distribution-model-brand-success-initiative-clemson-florida-state-tv-rights-exit-fees-lawsuit-tax-filings-20250616>

widely distributed sports-economy assets, and its reach gives the state a foundation upon which professional teams and major events can build.

7. Participant Sports and the *Everyday Sports Economy*

Participant sports run under a different economic model than professional leagues, college teams and tournaments, or even sports-destination events. The paying customer is usually a family or a participant, not a spectator. That vital difference shapes how these businesses raise revenue (and capital), price a season or subscription, and grow. Youth leagues, instructional franchises, nonprofit swim and recreation programs, and private training studios make up most of this layer, with public recreation departments, cheer programs, and martial arts studios extending it further. A tournament in this world can still fill a hotel block for a weekend without selling a single ticket.

National spending data shows the scale. The Aspen Institute's *Project Play* research found that the average sports family spent more than a thousand dollars on a child's primary sport in 2024, plus nearly another \$500 on other sports related experiences.⁷⁴ The stat comes from a national sample rather than a North Carolina survey, but it puts a figure on something families already know: *it costs to be sporty*. Registration fees, uniforms, lessons, dues, coaching, equipment, travel, clinics, and tournament costs are an every-season factor. This spending supports local coaches, small businesses, and large sports or recreation organizations across the state most of the time outside the count of an economic impact study. Much of it happens at the martial arts studio next to the grocery store, in strip-mall storefronts and leased gym time, and at a scale that never registers as sports business to anyone but the families paying and the owner making payroll.

North Carolina Youth Soccer, the state's largest recreational soccer organization, reports more than 74,000 children in its statewide system, with roughly two-thirds playing at the recreational level rather than competitive travel ball.⁷⁵ NCFC Youth adds another 16,000 to 17,000 players annually just in the greater Triangle.⁷⁶ Youth and participatory soccer, like a long list of other sports, supports playing field inventory and infrastructure, coaches, referees, administrators, concessions, uniform or trophy shops, travel infrastructure, facility operations, and a whole host of other peripheral benefactors. National franchise systems extend this sports economy further. Soccer Shots, a preschool sports instruction franchise active across North Carolina, enrolled more

⁷⁴ Aspen Institute Project Play, "Project Play Survey: Family Spending on Youth Sports Rises 46% over Five Years," March 3, 2025. <https://projectplay.org/news/2025/2/24/project-play-survey-family-spending-on-youth-sports-rises-46-over-five-years>

⁷⁵ North Carolina Youth Soccer Association, "Who We Are" and NCYSA Recreation Playbook 2024-2025. <https://www.ncsoccer.org/who-we-are/>

⁷⁶ SoccerWire. "North Carolina FC Youth Celebrates Club's 50th Anniversary in 2024." January 16, 2024. <https://www.soccerwire.com/news/north-carolina-fc-youth-celebrates-clubs-50th-anniversary-in-2024/>

than 620,000 children nationally in 2023 (although state-specific data is not available). i9 Sports runs community leagues, camps, and clinics through at least ten NC territories and counts five million cumulative registrations nationally since it began franchising.⁷⁷ Both companies have built business on repeat participation at the local level, branded curriculum, and relationships with schools and parks and recreation departments rather than events.



NCFC Youth players compete in the Triangle, part of a year-round participation base that supports coaches, facilities, families, and a major youth sports tourism economy. Photo courtesy of Soccerwire.

Sports and recreation nonprofits also carry a significant share of this economy. The YMCA of the Triangle reported 7,789 youth-sports participants in FY2024, and more than 164 thousand members across its broader organization.⁷⁸ The YMCA of Greater Charlotte reported \$74.1 million in revenue in its latest Form 990 though that figure also covers the Y's broader association activities, not just sports programming.⁷⁹ SwimMAC Carolina, organized under the Mecklenburg Aquatic Club, serves nearly 10,000 people in the Charlotte region each year and earns more than \$6.4 million in revenue in its most recent nonprofit compliance filings.⁸⁰ None of these organizations sell tickets, but each meets payroll, leases pool and facility time, and keeps a membership base that returns season after season, often alongside aquatics, camps, and wellness programming that makes sports part of a larger service offering.

Private sports-performance training adds another layer beyond teams and leagues. D1 Training, a franchise built around strength and conditioning work for competitive athletes, now operates locations in Cary, Holly Springs, Mooresville, Wake Forest, Charlotte, and Wilmington, a footprint that tracks the state's fastest-growing suburbs more closely than its biggest media markets.⁸¹ Similar demand shows up through Parisi Speed School in the Triangle and Triad, Athletic Republic in Cary, Athletic Lab in Morrisville, HF Center for Exercise Science in Asheville, and ISI Elite Training locations in several suburban locations around the state. That pattern, following youth-sports demand rather than stadiums or arenas, is a different site-selection approach than the one driving major venues and events.

⁷⁷ i9 Sports Franchise, "i9 Sports Celebrates 5 Million Registrations," August 30, 2024. <https://www.i9sportsfranchise.com/i9-sports-celebrates-5-million-registrations/>

⁷⁸ The Young Men's Christian Association of the Triangle Area, Inc. *Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax*, 2024. Public disclosure copy. Raleigh, NC, July 15, 2025. https://ymcatriangle.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/YMCA%20Triangle%20-%20Form%20990_2024_Public%20Disclosure.pdf; The Young Men's Christian Association of the Triangle Area, Inc. *Consolidated Financial Statements and Supplementary Information, December 31, 2024 and 2023*. Raleigh, NC, 2025. <https://ymcatriangle.org/sites/default/files/2026-04/12-31-2024%20Audit%20Report.pdf>

⁷⁹ ProPublica. "YMCA of Greater Charlotte." *Nonprofit Explorer*. Accessed July 12, 2026.

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/561045299/202543449349301469/full>

⁸⁰ ProPublica. "Mecklenburg Aquatic Club Inc: Full Filing for Fiscal Year Ending August 2025." *Nonprofit Explorer*. Updated June 22, 2026. <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/591769720/202503389349300940/full>

⁸¹ D1 Training, North Carolina facility pages, 2026, <https://d1training.com/facility/cary>.

These businesses are also developmentally related. Children who start preschool soccer programs move into youth clubs, then to tournament travel, private coaching and sports medicine, then into showcase events and recruiting, and eventually into adult fandom and the household spending that comes with it. Each stage supports different businesses in different places, and the spending at one stage is what makes the next stage possible. The economic chain is rarely captured in any single report because it develops across years and across many businesses, none of which sees more than its own segment.

Participant sports also become sports tourism when organizations or clubs host tournaments or showcases of their own. NCFC Youth's *visitRaleigh.com Showcase Series* reported more than 1,600 teams, 500 coaches, 72,000+ visitors, 32,000 room nights, and roughly \$34 million in estimated economic impact across four weekends. In the Triad, the NC Fusion organization's tournament calendar includes the Adidas Clash whose 2025 edition included a record 557 teams from 91 clubs and nine distinct states, not to mention an estimated \$10 million impact.⁸² The critical mass of sustained local participation, facilities and operational infrastructure can become an economic asset for a community.

"People often see the economic impact of youth sports on tournament weekends, the hotel rooms, the restaurants, the visitor spending, but that impact is built on a year-round foundation most people never see," said Gary Buete, chief executive officer of North Carolina FC Youth. "The tournament is the visible peak, but the participation base, growing hospitality industry, and facilities are the actual infrastructure investment."

Travel basketball is another large and highly active part of North Carolina's participant-event market, although no statewide economic estimate captures it. Greensboro hosts the four-day USBA National Championship across multiple courts and facilities, while North Carolina-based Phenom Hoops alone scheduled roughly 20 travel-ball event weekends in the state during 2026 from Raleigh and Rocky Mount to Bermuda Run and Kernersville. These businesses run on entry fees, court rentals, officiating, coaching and recruiting, but it quickly becomes sports tourism when families begin traveling between markets for weekend tournaments.

North Carolina, as one of the fastest growing states in the nation, is also experiencing demographic changes relevant to sports and the sports economy. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates the state's 2025 population at more than 11.2 million with more than 21 percent of residents under age 18, 9.1 percent foreign-born, and 13.5 percent speaking a language other than English at home.⁸³ Those figures will undoubtedly continue to shift the culture of North Carolina's sports economy with growth in soccer, cricket, volleyball, and other sports expanding into metro and suburban areas of the state. Population growth becomes weekly activities on fields, courts, pools, gyms and parks, as well as coaches paid, facilities built, utilized and leased, and equipment purchased, season after season.

⁸² WFMY News 2. "Adidas Clash Soccer Tournament Expected to Bring 33,000 Visitors, \$10M Economic Boost to the Area." November 6, 2025. <https://www.wfmynews2.com/article/news/local/adidas-clash-expected-to-bring-33000-visitors-10m-economic-boost-to-the-area/83-514de7c3-2fb1-44fa-a271-a201a3474056>

⁸³ U.S. Census Bureau. "QuickFacts: North Carolina." *QuickFacts*. Accessed July 22, 2026. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/PST045225>

8. Motorsports: North Carolina's Most Developed Sports Industry Cluster

Motorsports is North Carolina's most developed example of sports becoming an industry cluster. Race weekends and events bring fans, teams, vendors, media, sponsors, and hospitality spending into local markets. But this is also a supply chain story. The concentration of race teams, fabrication and engineering, machining, as well as suppliers, marketing and media, and specialized workforce in and around the Charlotte region is nothing short of a thriving industry. In the pursuit of speed and performance, the work in motorsports continues after the lights at the track dim. Cars get built, tested, damaged, adjusted, and rebuilt weekly. The firms supporting that cycle, and the research and development resources that go into it, often benefit from being close to their customer. The concentration of the motorsports supply chain in North Carolina adds to the momentum for this sports economy.



U.S. service members salute at the 2025 Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway, where North Carolina's motorsports and military communities intersect on one of NASCAR's biggest stages. Photo courtesy of USAF Tech. Sgt. Della Creech.

When the performance engine headers and exhaust systems manufacturer American Racing Headers chose Stanly County for their new manufacturing plant in 2021, the company's owner made it clear that he wanted to locate in the heart of racing country.⁸⁴ State officials framed the project as a win for precision manufacturing rather than a byproduct of sports nostalgia.⁸⁵ The \$4.37 million project brought more than 60 jobs to the Charlotte region, and is one example among many of a company's siting decisions driven

by talent, customers, and technical credibility. This clustering is not new for the area or sector. A 2003 study estimated motorsports suppliers alone at \$530.3 million in direct output and \$845.5 million in total output impact with NASCAR teams and suppliers accounting for more than half of the industry's total impact.⁸⁶ The exact figures are dated but it proves the point over time that North Carolina is a place where the sport's technical, commercial, and supplier networks have thrived.

The motorsports technical base gives this sports economy relevance beyond racing. The same capabilities that support racing, including lightweight materials, precision machining, rapid prototyping and simulation, power and safety systems also have value in other advanced industries like Defense. In 2025, Hendrick Motorsports opened a 160,000-square-foot advanced

⁸⁴ Area Development, "American Racing Headers & Exhaust Plans Stanly County, North Carolina, Manufacturing Plant," April 2021, <https://www.areadevelopment.com/newsitems/4-7-2021/american-racing-headers-exhaust-stanly-county-north-carolina.shtml>

⁸⁵ North Carolina Department of Commerce, "High-Performance Automotive Parts Manufacturer Selects Stanly County for New Industrial Plant," accessed July 2026, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/high-performance-automotive-parts-manufacturer-selects-stanly-county-new>.

⁸⁶ The Center Square, "\$18 Million in Federal Funds Fuels NASCAR Return to North Wilkesboro Speedway for All-Star Race," September 2022, https://www.thecentersquare.com/north_carolina/article_3c81ec6a-2fae-11ed-8820-a3cdb44b5f59.html

manufacturing facility in Concord for Hendrick Motorsports Technical Solutions serving commercial and government customers including GM Defense.⁸⁷ Minutes away from Hendrick Motorsports, GM Defense also manufactures the Infantry Squad Vehicle for the U.S. Army in Concord with Hendrick a key supply chain partner providing the vehicle's chrome-moly steel exoskeleton and rollover-protection structure.⁸⁸ A longtime Hendrick rival, Joe Gibbs Racing is keeping pace. In 2025 Joe Gibbs Racing sold its manufacturing arm to Torque Capital Group, rebranded as JGA Space & Defense, a manufacturer of solid rocket motor insulators, nozzle assemblies, precision machined parts, and aerospace, space, and defense components.⁸⁹ Racing capabilities are dual-use and allow this sports economy to move into adjacent markets where speed, precision, materials knowledge, rapid iteration, and reliability have commercial value beyond the track.

Though the concentration in Charlotte is noteworthy, motorsports is both a statewide cultural identity and sports economy. Charlotte Motor Speedway anchors one part of the system, but North Wilkesboro, Rockingham, Bowman Gray, Hickory, and other smaller tracks carry different pieces of racing history, visitor activity, and industrial innovation. North Wilkesboro Speedway sat mostly abandoned for 27 years after its last NASCAR-sanctioned race in 1996. The state's 2021 pandemic-recovery budget helped change that by directing \$18 million in federal relief funds to the speedway's rebuild, with NASCAR adding another \$4 million.⁹⁰ The state's investment proved fruitful as the 2023 NASCAR All-Star Race, held at North Wilkesboro for the first time since the track went dark, generated an estimated \$42.4 million in statewide economic impact, \$27.9 million in labor income, more than 600 jobs, all while drawing fans from all 50 states and beyond.⁹¹ The race returned in 2024 and 2025, and by 2026 the track had moved beyond exhibitions, hosting a points-paying NASCAR Cup Series race for the first time in three decades.⁹² The *Window World 450* ran on July 19 and sold every reserved seat, campsite, and advance parking pass for the fourth consecutive year and drew fans from 48 states and eight countries on a MEGA reimbursement grant of up to \$1.26 million. Rusty Wallace, serving as grand marshal, said the weekend "almost feels like this is an inaugural race." State officials expected the weekend to move millions of dollars through Wilkes County, though no completed study had been published.⁹³

Rockingham Speedway, roughly 90 miles to the southeast, followed a similar redevelopment arc. Known as "The Rock," the track hosted its final Cup Series race in 2004 and went dark on

⁸⁷ Muccigrosso, Catherine. "Yes, It's Hendrick Motorsports. But You Won't Find Race Cars at This New Concord Plant." *Charlotte Observer*, March 13, 2025. Updated March 18, 2025. <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/business/article300655019.html>

⁸⁸ Hendrick Motorsports. "GM Defense Names Hendrick Motorsports 2023 Supplier of the Year." April 12, 2024.

<https://www.hendrickmotorsports.com/news/2024/4/12/gm-defense-names-hendrick-motorsports-2023-supplier-of-the-year>

⁸⁹ PR Newswire, "Torque Capital Group Acquires Joe Gibbs Manufacturing Solutions, Announces Rebranding to JGA Space & Defense and Major Facility Expansion," December 1, 2025, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/torque-capital-group-acquires-joe-gibbs-manufacturing-solutions-announces-rebranding-to-jga-space--defense-and-major-facility-expansion-302627002.html>.

⁹⁰ The Center Square, "\$18 Million in Federal Funds Fuels NASCAR Return to North Wilkesboro Speedway for All-Star Race," September 2022, https://www.thecentersquare.com/north_carolina/article_3c81ec6a-2fae-11ed-8820-a3cdb44b5f59.html.

⁹¹ WUNC, "NASCAR All-Star Race Returns to North Wilkesboro After Generating Millions for North Carolina in 2023," May 2024, <https://www.wunc.org/sports/2024-05-17/nascar-allstar-race-north-wilkesboro-millions-cooper-moonshine>.

⁹² Spectrum News, "North Wilkesboro Speedway to Benefit Big This Weekend," July 2026,

<https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nc/charlotte/news/2026/07/16/nascar-returns--north-wilkesboro-speedway>.

⁹³ Office of the Governor of North Carolina, "North Carolina Welcomes Race Fans to North Wilkesboro for NASCAR Race Weekend," July 16, 2026, <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/07/16/north-carolina-welcomes-race-fans-north-wilkesboro-nascar-race-weekend>; sellout and grand-marshal remarks reported July 18–19, 2026.

NASCAR's national circuit entirely after 2012.⁹⁴ The track sat in near total disrepair until Dan Lovenheim bought it in 2018. The same state relief program that was a lifeline to North Wilkesboro sent roughly \$9 million to Rockingham in 2022 for renovations and repairs. By 2025, NASCAR's national touring series returned to the track and the race weekend generated an estimated \$40 million in economic activity across Richmond and Moore counties.⁹⁵ The Rock changed hands again in 2026 when the International Hot Rod Association purchased the speedway with plans to add concerts and festival experiences alongside racing.⁹⁶ Sports infrastructure, well-utilized, once again making local and regional economic contributions.

Both revivals are tied to a state investment in the sports economy. Mark Poole, director of the Commerce Finance Center at the North Carolina Department of Commerce, described motorsports as Commerce's first major step into sports-related economic development. "As a department, our first movement into the realm of sports was \$46 million that came out of the State Fiscal Recovery Funds dedicated to the motorsports industry," Poole said. "Some money went into Charlotte Motor Speedway, obviously a big chunk went into Wilkesboro, Rockingham Speedway, and then a bunch of smaller tracks around the state." The *Motorsports Relief Fund* reached 17 venues across 15 local governments in total. North Carolina felt that track infrastructure across the state was worth protecting, rather than simply rescuing two nostalgic venues. The state's Major Events, Games, and Attractions (MEGA) Fund also incentivizes growth in the sports economy. Their 2026 lineup includes motorsports awards for the NASCAR Cook Out Clash at Bowman Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem, NASCAR Race at the Rock at Rockingham Speedway, the NASCAR Cup Weekend at North Wilkesboro, and NHRA Nationals at Rockingham Dragway.⁹⁷ Investment in event assets and infrastructure helps keep the broader racing ecosystem visible, active, and connected to communities across North Carolina.

North Carolina did well for Cup events in 2026, but the NASCAR calendar has become annually negotiable. Events have been added, dropped, or moved to new spots on the schedule. The NASCAR All-Star race even moved out of North Wilkesboro to make room for a points race there.⁹⁸ What does not move as easily are the engineering, fabrication, and machining businesses and supply chain around Concord, Mooresville, and Charlotte. The motorsports economy is anchored to teams, manufacturers, and supplier relationships rather than any race weekend. Its durability depends on team viability and continued OEM participation more than on the schedule.

The North Carolina Motorsports Association, founded in Concord in 2002, is a trade association whose members range from race teams and tracks to manufacturers, suppliers, and professional-service firms, and it functions largely as the industry's advocate in Raleigh on regulatory and legislative matters. Its charitable arm, the North Carolina Motorsports Foundation, funds

⁹⁴ NASCAR.com, "Rockingham Speedway Through the Years," accessed July 2026, <https://www.nascar.com/gallery/rockingham-speedway-through-the-years/>

⁹⁵ Sandhills Sentinel, "Rockingham NASCAR Weekend Provides \$28M for Moore in Economic Impact," June 2025, <https://sandhillssentinel.com/rockingham-nascar-weekend-provides-nearly-40-million-in-economic-impact/>.

⁹⁶ Lankford, Ciara. "Historic Rockingham Speedway under New Ownership with Long-Term Vision." *Queen City News*, January 1, 2026. <https://www.qcnews.com/organization/nascar/historic-rockingham-speedway-under-new-ownership-with-long-term-vision/>

⁹⁷ North Carolina Department of Commerce. "Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund." Accessed July 23, 2026. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/major-events-games-and-attractions-fund#2026EventsSupportedbytheFund-3769>

⁹⁸ Staff Report. "Dover to Host 2026 All-Star Race; North Wilkesboro Gets Points Date." *NASCAR.com*, August 20, 2025. <https://www.nascar.com/news-media/2025/08/20/dover-to-host-2026-all-star-race-north-wilkesboro-gets-points-date/>

scholarships aimed at the engineers, technicians, and business staff the industry needs to keep hiring.⁹⁹

“Motorsports is one of North Carolina’s defining strengths because it’s both an iconic sport and a strategic economic asset,” said Chad Willis, executive director of the North Carolina Motorsports Association and North Carolina Motorsports Foundation. “Every race showcases the passion and competition fans love, but behind that spectacle is a year-round ecosystem of engineers, manufacturers, technology companies, suppliers, educators, and entrepreneurs who drive innovation and create opportunity. That’s why motorsports isn’t just part of North Carolina’s sports economy; it’s a cornerstone of our innovation economy and a competitive advantage for our state’s future.”

9. Golf, Pinehurst, and Destination Sports

Golf gives North Carolina one of its strongest destination-sports, and Pinehurst carries a significant part of that reputation. Championship hosting is highly visible, but the same economy runs through resort travel, real estate, course operations, and the agronomy and instruction that keep the courses playable year-round. North Carolina’s golf assets stretch far past the Sandhills into coastal resort courses, mountain town clubs, and the golf communities built into the suburbs ringing metros across the state. Pinehurst’s own relationship with golf has, however, been a key driver in the development of golf’s sports economy in the Old North State. In 2020, the U.S. Golf Association (USGA) moved from a partner to permanent fixture by naming Pinehurst Resort its first-ever U.S. Open “anchor site.”¹⁰⁰ North Carolina helped make that deal happen with the support of H.B. 807, the Championship NC Act which gave the USGA a \$25 million state incentive package to open an office in Pinehurst and lock in the anchor-site designation.¹⁰¹ The Pinehurst resort added an additional 150-year lease on



Pinehurst No. 2, the centerpiece of North Carolina’s golf identity and a recurring U.S. Open host, anchors a destination-sports economy built around championship golf, tourism, and long-term investment in the Sandhills. Photo courtesy of PGA.

⁹⁹ North Carolina Motorsports Foundation. “Talent Advancement: Scholarship Program.” *North Carolina Motorsports Association*. Accessed July 23, 2026. <https://motorsportsn.org/scholarship-program/>

¹⁰⁰ Dojc, Mike. “USGA To Build Second Headquarters In Pinehurst, North Carolina.” *Forbes*, September 9, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikedojc/2020/09/09/usga-to-build-second-headquarters-in-pinehurst-north-carolina/>

¹⁰¹ StarNews. “USGA Moving Museum, Offices to Pinehurst and Adds U.S. Open Dates to NC Course.” *StarNews Online*, September 9, 2020.

seven acres of land to complete the transaction.¹⁰² The designation locked in five U.S. Opens on Pinehurst No. 2 through 2047, in 2024, 2029, 2035, 2041, and 2047, with the U.S. Women's Open returning in 2029 for the tournament's second-ever back-to-back Open and Women's Open year.

"Golf is not only the economic identity of the Pinehurst area, it is the life blood of the community. It is our DNA," said Phil Werz, president and CEO of Visit Pinehurst, Southern Pines, Aberdeen. That identity has increasingly become physical and permanent. Pinehurst Resort continues to reinvest in courses, lodging, hospitality, and other golf-related assets, while Golf Pride has located its global innovation headquarters in the community and the USGA has activities including the USGA Experience, and the World Golf Hall of Fame.

The USGA brought real capital to back its commitment, investing \$25 million to build Golf House Pinehurst, its second headquarters campus now including equipment testing facilities, a USGA Experience visitor center, and the World Golf Hall of Fame. The site employs more than 70 full-time staff and facilitates more than 25,000 visitors annually.¹⁰³ The USGA's Golf House Pinehurst, research and test functions, activity centers, and future championship rotation give North Carolina more than episodic golf tourism. They give the state a permanent connection to golf governance, research, rules, equipment testing, turf science, and global golf attention. The 2024 U.S. Open delivered \$242.5 million in economic impact to North Carolina, more than the combined 2014 U.S. Open and U.S. Women's Open weeks, a previous high-water mark for the venue. The tournament supported more than 1,800 jobs and generated \$95.7 million in direct visitor spending, an average of \$1,156 per visitor.¹⁰⁴ Longer-term USGA estimates put each Pinehurst-hosted Open at roughly \$500 million in economic impact and project \$2 billion in cumulative impact across the anchor-site rotation through 2047.¹⁰⁵

"Professional and amateur sports are an important part of North Carolina's economy in that they stimulate tourism, create jobs, support local businesses, generate tax revenue, and enhance the state's reputation as a destination for major events, but that's only part of it," said Ben Kinney, publisher of Business North Carolina. "North Carolina is quickly becoming a leader in sports manufacturing. For example, outdoor recreation manufacturers in the western part of the state have been steadily growing over the years. In Moore County, the golf industry is much more than world-renowned courses." Kinney cited Golf Pride, the leading grip manufacturer, headquartered there. "This is no

¹⁰² Pinehurst Resort. "Pinehurst, USGA Officially Break Ground on Golf House Pinehurst." June 6, 2022.

<https://www.pinehurst.com/news/pinehurst-usga-officially-break-ground-on-golf-house-pinehurst/>

¹⁰³ GolfPass Staff. "USGA to Bring Second Headquarters, Multiple U.S. Opens to Pinehurst." *GolfPass*, September 9, 2020.

<https://www.golfpass.com/travel-advisor/articles/usga-to-bring-second-headquarters-multiple-u-s-opens-to-pinehurst> ; Tarde, Jerry. "Why Nobody Goes to Golf Museums." *Golf Digest*, March 27, 2026. <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/why-nobody-goes-to-golf-museums>

¹⁰⁴ USGA, "USGA Releases 2024 U.S. Open Economic Impact Following Golf House Pinehurst Opening," December 2024, <https://mediacenter.usga.org/usgausopeneconomicimpact>.

¹⁰⁵ King, Brad. "Could the USGA Increase Its Stock of Regular Open Courses?" *The Pilot*, June 11, 2024.

https://www.thepilot.com/opendaily/could-the-usga-increase-its-stock-of-regular-open-courses/article_1c389628-2833-11ef-8a6a-e3bc37885cc1.html (data note: these projections by the USGA are built on a 2014 study and includes the broader impact of recurring championships, permanent operations and related economic activities.)

accident. The rise of sports teams, events, and venues in North Carolina is creating more opportunities for growth in our state.”

Pinehurst is also a business-travel and real estate story. Golf trips are often packaged with meetings, corporate hospitality, client entertainment, second homes, retirement decisions, and repeat leisure travel. The Sandhills brand benefits from golf in ways that extend into restaurants, lodging, construction, landscaping, medical services, aviation, retail, and workforce. Moore County reported \$901 million in visitor spending in 2025, up nearly 5 percent from the year prior. More than 6,500 people work in tourism and hospitality within the county, the eighth largest tourism workforce in the state. Golf drives a destination economy, supporting both visitor activity that can be counted and the kind of long-term investment that has accumulated around Pinehurst and the Sandhills.

Golf's reach in North Carolina extends well beyond one resort or region. The state ranks eighth nationally in golf courses with 549, and the game generates \$2.3 billion in direct spending, \$4.2 billion in total economic impact, and supports nearly 53,000 jobs statewide.¹⁰⁶ Charlotte's Quail Hollow Club hosted the 2025 PGA Championship, its second time hosting the event after 2017, and continues to host the Truist Championship, formerly the Wells Fargo Championship, on the PGA Tour's annual calendar. Greensboro's Wyndham Championship gives the Piedmont Triad its own annual PGA Tour stop. Beginning in 2026, western North Carolina will add another PGA Tour event through the Biltmore Championship Asheville, a FedEx Cup Fall tournament at The Cliffs at Walnut Cove in Arden and Asheville's first PGA Tour event in more than 80 years.¹⁰⁷

Greensboro's place on that calendar is no longer a safe bet. The PGA Tour's move to a two-tier structure in 2028 leaves about fifteen slots for ordinary tour events, and the Wyndham's standing among them is an open question. Legislators chimed in late July 2026 with a provision that would pay organizers up to \$40 million between 2028 and 2031 if the Tour commits to a Championship Series event in Greensboro. Senate leader Phil Berger described the money as economic development rather than a rescue.¹⁰⁸

Course maintenance is its own labor market and supply chain driver, and the USGA has started treating it that way. Its Green Section launched the Greenkeeper Apprenticeship Program in 2023, a debt-free, one-year training track for golf course maintenance workers based at Sandhills Community College in Moore County. The USGA and regional partners, including the Carolinas Golf Association, have committed \$1 million to keep the program running for five years.¹⁰⁹ It is a small program next to a \$242.5 million tournament weekend, but it is the kind of investment that keeps the agronomy behind five decades of scheduled U.S. Opens staffed with people who actually live in the community.

¹⁰⁶ Business North Carolina, "NC Golf 2025: The State's 100 Best Courses and More," March 2025, <https://businessnc.com/nc-golf-2025-the-states-100-best-courses-and-more/>.

¹⁰⁷ ESPN. "PGA Tour Returns to Asheville for First Time in 86 Years with Fall Event." November 10, 2025.

https://www.espn.com/golf/story/_/id/46919055/pga-tour-returns-asheville-first-86-years-fall-event

¹⁰⁸ N.C. General Assembly, House Bill 268, 2025–26 Session (Senate committee substitute adopted July 28, 2026), <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2025/H268>; Brian Murphy and Will Doran, "\$65 Million for Sporting Events in North Carolina? State Senate Signs Off on Plan," WRAL, July 28, 2026.

¹⁰⁹ USGA, "USGA Releases 2024 U.S. Open Economic Impact Following Golf House Pinehurst Opening," December 2024, <https://mediacenter.usga.org/usgausopeneconomicimpact>.

Golf's value to North Carolina is larger than just championship events. Pinehurst gives the state a global golf identity, a long-term U.S. Open calendar, and a permanent USGA presence. Quail Hollow and Greensboro add major professional tournaments in the state's largest metro and the Piedmont Triad. Hundreds of public, private, resort, and community courses keep the sport active in local economies year-round adding to the participation economy of sports in the state. Underneath the tournament headlines are workers, suppliers, turf managers, instructors, club operators, real estate developers, hospitality businesses, and repeat visitors whose spending continues long after the galleries leave. Golf is one of North Carolina's clearest examples of a destination-sports economy and infrastructure that has become institutional and permanent.

10. Outdoor Sports and Place-Based Economies

North Carolina's outdoor sports economy is built around geography. Coastal waters, mountain rivers, public lakes, beaches, trails, and recreation businesses provide the infrastructure for competition while also supporting tourism, retail, hospitality, and seasonal employment. A fishing tournament in Morehead City, a whitewater outfitter in Bryson City, and a paddling festival in Wrightsville Beach belong to the same economy as the Panthers and the ACC Tournament, just built on a different set of businesses, ones that exist because of a coastline or a river rather than a stadium. This part of the sports economy can be harder to measure because the activity is dispersed beyond a block of hotel rooms. A family at a coastal event may spend more at the marina and grocery store than on a hotel, and a fishing tournament may hit the fuel dock before it turns up in a room-night count. The economic activity is real even when it is not captured in a clean event-impact report.

Nationally, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported that outdoor recreation accounted for \$696.7 billion in value added in 2024, equal to 2.4 percent of GDP, and puts North Carolina's share at approximately \$17.7 billion.¹¹⁰ That's 2.1% of the state's GDP and represents more than 155 thousand jobs statewide.¹¹¹ That covers far more than organized sports and includes retail, manufacturing, and general outdoor recreation activity. North Carolina's outdoor recreation activity is large enough to register on federal economic accounts, yet it often is outside of the competitiveness conversation.

Some of North Carolina's highest-profile coastal events, the Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament and the Pirate's Cove Billfish Tournament, make their biggest splash in Morehead City and Manteo, respectively. Big Rock draws boats into Morehead City every June, and the 2026 tournament pulled in 278 boats and a purse that topped \$9 million. Two hundred miles up the coast, Pirate's Cove in Manteo runs a comparable tournament out of a 194-slip deepwater marina, now in its fourth decade and ranked among the fifteen highest-paying billfish tournaments in the country in 2025.¹¹² Neither tournament has completed a formal economic study, but the operating economy around these events is seen at the fuel docks, the charter boats, and the restaurants

¹¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics, U.S. and States, 2024," news release BEA 26-13, March 5, 2026.

¹¹¹ NC Commerce, "NC Outdoor Economy Office," accessed July 2026, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-outdoor-economy-office>

¹¹² Pirate's Cove Billfish Tournaments. "Home." Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.piratescovebillfishtournament.com/>

that fill up for a week every summer in towns that don't have a professional franchise or a college sports team.¹¹³ A fishing tournament is a sports event, a maritime-business event, and a tourism event all in one.



Paddlers fill the water during the Carolina Cup in Wrightsville Beach, where coastal geography and an established visitor economy support one of North Carolina's signature paddle-sports events. Photo courtesy of Lumina News

Wrightsville Beach offers more coastal infrastructure. The Carolina Cup is a five-day paddle sports festival that has run every spring for over a decade drawing more than 1,000 competitors and thousands of spectators, pulling in Olympic and world-champion paddlers on the strength of its standing on the World Paddle Association's international tour. Further down the coast, Carolina Beach hosts its own dragon boat regatta each September drawing 30 to 50 teams and as many as 600 paddlers to the Yacht Basin for a race with a festival built around it rather than a five-star field. Neither the

Carolina Cup nor dragon boat events have formal economic impact statements, but a five-day international paddling festival and a community-run dragon boat race both create real economic activity, filling hotel rooms and restaurants. Those events work because greater Wilmington already has the beaches and the hotel and hospitality base to absorb a race weekend, the same infrastructure a golf resort or an arena district would need.

North Carolina's beach culture also supports a seasonal workforce built around competitive ocean rescue. Wrightsville Beach Ocean Rescue alone employs 92 seasonal lifeguards to staff 14 stands across four miles of beach.¹¹⁴ Beach communities up and down the coast run their own version of this operation every summer, each one holding open tryouts, an ocean swim, a beach run, and mock rescues before the season even starts. Wrightsville Beach's Jeremy Owens Junior Lifeguard Camp, now in its twelfth year, trains local kids as young as nine in rescue skills, CPR, and rip-current awareness, turning some of them into next season's tryout candidates.¹¹⁵ In 2025, the South Atlantic Lifesaving Association held its regional championship at Nags Head, where Wrightsville Beach Ocean Rescue won the large-team title for the fifth year running and Carolina Beach won its own division, both squads beating teams from Florida, Virginia, and across the Southeast.¹¹⁶ Carolina Beach has carried that form onto the national stage as well, winning the 2021 USLA Division C national championship in South Padre Island, Texas, and finishing runner-

¹¹³ Note: Big Rock conducted an economic impact study during the 2026 tournament, with findings still pending as of July 2026.

¹¹⁴ Town of Wrightsville Beach, "Ocean Rescue," townofwrightsvillebeach.com; WECT, "Wrightsville Beach Ocean Rescue Holding Lifeguard Tryouts Ahead of Summer Season," April 1, 2026.

¹¹⁵ Wrightsville Beach Magazine. "Training Junior Lifesavers at Wrightsville Beach Camp." *Wrightsville Beach Magazine*, Spring 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/d4wz2kx2>

¹¹⁶ Overton, Rodney. "2 North Carolina Island Teams Win Elite Coastal Lifeguard Regionals." *CBS 17*, July 21, 2025. <https://www.cbs17.com/news/north-carolina-news/north-carolina-island-teams-win-elite-coastal-lifeguard-regionals/>

up in the same division in 2024.¹¹⁷ None of this is through a professional sports organization. It's municipal lifeguards, funded and trained the same way as any other public-safety department, that *also happen* to be good enough to win a national title.

Way out west, North Carolina's paddling economy flows through an entirely different kind of business altogether. The Nantahala Outdoor Center, founded in 1972 on a converted motel property in Bryson City, now draws more than a million visitors a year to its 500-acre base on the Nantahala River, making it, by its own account, the largest whitewater outfitter in the world and a training site for Olympic paddlers.¹¹⁸ The NOC reports its combined guided volume at roughly 110 thousand guest-days across the Nantahala, Ocoee, Chattooga, French Broad, Pigeon, and Chattahoochee. Outfitters across the region reported volumes down sharply through the 2025 season as travelers stayed uncertain about what had reopened.¹¹⁹



The Nantahala Outdoor Center in Bryson City sits directly on the river that powers its business, combining recreation, training, competition, and tourism in one of Western North Carolina's best-known outdoor sports destinations. Photo courtesy of NOC.

An economy built on geography shares risk inherent to its location. Hurricane Helene came through Western North Carolina in September 2024 and damaged many of the assets supporting the region's outdoor sports economy. The impact on trails, river access, roads, bridges, and the small businesses built around them was significant. Recovery remains a multiyear public works project and in February 2026 the U.S. Forest Service and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission signed a \$290 million Good Neighbor Agreement giving the Commission a ten-year mandate across Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests to remove debris, repair roads and recreation areas, and restore damaged watersheds.¹²⁰ Most of both national forests have since reopened. The Pisgah district is the most heavily permitted Forest Service district for outdoor

¹¹⁷ WWAY News. "Carolina Beach Ocean Rescue Receives Top Marks During National Lifeguard Championships." WWAY, August 12, 2025. <https://www.wwaytv3.com/carolina-beach-ocean-rescue-receives-top-marks-during-national-lifeguard-championships/>

¹¹⁸ Nantahala Outdoor Center. "Fact Sheet." Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://noc.com/about/newsroom/fact-sheet/>

¹¹⁹ Buchanan, Eugene. "Rafting Outfitters Still Rebuilding and Reopening After Hurricane Helene." *Paddling Magazine*, December 18, 2025. <https://paddlingmag.com/paddling-business/rafting-outfitters-rebuilding-after-hurricane-helene/>

¹²⁰ U.S. Forest Service. "Hurricane Recovery in North Carolina Receives \$290 Million Boost for Forest Restoration." *U.S. Department of Agriculture*, 2026. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/newsroom/releases/hurricane-recovery-north-carolina-receives-290-million-boost-forest>

recreation in the country so the repair schedule for a national forest becomes relevant for a large element of a regional economy.

Old Fort in McDowell County is a community of roughly 800 people that have spent several years building an outdoor recreation economy around a network of elite mountain bike and hiking trails. The storm sent a flood surge through downtown that destroyed more than forty buildings and homes along with the trails themselves. When the Curtis Creek bridge was lost, the G5 Trail Collective at Camp Grier established the Allison Trailhead as an emergency access point, and the Old Fort Strong Endurance Festival ran in both 2024 and 2025.¹²¹ An event held *on schedule* through a disaster shows that the capability to host relies on people and relationships as much as infrastructure.

North Carolina's six alpine ski areas, Appalachian Ski Mountain, Beech Mountain, Sugar Mountain, Cataloochee, Hatley Pointe, formerly Wolf Ridge, and Sapphire Valley, generated an estimated \$244.3 million in economic value during the 2022-23 winter season.¹²² According to a study commissioned by the North Carolina Ski Areas Association, these areas accounted for more than 781,000 visits, while the state estimates the industry supports nearly 2,000 full-time and seasonal jobs.¹²³ Nearly half of ski-area visitors come from outside North Carolina so in communities where tourism might otherwise drop with the temperature, these mountain businesses remain active through the winter.

Western North Carolina's outdoor recreation reputation also extends to competitive cycling. The Biltmore Estate in Asheville hosted the USA Cycling Cyclocross National Championships in January 2016, a six-day championship that drew thousands of racers and spectators to a course built across the historic estate's grounds.¹²⁴ A decade later, the Pisgah region picked up a different cycling discipline entirely, when the Rock Creek Rumble in Zirconia opened the 2026 UCI mountain bike cross-country national series, bringing an international-level discipline to the same mountains that draws paddlers to the Nantahala Gorge, and doing so just eighteen months after those same mountains were underwater.¹²⁵

Equestrian sport adds another large but easily overlooked piece of North Carolina's place-based sports economy. The North Carolina Horse Council's 2023 state analysis puts the broader equine industry's economic impact at \$2.9 billion and 45,000 jobs, including \$571 million and roughly

¹²¹ Pipa, Tony. "Restoring Outdoor Recreation in Old Fort, North Carolina, after Hurricane Helene." Reimagine Rural, Brookings Institution, July 29, 2025. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/restoring-outdoor-recreation-in-old-fort-north-carolina-after-hurricane-helene/>.

¹²² RRC Associates. "Large Economic Impact of North Carolina Ski Areas Revealed by RRC Study." January 19, 2024. <https://www.rrcassociates.com/blog/economic-impact-analysis/large-economic-impact-of-north-carolina-ski-areas-revealed-by-rrc-study/>

¹²³ North Carolina Department of Commerce. "Governor Stein Celebrates Strength of North Carolina Skiing Industry, Encourages Travelers to Rediscover the Unforgettable Mountains of NC." February 13, 2026. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/02/13/governor-stein-celebrates-strength-north-carolina-skiing-industry-encourages-travelers-rediscover>

¹²⁴ Mountain Xpress, "Thousands Expected at 2016 Cyclocross Nationals in Asheville," January 2016. <https://mountainx.com/news/thousands-expected-at-2016-cyclocross-nationals-in-asheville/>

¹²⁵ USA Cycling, Rock Creek Rumble UCI mountain bike national series schedule, 2026. <https://usacycling.org/national-series/cross-country-mountain-bike-national-series>



Tryon International's purpose-built facilities support a nearly year-round competition calendar, making Polk County a destination for riders, spectators, and the broader horse economy. Photo courtesy of Tripadvisor.

9,100 jobs tied specifically to the competition sector.¹²⁶ Tryon International has concentrated part of that activity in Polk County through a 1,600-acre site with 1,400 permanent stalls, 14 competition rings, and more than 40 weeks of equestrian competition a year. The facility averages about 250 full-time employees and more than 500 staff during peak periods, giving Western North Carolina a sports destination built around horses rather than a ballpark, arena, or golf course.

From horses to halyards, both coastal and inland, North Carolina hosted nineteen national or international sailing championships since 2014, drawing thousands to the state. Wrightsville Beach's Carolina Yacht Club carries the heaviest load, having hosted Sunfish World and Youth World Championships, two Lightning World-level championships, two collegiate conference championships, and three separate Lightning North American Championships since 2017, the largest of which drew 75 teams and roughly 225 sailors. Mooresville's Lake Norman Yacht Club, well inland near Charlotte, has built a competing identity around trailerable one-design fleets, hosting Sunfish and Ultimate 20 North Americans.¹²⁷ The Pamlico County towns of Arapahoe and Oriental, North Carolina's sailing capital, form a third cluster with a different kind of pedigree.¹²⁸ Camp Sea Gull, a YMCA summer camp in Arapahoe, hosted Sunfish World Championships in 2014 and the 156-sailor 2021 U.S. Youth Sailing Championship. Nautical traditions have grown deeper in Oriental as the community hosts NC State's SailPack Oriental Intercollegiate Regatta on the Neuse River every spring for the past dozen years, drawing sailors and coaches from all over the nation to the same waters that built the town's reputation in the first place. Smaller championship stops at Lake Waccamaw in the far southeastern coastal plain and Nor'Banks Sailing in Duck round out a championship map that depends on no single flagship venue.

Charlotte's U.S. National Whitewater Center shows the other side of that same paddling economy, purpose-built and metropolitan. The Center is a single outdoor-sports facility that has become a major economic node. It is one of the facilities in this category with an IMPLAN-based annual study behind it versus proxy estimates. A report produced by Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement puts its total modeled economic output at \$267.4 million a year, a

¹²⁶ North Carolina Horse Council. *2023 Economic Impact of the Horse Industry*. Information provided by the American Horse Council Foundation. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Horse Council, 2023. <https://nchcouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/nchc-2023-economic-impact-final.pdf>

¹²⁷ Sailing Scuttlebutt, Lightning North American Championship archive, sailingscuttlebutt.com; Lightning Class International Association, 2022 World and World Masters Championship results, lightningclass.org; Carolina Yacht Club, "2025 Lightning North Americans," carolinayachtclub.org; International Sunfish Class Association, World Championship Archive, sunfishclass.org.

¹²⁸ Town of Oriental, "Oriental History in a Nutshell," townoforiental.com

figure that overlaps with Charlotte's broader tourism economy rather than sitting entirely outside it.¹²⁹ The Center has also built a competitive identity for North Carolina around the sport, hosting national-team trials and international paddling events on a course built for competition, giving Charlotte a paddle sports venue inside city limits.

None of these events required a stadium, a franchise, or even a university to exist. They required a coastline, a river, a basin, or a mountain gorge that was already there, and a business or association motivated to build competition around it.

11. Public Assets and Participation Events

Another layer of North Carolina's sports economy is built through participant travel rather than large spectator crowds. Universities, municipalities, parks departments, and local clubs have turned existing lakes, campuses, trails, and recreation facilities into recurring competition venues, often with little need for new construction.

Greenville has turned Stallings Stadium into the recurring home of the Little League Softball World Series, held there every summer since 2021 and under contract to stay through 2027.¹³⁰ Visit Greenville estimated nearly \$1.6 million in local economic impact for both the 2025 and 2026 tournaments.¹³¹ Twelve teams come to Pitt County for about eight days each summer, with East Carolina University supporting the event and ESPN carrying the tournament to a national audience. None of that required a new stadium. It required a strong existing community facility, local partners, and a multi-year agreement that keeps the event coming back.

Collegiate sailing shows how reoccurring events add up. A 2026 South Atlantic Intercollegiate Sailing Association analysis identified nearly 70 collegiate regattas hosted in North Carolina between 2011 and 2026, putting nearly 3,500 sailors on the water and generating an estimated \$668,000 in direct visitor spending, a conservative figure that leaves out spectator spending, operations spend, or indirect event incidentals.¹³² That activity concentrates in Raleigh, Wilmington, Oriental, and Charlotte's nearby Lake Norman, the same lakes, rivers, yacht clubs, basins, and marinas built for public recreation that a handful of college programs have turned into specialized competitive infrastructure instead.

¹²⁹ Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement, "Economic Impact of the U.S. National Whitewater Center," 2024.

https://cece.vt.edu/content/dam/cece_vt_edu/projects/Whitewater%20Center%20Economic%20Impact%20and%20Contribution%20Study%20Final%20Report.pdf

¹³⁰ Little League. "Little League Softball® World Series to Remain in Greenville Through 2027." April 25, 2024.

<https://www.littleleague.org/news/little-league-softball-world-series-to-remain-in-greenville-through-2027>

¹³¹ Jones, Sierra. "Community Invited to 2025 Little League Softball® World Series Opening Ceremony & Celebration." *Visit Greenville, NC*, July 9, 2025. <https://www.visitgreenvillenc.com/blog/post/community-invited-to-2025-little-league-softball-world-series-opening-ceremony-celebration> *Data note:* Publicly available materials do not disclose visitor-spending assumptions, geographic scope, or multipliers used for the estimated economic-impact.

¹³² South Atlantic Intercollegiate Sailing Association, *SAISA Collegiate Sailing Economic Impact Research (2011–2026)* (August 1, 2026), <https://saisasailing.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/saisa-economic-report-final-august-1-2026.pdf>



College sailors race in Banks Channel on Wrightsville Beach, where coastal waters and yacht-club infrastructure support recurring collegiate competition and bring visiting teams to the Wilmington area. Photo courtesy of SAISA Conference.

Competition organized around athletes with disabilities follows the same pattern on a statewide scale as Special Olympics North Carolina, headquartered in Morrisville, runs year-round competition across all 100 counties, with statewide games each year held on school, municipal, and university facilities built for other purposes. Adaptive sports organization Bridge II Sports has run the Valor Games Southeast, a multi-sport competition for disabled veterans, in the Triangle since at least 2017, drawing 110 to 125 athletes across archery, powerlifting, cycling, and rowing at venues including UNC, Duke, and Lake Crabtree.¹³³

Some of the state's most active small-market sports sit even further from a tournament or Olympic development spotlight. Rowing has its own small-market venues. Wake County's Lake Wheeler is a public park first, but each spring it doubles as the site of the ACC Rowing Championship, adding a weekend of hotel stays, meals, and rental revenue to a facility the county built and maintains for its residents. Oak Hollow Lake in High Point has built its own rowing identity around a similar setup, running a bigger open (beyond collegiate) circuit on top of it. The North Carolina Rowing Championships and the fall Peters Cup regatta both run in High Point each year, with the 2026 state championship drawing 509 boat entries from 35 clubs and the Lenny Peters Cup pulling in more than 1,000 rowers and an estimated \$1 million in local economic impact.¹³⁴

Running has its own economic and championship record in North Carolina on a different path. The Wilmington Marathon brings in nearly \$10 million to the Cape Fear region each year, according to race director Tom Clifford.¹³⁵ The IRONMAN 70.3 adds an estimated \$7 million more in 2022 according to New Hanover County Tourism Development Authority president and CEO Kim Hufham.¹³⁶ On another track, running's governing-body hosts championships in the state. USA Track & Field held its national Masters Outdoor Championships in Greensboro in July 2023,

¹³³ Bridge II Sports, Valor Games Southeast event materials, 2017–2025; Spectrum News, Valor Games Southeast coverage, 2018. <https://b2s.app.neoncm.com/np/clients/b2s/event.jsp?event=111346>

¹³⁴ Lenny Peters Cup. "Headline Boat Races Set for Lenny Peters Cup at the High Point Autumn Rowing Festival." September 4, 2025. <https://lennypeterscup.com/blogs/news/headline-boat-races-set-for-lenny-peters-cup-at-the-high-point-autumn-rowing-festival/>

¹³⁵ Conor Doherty, "A Look at the Wilmington Marathon's Economic Impact on the Cape Fear Region," *WWAY*, February 27, 2026. <https://www.wwaytv3.com/a-look-at-the-wilmington-marathons-economic-impact-on-the-cape-fear-region/>

¹³⁶ Miriah Hamrick, "Ironman Race Brings Boost to Local Economy," *Greater Wilmington Business Journal*, October 14, 2022. https://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/hospitality/2022/10/14/ironman_race_brings_boost_to_local_economy/23758.

and the state's own USATF association runs annual championships of its own, including a half-marathon championship in Raleigh and a 50-kilometer trail championship at Tsali, near the Nantahala Gorge in the far western part of the state.¹³⁷ None of these draw the crowds a marathon in Charlotte, Raleigh, or Wilmington does, but they give competitive distance running in North Carolina a championship pedigree a weekend charity fun-run doesn't.

Fort Bragg, Camp Lejeune, and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base give North Carolina one of the largest military populations in the country, and each installation operates gymnasiums, fields, pools, tracks, and organized athletic programming through the Department of Defense. That infrastructure exists to serve service members and their families, but it supports a resident athletic population, a competitive calendar, and a workforce of coaches, trainers, and facility staff on a scale few North Carolina counties could fund on their own. Fayetteville's All-American Marathon and its Mike-to-Mike Half Marathon benefit from that base.¹³⁸ Those military communities also support the local ecosystem of participant sports at ample municipal and site facilities.

Rocky Mount has built its own PDGA A-Tier championship, the North Carolina Disc Golf Championship, drawing roughly 150 players across its divisions to NC Wesleyan University each spring.¹³⁹ Charlotte has built a competing Tour-level site at Hornets' Nest Park where the 2026 Queen City Classic brought 164 professional players to town with the Disc Golf Pro Tour's Elite Series.¹⁴⁰ A sport built almost entirely on participant fees and travel, leveraging municipal recreational infrastructure without stadium economics behind it, provides a national-level stage in more than one part of the state.

A collegiate regatta, an adaptive-sports competition, a youth softball world series, a rowing championship, and a professional disc golf event don't share a business model. They do share an ability to bring recurring activity to public and community assets without the cost of a stadium or arena. Their individual numbers may be modest, but together they represent a durable layer of North Carolina's participant-driven sports economy. That same pattern is about to show up again, real activity building on infrastructure nobody built for this purpose, this time in sports few in North Carolina knew about a decade ago.

12. Emerging and Global Sports in North Carolina

North Carolina's sports economy is changing with population growth, global media, immigration, youth preferences, new event formats, and the search for lower-barrier participation. Growth and demographic changes are reshaping North Carolina's sports economy. The strongest signs of this are visible in the growth of soccer, cricket, pickleball, rugby, esports, TST, international exhibitions, and hybrid sports-entertainment properties. These activities use different facilities and business models, but they also bring new audiences into the state's sports economy.

¹³⁷ USA Track & Field Masters. "Past Upcoming Masters Track and Field Events." Accessed July 30, 2026.

<https://usatfmasters.org/upcoming-masters-track-and-field-events/past-upcoming-masters-track-and-field-events/>

¹³⁸ RaceEntry.com. "All-American Marathon & Mike-to-Mike Half Marathon: Fayetteville Race Information." Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.raceentry.com/all-american-marathon-and-mike-to-mike-half-marathon-fayetteville/race-information>

¹³⁹ North Carolina Wesleyan University. "Disc Golf Championship Brings Regional Players to NC Wesleyan." April 16, 2026. <https://ncwu.edu/disc-golf-championship-brings-regional-players-to-nc-wesleyan/>

¹⁴⁰ Disc Golf Pro Tour. "2026 Queen City Classic." Accessed July 30, 2026. <https://www.dgpt.com/event/2026-queen-city-classic/>

Soccer is not new to North Carolina, but it is more actively and visibly connected to the global game than it used to be. Its cultural pull with the state's growing immigrant and international communities is real, and soccer organizers and leaders in North Carolina have been quick to build around it. With the United States hosting the 2026 World Cup, the state's *2026 Summer of Soccer* added international training and fan activities to a soccer economy already thriving in different parts of North Carolina. With the U.S. men's national team playing a World Cup send-off match in Charlotte, and Germany, Norway, and Scotland choosing Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Charlotte as their World Cup training bases, respectively, the state's sports economy benefitted despite none of the visiting national teams playing a match in North Carolina.¹⁴¹

TST, The Soccer Tournament, here is still soccer, but its format and philosophy have created a new kind of sports property, built for a media and high-impact audience first. The 2026 event drew a record 57,942 spectator-visits over six days, and the semifinal broadcast on NBC averaged 433,000 viewers, the largest television audience the event has produced.¹⁴² Its digital reach dwarfs both of those figures with a reported 35.5 million YouTube impressions and just over one million unique YouTube viewers across more than 180 countries. The event offered three one-million-dollar prize purses, for the men's, women's, and mixed tournaments, and although its sports business inside-baseball, that turns a single event into three properties in their sponsorable inventory.

The state is also committed to seeing TST grow in North Carolina, awarding organizers a \$6.8 million grant in 2025 to keep Cary hosting through 2029. That's a multi-year commitment resembling how the state treats a golf anchor site or speedway versus just a one-off tournament booking.¹⁴³ The most recent local economic-impact analysis from 2025 figures report more than \$14.7 million in direct impact, over \$547,000 in local tax revenue, and nearly 20,000 room nights. TST organizers and the Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau note that the 2024 and 2025 events created \$23.9 million in impact.¹⁴⁴

In the Triangle's Morrisville community, the growth of cricket is garnering municipal support and investment. Opened in 2015 with significant upgrades during the decade that followed, Church Street Park is undoubtedly the heart of cricket in North Carolina. The site hosted Major League Cricket matches in 2023 and 2024 and the Minor League Cricket Super 8 Series in late 2025.¹⁴⁵ Church Street Park hosts more than high-profile events and is the regular-season home to the MiLC's Morrisville Cardinals, as well as hub for the Triangle Cricket league with more than 1,800

¹⁴¹ North Carolina Department of Commerce, "North Carolina Celebrates 'Summer of Soccer' with Major Events Investments Across the State," 2026, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/06/03/north-carolina-summer-soccer>.

¹⁴² WRAL, "The Soccer Tournament Sets Record Attendance in Cary, Viewership Highs," 2026; TST, "The Soccer Tournament (TST) Announces Record Viewership and Attendance for 2026 Event," <https://tst7v7.com/announcement/the-soccer-tournament-tst-announces-record-viewership-and-attendance-for-2026-event/>.

¹⁴³ TST, "State of North Carolina Awards \$6.8 Million Grant to Keep the Soccer Tournament (TST) in Cary Through 2029," <https://tst7v7.com/announcement/state-of-north-carolina-awards-6-8-million-grant-to-keep-the-soccer-tournament-tst-in-cary-through-2029/>.

¹⁴⁴ Town of Cary, "The Soccer Tournament 2025 Local Impact," <https://www.carync.gov/Home/Components/News/News/16782/715>.

¹⁴⁵ Town of Morrisville, "Professional Cricket," accessed July 2026, <https://www.morrisvillenc.gov/Things-To-Do/Professional-Cricket>; Town of Morrisville, "Minor League Cricket Super 8 Series," <https://www.morrisvillenc.gov/News-articles/MiLC-September>.

local players. The town has dedicated municipal resources tied to cricket, including a dedicated athletic program manager for the park's cricket programming. Wake County and the City of Raleigh's hospitality-tax fund put \$2 million behind lighting, drainage, and expanded pitches at the site. Morrisville officials estimate the lighting upgrade alone will generate half a million dollars in tax revenue over seven years supporting more matches, overnight visitation, and broadcast activity. Cricket's return to the Olympic catalog at the upcoming 2028 Los Angeles Games gives Morrisville another reason to expect the sport's visibility to continue climbing.¹⁴⁶



Cricket at Church Street Park in Morrisville, where a growing local player base and municipal investment have helped turn the facility into one of the state's most active cricket venues. Photo courtesy of Town of Morrisville.

No analysis of developing sports in North Carolina (or anywhere for that matter) would leave out Pickleball. Love it or hate it, USA Pickleball claims the sport is the fastest-growing nationally for a fourth consecutive year with national participation of 24.3 million players.¹⁴⁷ Cary Tennis Park, now a dual-use infrastructure asset through court conversions, draws more than 300,000 visitors annually, has hosted dozens of sanctioned tournaments and claims roughly \$3 million in annual community economic impact from its existing 36 courts, four of them permanent pickleball courts. Two Professional Pickleball Association (PPA) Tour stops in 2024 and 2025 added more than \$6 million in combined direct economic impact on top of those figures.¹⁴⁸ The Veolia Pickleball National Championships, scheduled for Cary Tennis Park in August and September of 2026 is projected to draw more than 2,000 competing players and thousands of daily spectators with national broadcast coverage. The event is another beneficiary of the state's Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund award of more than \$985,000.¹⁴⁹

Two new sports are developing at the scholastic level across North Carolina. The North Carolina High School Athletic Association (NCHSAA) sanctioned women's flag football in May 2026 and will see 135 teams participating in the inaugural season this fall. 30 percent of the NCHSAA's 446 member schools will field a team and compete for a state championship scheduled for November

¹⁴⁶ Town of Morrisville, "Church Street Park Northern Lot Closing for Lighting Upgrades," <https://www.morrisvillenc.gov/News-articles/Church-Street-Park-Northern-Lot-Closing-for-Lighting-Upgrades>; Olympics.com, "Cricket at the LA 2028 Olympic Games," accessed July 2026.

¹⁴⁷ USA Pickleball, "About and History," accessed July 2026.

¹⁴⁸ Town of Cary, Cary Tennis Park annual visitation and impact, <https://www.carync.gov/Home/Components/News/News/16821/715>.

¹⁴⁹ Town of Cary, national championship announcement and projections, <https://www.carync.gov/Home/Components/News/News/17011/715>; PPA Tour, "Veolia Pickleball National Championships Coming to Cary, North Carolina," <https://ppatour.com/veolia-pickleball-national-championships-coming-to-cary-north-carolina/>.

2026.¹⁵⁰ Men's volleyball follows a season behind, sanctioned to begin spring 2027. The sport went from seven active programs statewide in 2022 to more than 120 in 2026 as the sport welcomes its new endorsement. Both sports lean on infrastructure schools already have. Women's flag football uses fields schools have while men's volleyball programs share gyms and equipment with existing women's teams. The NCHSAA cites the sport's affordability with typical first-year costs between \$6,000 and \$14,000 that would include a coaching stipend, uniforms, transportation, and officials accounting for most of it.¹⁵¹ Flag football, like cricket, will debut as an Olympic sport at the 2028 Los Angeles Games and organizers anticipate and welcome the increased visibility here at home.¹⁵²

Rugby's growth in North Carolina is less tied to demographic changes and more about a sport making strategic investments in its future. Charlotte's Anthem Rugby Carolina was created through a partnership among Major League Rugby, USA Rugby, and World Rugby specifically to strengthen the American player pathway ahead of the men's Rugby World Cup the United States hosts in 2031 and the women's tournament in 2033.¹⁵³ Anthem RC plays at American Legion Memorial Stadium and trains out of the nearby Charlotte Rugby Football Club facility. The sport is also accessible for fans and spectators, although that was not the initial impetus for Anthem RC. Season tickets for 2026 run \$165 to \$205, nine of the team's ten matches air locally on WCCB Charlotte, while sponsorship from Novant Health, The Hartford, and Pillar Sports are also quite visible on the pitch. The Hartford also supports Try Rugby Charlotte, a program introducing the sport in local schools.¹⁵⁴ International rugby also came to the state in July 2026, hosting two USA Men's Eagles matches during the inaugural World Rugby Nations Cup. The US team played Zimbabwe at American Legion Memorial Stadium in Charlotte, later facing Spain at First Horizon Stadium at WakeMed Soccer Park in Cary.¹⁵⁵

Esports, albeit still emerging, is no longer fringe to the sports economy. NC State University is building a 5,000-square-foot Lenovo Esports Arena inside Mann Hall, funded by \$12 million from the state. The on-campus facility is set to open in 2027 with 400 seats and more than 100 gaming stations.¹⁵⁶ Lenovo's ten-year naming partnership adds an endowment, current-use funding, a custom server, and donated hardware on top of the state's construction money. Predecessor to the Lenovo-supported facility, NC State's existing Hunt Library esports lab, open since January 2024, has logged roughly 5,000 unique users and more than 44,000 visits, as well as hosting more than 100 student-run tournaments and events. These include Riot Games collegiate

¹⁵⁰ North Carolina High School Athletic Association, "NCHSAA Board of Directors Votes to Sanction Flag Football," <https://www.nchsaa.org/nchsaa-board-of-directors-votes-to-sanction-flag-football/>; NCHSAA, "Spring 2026 Full Board Consideration," https://www.nchsaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Spring2026_FullBoardConsideration.pdf.

¹⁵¹ North Carolina High School Athletic Association, "Spring 2026 Full Board Consideration," https://www.nchsaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Spring2026_FullBoardConsideration.pdf.

¹⁵² International Olympic Committee, "LA28 Additional Sports Approval," accessed July 2026.

¹⁵³ Major League Rugby, "Major League Rugby Comes to Charlotte in a Groundbreaking Partnership," <https://www.majorleague.rugby/news/major-league-rugby-comes-to-charlotte-in-a-groundbreaking-partnership>.

¹⁵⁴ Anthem Rugby Carolina, "2026 Ticket Packages," <https://anthemrc.com/tickets/>; Anthem Rugby Carolina, "Anthem RC Locks in Local Broadcast Agreement with WCCB for 2026 Season," <https://anthemrc.com/news/anthem-rc-locks-in-local-broadcast-agreement-with-wccb-for-2026-season/>; Anthem Rugby Carolina, "Try Rugby Charlotte," <https://anthemrc.com/tryrugbycharlotte/>.

¹⁵⁵ World Rugby, "World Rugby Nations Cup 2026," Accessed August 3, 2026. <https://www.world.rugby/nations-cup>

¹⁵⁶ NC State News, "Lenovo Investment Advances NC State's Esports Program," April 2026, <https://news.ncsu.edu/2026/04/lenovo-names-esports-arena-gaming-lab/>.

competition and Konami eBaseball's national and world championships.¹⁵⁷ The university is also programming the soon-to-be dual-use infrastructure through engineering, computer science, design, communications, sport and tourism, broadcasting, and data science curricula.

Legal sports wagering is the newest market in the state's sports economy and the only one that generates public revenue as a direct function of fan attention. North Carolina launched online wagering in March 2024, and eight licensed operators now serve the state. Bettors placed roughly \$6.6 billion in wagers during the first twelve months of legal wagering, from March 2024 through February 2025, producing \$713 million in gross wagering revenue for operators and \$128 million in state tax at the original 18 percent rate. The 2026 budget raised that rate to 23 percent, and the Fiscal Research Division projects total sports-wagering tax revenue rising from \$161.2 million under the prior formula to roughly \$206 million in fiscal 2026-27, with \$126.1 million of that going to the General Fund. Where the rest of the money goes ties wagering directly into the state's sports economy. Revenues will flow to the state's General Fund, the MEGA Fund, and UNC System athletic departments.¹⁵⁸ Fixed allocations include \$2 million a year for gambling-addiction education and treatment, perhaps the only place in the state's sports finances where a public cost is funded by the same activity that creates it.

13. Venues, Infrastructure, and Event Capacity

Sports infrastructure brings stadiums and arenas to mind, but the real scope captures much more. For the first two rounds of the 2025 NCAA men's basketball tournament, more than 57,000 people moved through Lenovo Center. Off the court, these tournament games generated millions in direct spending, filled thousands of Wake County hotel rooms, and brought in more than \$707,800 in local tax revenue.¹⁵⁹ The arena held the games, but the market held the event.

For some travelers coming into town for those games, the "market" starts at Raleigh-Durham International Airport. For sports fans coming to North Carolina for other games, it may be Charlotte Douglas, PTI, or even Wilmington International. Some are traveling on the state's more than 80,000 state-maintained highway and road miles. For the 2024 U.S. Open, a fan could ride in style from Raleigh and Cary to Pinehurst all aboard the NCDOT Open Express, a special route opened specifically for the event. The train sold out at a premium within days and carried more than 2,500 spectators over the span of the four-day event.¹⁶⁰ All across the state, the transportation infrastructure that so readily supports commerce and passenger travel, offers the sports economy a slice of its capacity. It's more than roads and bridges, too, as parking supply, traffic routing, and pedestrian connections decide whether visitor spending reaches the businesses around a venue or stays inside the gates, and whether the neighborhood tolerates the next event at all. This shared core-infrastructure puts venues and communities in the running

¹⁵⁷ NC State News, "Esports Lab Opens in Hunt Library," January 2024, <https://news.ncsu.edu/2024/01/esports-lab-opens-in-hunt-library/>.

¹⁵⁸ North Carolina State Lottery Commission. "Where the Money Goes." [ncgaming.gov](https://ncgaming.gov/where-the-money-goes/). Accessed August 2026.

¹⁵⁹ Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau, "2025 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament 1st & 2nd Rounds in Raleigh Generates \$16.4 Million in Direct Economic Impact," June 17, 2025. <https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/2025-ncaa-mens-basketball-tournament-1st-2nd-rounds-in-raleigh-generates-164-million-in-direct/>

¹⁶⁰ North Carolina Department of Transportation, "Special Train to Take Fans to U.S. Open," May 28, 2024, <https://www.ncdot.gov/news/press-releases/Pages/2024/2024-05-28-special-train-to-us-open.aspx>;

to host sports events and activities. When recruiting sports, like industry, connectivity and capacity is vital.

A community's event operations capacity is something that the sports economy both uses and strengthens. Raleigh's 2026 Stanley Cup celebration ran on a coordinated route plan covering first responders, transportation and parking operations, real-time safety messaging, and sanitation crews working before and after the crowd.¹⁶¹ Charlotte operations are robust with a police special-events division, and significant transit involvement in the Queen City's mobility for major events.¹⁶² Capacity like this accumulates and it will face a much larger test in 2029, when the FISU World University Games anticipate an estimated 10,000+ participants competing and training in dozens of venues across the Triangle and Triad. Each event leaves behind traffic plans (or lessons), vendor relationships, and staff who have done it before. Capacity plus experience is much of what a bid committee is actually selling.

Flexible venues create another kind of capacity. Bank of America Stadium now hosts nearly 40 major events a year. Since 2018, its calendar has added international soccer, concerts, college and high school football, and roughly 100 corporate and community events. It has also served as a polling location and mass-vaccination site. In 2025, the building became a baseball park for two sold-out Banana Ball nights. In 2026, its soccer uses included a U.S. national-team match and the MLS All-Star Game. Cary Tennis Park, built for tennis, is being reconfigured to host the 2026 Veolia Pickleball National Championships and more than 2,000 players.¹⁶³ Lenovo Center has run the Rocket League Championship Series through the same bowl that holds NHL hockey.¹⁶⁴ Conversions are complicated and costly, but small relative to the economic activity – and assets utilization boost it can give facilities.

Some of the state's most *efficient* event infrastructure was never built for events. Morrisville rents cricket fields at the town's Church Street Park for around \$75 an hour and is putting \$2 million of hospitality-tax-supported improvements into the site. The town projects their return to be roughly \$500,000 in tax revenue over seven years.¹⁶⁵ Wilmington's waterfront, Iredell and Wake County's lake parks carry ACC rowing and collegiate sailing at sites already built and maintained for residents. Facilities like these spend most of the year as public recreation, but competition weekends layer in rentals, parking, and visitor spending. Where local funding structures allow tourism-related revenues to support facilities, that visitor activity can also strengthen the case for reinvestment in the assets generating it.

¹⁶¹ City of Raleigh, "All Hands on Deck for the Canes Celly," <https://raleighnc.gov/news/all-hands-deck-canes-celly>; City of Raleigh, "Canes Parade," <https://raleighnc.gov/canes-parade>.

¹⁶² City of Charlotte, "Planning Outdoor Events," <https://www.charlottenc.gov/Services/Permits/Event-Permits/Planning-Outdoor-Events>; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, "Our Organization," <https://www.charlottenc.gov/cmpd/Our-Organization>. Both accessed August 3, 2026.

¹⁶³ Town of Cary. "Cary to Host 2026 Veolia Pickleball National Championships." Accessed August 3, 2026. <https://www.carync.gov/Home/Components/News/News/17011/715>

¹⁶⁴ Visit Raleigh. "Visit Raleigh Joins RLCS Raleigh Major as Official Destination Partner." Accessed August 3, 2026. <https://www.visitraleigh.com/media/press-release/post/visit-raleigh-joins-rlcs-raleigh-major-as-official-destination-partner/>

¹⁶⁵ Town of Morrisville, "Town of Morrisville Facility Rentals," <https://www.morrisvillenc.gov/files/assets/town/v/1/prcr/documents/town-of-morrisville-rentals.pdf>; Town of Morrisville, "Church Street Park Northern Lot Closing for Lighting Upgrades," <https://www.morrisvillenc.gov/News-articles/Church-Street-Park-Northern-Lot-Closing-for-Lighting-Upgrades>. Both accessed August 3, 2026.

North Carolina's two largest urban event venue projects are renovations and reimaginings of existing facilities. Raleigh and Wake County have committed hospitality-tax resources to a \$300



Rendering of the planned Bank of America Stadium renovations in Uptown Charlotte, part of a \$1.3 billion public-private investment intended to extend the venue's life and support a broader year-round sports and entertainment district. Photo courtesy of Carolina Panthers

million renovation of Lenovo Center.¹⁶⁶ Charlotte's Bank of America Stadium agreement pairs a fixed \$650 million city contribution matched by Tepper Sports & Entertainment, bringing the full renovation to \$1.3 billion.¹⁶⁷ The renovations match broader development plans intended to create activity between event dates. Public support for Lenovo Center applies to the arena renovation, while the Raleigh Sports & Entertainment District around it is a privately led, phased development. Charlotte's public commitment is similarly distinct from Tepper Sports & Entertainment's private contribution and ongoing maintenance obligations.

Tepper Sports & Entertainment sees the stadium's role extending well beyond its primary tenants. "Bank of America Stadium sits at the heart of the 'MOMINTUM' transforming our region, creating shared experiences that bring people together year-round through Panthers games, Charlotte FC matches, major events and community gatherings," said Eric Sudol, Chief Revenue Officer of Tepper Sports & Entertainment. "These events help introduce new audiences to the Carolinas and provide a powerful platform to showcase the growth and character of our region across the globe."

¹⁶⁶ City of Raleigh. "Raleigh-Wake Hospitality Tax: An Intro." Updated June 1, 2026. <https://raleighnc.gov/doing-business/services/raleigh-wake-hospitality-tax-intro>

¹⁶⁷ Business North Carolina. "Panthers Add Cash; Bank of America Stadium Renovation Plans Now Total \$1.3 Billion." *Business North Carolina*, July 23, 2026. <https://businessnc.com/panthers-add-cash-bank-of-america-stadium-renovation-plans-now-total-1-3-billion/>

Around both projects is a development model that has become increasingly common in the sports business. Stadiums and arenas can serve as anchors for larger commercial districts that may include restaurants, hotels, housing, retail, offices, and entertainment. The venue supplies an audience draw on event or gamedays. The surrounding district offers places to spend time and money on both event days and those when nothing's happening. For owners and developers, that creates revenue streams tied to real estate and commercial activity rather than the events calendar.

Sports-data storyteller Riley Martin of @sportsball put it more plainly: "The stadium pulls the crowds in every summer, but the district has people eating, working, and hanging out all year." Often cited as an example of this, the Atlanta Braves' Battery development has proven the point. The Braves' public financials bear that out as the Braves generated \$635.1 million in baseball revenue and \$97.4 million from the mixed-use development surrounding Truist Park in 2025. The mixed-use business generated \$68.5 million in adjusted earnings, about \$17 million more than the Braves' \$51.1 million baseball operation.¹⁶⁸ Martin also points out the growing trend around districts in college athletics. Wake Forest University and its development partners are building The Grounds, a more than \$200 million mixed-use district around a venue cluster drawing roughly 750,000 to 800,000 attendees annually, including hosting the ATP Tour's Winston-Salem Open, which alone generated an estimated \$5 million in local economic impact.¹⁶⁹



Durham Bulls Athletic Park, home of America's most famous minor-league team, opened in 1995, helping anchor downtown Durham's redevelopment and remains one of North Carolina's most recognizable minor league baseball venues. Photo Creative Commons.

Minor league baseball is the most widely distributed professional sports asset in the state. Nine affiliated clubs play in North Carolina in 2026, from Triple-A in Charlotte and Durham through High-A in Asheville, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem to Single-A in Fayetteville, Hickory, Kannapolis, and Wilson. Partner-league and independent baseball adds Gastonia, High Point, and Kinston, and summer collegiate wooden-bat programs like the Holly Springs Salamanders and the Wilson Tobs. Few states carry a deeper roster. For most of these communities, the ballpark is the only professional sports venue in the county.

¹⁶⁸ Sportsball (@sportsball). "Why Sports Teams Are Obsessed with Real Estate." *Instagram*. Accessed August 6, 2026. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DbqTTwQp4zP/>

¹⁶⁹ McCormick, Bret. "Mixed-Use Development Creating Common Ground for Wake Forest, Winston-Salem." *Sports Business Journal*, October 20, 2025. <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Articles/2025/10/20/mixed-use-development-creating-common-ground-for-wake-forest-winston-salem/?issuelid=GFRCLKJXPZBS5MHHSKDFGYQ23I>; Winston-Salem Open, "2023 Winston-Salem Open Brings \$5 Million to Local Economy and Donates \$10,000 to Middle School Athletic Programs," January 26, 2024. <https://www.winstonsalemopen.com/en/media/news/local-economic-impact>

The business model is nothing like the one running at Lenovo Center or Bank of America Stadium. A minor league club sells roughly seventy home dates to a mostly local crowd, earns its money through gate, concessions, and local sponsorship rather than media rights. These sites employ small year-round front offices alongside a large seasonal workforce of game-day staff, groundskeepers, and vendors. Yet, when Major League Baseball restructured the minors in 2020 and set facility standards for affiliated clubs, it effectively handed every host city a capital decision, and North Carolina towns have been answering.¹⁷⁰

Gastonia offers a smaller-market version of the same district strategy. CaroMont Health Park, the 5,000-seat home of the Atlantic League's Gastonia Ghost Peppers, anchors the 16-acre Franklin Urban Sports & Entertainment (FUSE) district between downtown and the Loray Historic District. The city planned FUSE around a multi-use ballpark, adaptive reuse, housing, hospitality, retail, and office development. The Trenton Mill Lofts and Dirty Bull Brewery are now open in the district with additional projects announced. Gastonia's social district extends from the ballpark east to Broad Street, giving game-day and other event activity a path into participating downtown businesses.



A Gastonia Ghost Peppers player at CaroMont Health Park, where minor league baseball anchors the city's FUSE district and supports year-round activity in downtown Gastonia. Photo courtesy of Gastonia Ghost Peppers.

Gastonia is not North Carolina's only test of the ballpark-as-redevelopment model. Fayetteville's \$43 million Segra Stadium opened downtown in 2019, and current city redevelopment materials identify \$25.5 million in private residential and mixed-use investment downtown since 2017.¹⁷¹ Kannapolis made an even broader redevelopment bet around the \$52 million Atrium Health Ballpark, infrastructure, streetscape, housing, and commercial development. By 2025, the city reported \$122 million in private capital investment downtown since the revitalization effort began.¹⁷² The ballpark is only one piece of either story, but both provide in-state examples where baseball has been deliberately placed inside a larger redevelopment strategy.

An older and different model can be seen with the Durham Bulls Athletic Park which opened in 1995. The park itself "sparked development throughout the downtown area," according to the City

¹⁷⁰ <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Articles/2025/01/20/facilities-minor-league-baseball-ballparks/?publicationSource=sbj>

¹⁷¹ City of Fayetteville. *Addendum 2: Mixed Use Development of City-Owned Land: Blount-Gillespie Site*. May 2026.

<https://www.fayettevillenc.gov/files/sharedassets/main/v/1/finance/purchasing/bids/2026/may/addendum-2-mixed-use-development-of-city-owned-land-%E2%80%94-blount-gillespie-site.pdf>

¹⁷² City of Kannapolis, North Carolina. *Annual Comprehensive Financial Report for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2025*.

Kannapolis, NC: City of Kannapolis Finance Department, December 5, 2025.

<https://www.kannapolisnc.gov/Portals/0/Kannapolis/Departments/Finance/Documents/Annual%20Financial%20Report/City%20of%20Kannapolis%20-%202025%20Audit%20Report.pdf>

of Durham.¹⁷³ Capitol Broadcasting then redeveloped the American Tobacco campus next door, and today CBC is unusually positioned across both sides of the equation as Michael Goodman leads both its real-estate and baseball divisions, including American Tobacco and the Durham Bulls.

Even beyond the district model, towns and communities are looking to build up on and strengthen their existing sports economy. A 2026 Sports Facilities Advisory analysis commissioned by the High Point Chamber Foundation ties investment in existing and future sports facilities to broader development in lodging, restaurants, retail, housing, and other visitor-serving businesses. The study estimated 2025 visitation at around 389,500 for Truist Point Stadium and 339,700 for the High Point Athletic Complex, the two most active venues in the community while the study cites the city's overall sports-tourism development opportunity as 'Strong.' The scale is smaller but the sound business logic is that the sports economy can support foot traffic, public-space usage, and private investment outside stadium gate.

"For decades, High Point has been known around the world as the Home Furnishings Capital. Sports tourism gives us another opportunity to tell our story. Every tournament, regatta, or championship introduces new families to our community, supports our local businesses, and showcases the quality of life we continue to build," said Business High Point President and CEO Rachel Collins. "We see sports as more than recreation. It's an economic development strategy that strengthens our hospitality industry, creates new partnerships, and broadens the reasons people choose to visit, invest, and ultimately become part of High Point."

Modern event capacity also runs through utility and digital systems. NC State's planned Lenovo Esports Arena, broadcast and production equipment, and the power, servers, networking, cooling, and technical staff needed to support them. The field here, the venue, is networked technology. Digital infrastructure also supports ticketing and credentialing, broadcast feeds, and fan communication across many kinds of venues. Without this infrastructure, much like transportation, there is no kickoff or first pitch.

The funding that supports sports and event infrastructure comes from a variety of sources. Raleigh and Wake County use hospitality-tax proceeds for tourism-related facilities, including WakeMed Soccer Park, Cary Tennis Park, convention facilities, and the roughly \$300 million in renovations at Lenovo Center. Charlotte's \$650 million contribution to Bank of America Stadium similarly comes from tourism-related revenues restricted by state law rather than the general fund. The Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund reimburses approved event expenses after the fact and requires documentation of in-state spending, attendance, employment, and compliance through an independent accounting review. State money arrives conditioned on documentation, with the Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund reimbursing qualifying expenses only after

¹⁷³ City of Durham. *Citizens' Financial Report, Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2007*. Durham, NC, 2007. <https://www.durhamnc.gov/DocumentCenter/View/4370/Citizens-Financial-Report-2007-PDF>

independent CPA review.¹⁷⁴ Funding structure also affects the risk and responsibilities that follow initial investment. Venue authorities, visitors' bureaus, parks departments, universities, private owners, and public agencies each carry different parts of construction, maintenance, and operations. A capital appropriation, private investment, grant reimbursement, operating subsidy, direct-spending estimate, total economic impact, or tax revenue calculation all tell slightly different stories.

14. Public Investment and Public Value

North Carolina's public money is already in the sports economy, often arriving through channels that have almost nothing in common with each other. Across the state, sports investment is being folded into existing public systems, from tourism financing and transportation to parks, universities, and redevelopment, allowing communities to renovate major venues, revive older assets, and support newer forms of competition through very different funding models. A stadium agreement and a police parade detail are both public investment in sports and analyzing them as though they carry the same risk will not provide meaningful intelligence. Hosting places real demands on infrastructure and people. Those costs are recurring, borne locally, and rarely reported alongside the impact figure produced for the same event.

Raleigh's own accounting of the Stanley Cup parade articulates the cost of the operation in units of labor and equipment. The city reported 184 police officers on duty and six departments involved. Trucks cleared seven cubic yards of litter and emptied sixty downtown trash cans.¹⁷⁵ Six outside law-enforcement agencies supplemented Raleigh's own force with departments in Apex, Cary, Wake Forest, and Wake County staffing an event whose visitor spending landed almost entirely inside Raleigh. Total cost of providing these services was not a part of the report.

A 2023 survey in the *Journal of Economic Surveys* reviewed more than 130 studies spanning three decades and found consensus that sports franchises and stadiums produce limited measurable effect on metropolitan income, employment, and growth.¹⁷⁶ The same researchers doubled down in a 2024 *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* review adding that even when intangible benefits like civic pride are considered, the ROI tends to fall well short of the public outlay.¹⁷⁷ This analysis is often driven by the economic concept of substitution where a *local* resident spending money at a game may have otherwise spent that at another restaurant, theatre or business in the market. The math is also impacted when salaries, ownership profits or league payments, and other revenue leaves the host economy. Economists Siegfried and Zimbalist identified both of these effects more than twenty-five years ago, along with the

¹⁷⁴ North Carolina Department of Commerce, "Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund," <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/major-events-games-and-attractions-fund>; NC Commerce, "Guidelines: Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund," <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/guidelines-major-events-games-and-attractions-fund/open>. Both accessed August 3, 2026.

¹⁷⁵ City of Raleigh. "Downtown Raleigh's Largest-Ever Event, By the Numbers." Published June 26, 2026. Updated July 13, 2026. <https://raleighnc.gov/news/downtown-raleighs-largest-ever-event-numbers>

¹⁷⁶ John Charles Bradbury, Dennis Coates, and Brad R. Humphreys, "The Impact of Professional Sports Franchises and Venues on Local Economies: A Comprehensive Survey," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 37, no. 4 (2023): 1389–1431, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12533>

¹⁷⁷ John Charles Bradbury, Dennis Coates, and Brad R. Humphreys, "Public Policy Toward Professional Sports Stadiums: A Review," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 43, no. 3 (June 2024): 899–937. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22534>

opportunity cost that comes with committing public resources to a sports facility instead of another eligible use.¹⁷⁸

The truth is still up for debate however as a 2025 study that claimed the position against public investment has been overstated and that individual projects deserve specific cost/benefit assessment.¹⁷⁹ Bradbury and Humphreys pushed back in a 2026 piece saying the overwhelming empirical evidence still shows opposition to public underwriting of professional sports venues, and that a case-by-case basis wastes time and resources.¹⁸⁰

That skepticism now reaches smaller facilities and ballparks as well. A 2026 Economic Inquiry study found that state and local governments have spent roughly \$7 billion building or renovating more than 130 minor league ballparks for MLB affiliates.¹⁸¹ The research concluded that based on MLB's 2020 minor-league reorg, a comparison of cities retaining affiliated teams with those that lost them, found no measurable income difference for retaining a franchise. North Carolina has run three versions of that experiment in six years. Burlington's rookie-level club was among those affected when the Appalachian League converted to a collegiate wooden-bat league in 2021.¹⁸² Kinston, once notably the smallest full-season market in baseball, lost affiliated baseball outright after the 2024 season when the Down East Wood Ducks relocated to Spartanburg, South Carolina. Zebulon's turn came next when the Brewers moved the Carolina Mudcats after 34 seasons because Five County Stadium no longer met the league's facility standards and Wake County wasn't stepping in with funds for an upgrade. Wilson *did* fund one, putting a ballpark inside a larger downtown development and signing the club to a 25-year lease. The team opened as the Wilson Warbirds in April 2026.¹⁸³ Whether Wilson bought a generation of downtown activity or an expensive tenant is the question the research says is hardest to answer in advance. The same argument is ongoing in Gastonia, High Point, Holly Springs, and Fayetteville.

Research on sports-impact reporting calls for more consistent treatment of geography, visitor origin, substitution, public costs, and the distinction between projected and observed results.¹⁸⁴ A market weighing a ballpark or sports facility subsidy may have better evidence available than it did five years ago, but the truth remains a bit of a knuckleball.

Purpose, then, may bring some contact. An event-recruitment grant is largely about bringing visitors (and spending) into the market. Investment into a mixed-use district is closer to a real-estate proposition with private capital, taxable value, occupancy, and year-round activity doing

¹⁷⁸ John J. Siegfried and Andrew Zimbalist, "The Economics of Sports Facilities and Their Communities," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 95–114, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.14.3.95>.

¹⁷⁹ Sidney A. Johnson, Rodney Fort, and Mark S. Rosentraub, "The Consensus (?) on Public Spending on Professional Sports Facilities," *Economic Development Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (May 2025): 136–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912424251314757>

¹⁸⁰ John Charles Bradbury and Brad R. Humphreys, "Yes, There Is an Economic Consensus That Professional Sports Facilities Are Inadvisable Public Investments: A Reply to Johnson, Fort, and Rosentraub," *Economic Development Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2026): 179–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912424261418035>

¹⁸¹ John Charles Bradbury, "The Public Cost of Minor League Baseball Stadium Subsidies," *Economic Inquiry* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecin.70055>.

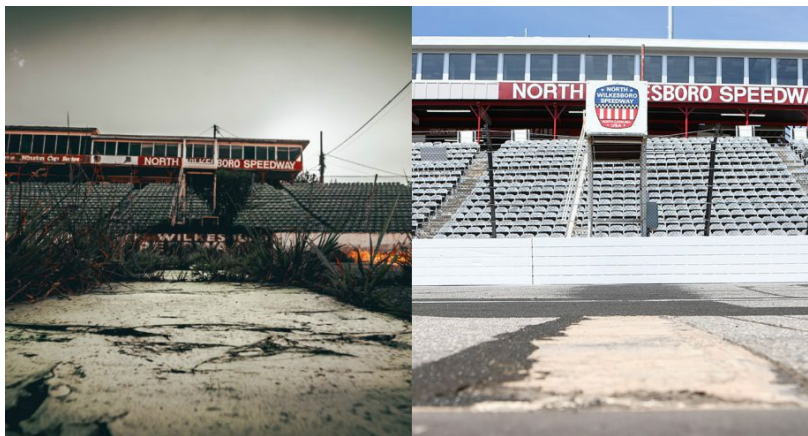
¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Hill, Benjamin. "Visit Wilson's Wilson Ballpark." *MLB.com*, April 1, 2026. <https://www.mlb.com/news/featured/wilson-warbirds-ballpark-guide>

¹⁸⁴ Robert W. Wassmer, Ryan S. Ong, and Geoffrey Propher, "Suggestions for the Needed Standardization of Determining the Local Economic Impact of Professional Sports," *Economic Development Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2016): 252–266, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891242416636685>.

more of the work. Building a municipal sports complex can be more than a local resource if tournament travel becomes a driver. Rehab of an old venue can do wonders if long-term utilization follows. These different cases don't lend themselves to an easy comparison.

North Carolina's Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund is one of the cleaner examples of a public award tied to what happens thereafter. Applications require expected attendance, projected out-of-state visitors, budgets, qualifying expenses, and other state or local investment. An independent NC-licensed CPA examines claims while compliance reporting includes actual attendance and out-of-state figures when they become available. Commerce's guidelines also require that the event's benefits outweigh its costs before making an award.¹⁸⁵ The 2026 award list is a reminder though that this is an *events* program and it covers everything from motorsports, soccer, and pickleball to gospel music, and band festivals.¹⁸⁶



North Wilkesboro Speedway following its 2023 revival following a 27-year absence. The restoration brought a dormant sports asset back into North Carolina's active motorsports economy. Photo courtesy of NASCAR.

Existing facilities or rehabilitation of older sites change the math further. North Wilkesboro Speedway sat mostly dormant for decades before state recovery funds helped finance its resurrection. Rockingham followed a similar track. The state's 2021 budget invested in those tracks, as well as other motorsports facilities with public capital bringing life back into assets that carried racing history, physical

infrastructure, and a potential event calendar.¹⁸⁷ North Wilkesboro has since returned to points-paying NASCAR Cup competition and Rockingham to national touring competition, outcomes that would have required far more capital to create from scratch. Existing infrastructure, surrounding land, and an established audience definitely lower the entry cost.

Mixed-use districts add a curveball to stadium claims because the real estate and sports revenue can become intertwined. Bradbury's analysis of Cobb County (GA) sales-tax after the Braves moved to Truist Park and The Battery found a small, statistically insignificant net increase in taxable sales. Roughly a third of the district's sales appear to come at the expense of other local businesses, and added tax collections fell well short of the county's subsidy.¹⁸⁸ A related 2024 review of *pro forma* models behind publicly financed similar developments drew similar

¹⁸⁵ North Carolina Department of Commerce, "Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund," and "Guidelines: Major Events, Games, and Attractions Fund," accessed August 3, 2026. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/grants-incentives/major-events-games-and-attractions-fund>.

¹⁸⁶ North Carolina Department of Commerce. "North Carolina Celebrates 'Summer of Soccer' with Major Events Investments Across the State." June 3, 2026. <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/06/03/north-carolina-celebrates-summer-soccer-major-events-investments-across-state>

¹⁸⁷ North Carolina General Assembly, Current Operations Appropriations Act of 2021, S.L. 2021-180, sec. 40.22, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ John Charles Bradbury, "Sports Stadiums and Local Economic Activity: Evidence from Sales Tax Collections," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 46, no. 1 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2022.2044837>

conclusions.¹⁸⁹ That is not to say that The Battery is a failure. The Braves' own financials tell a different story, but the question is not a sports or even stadium question. It's a real estate exercise, evaluated as such with relevant evidence more holistically focused on new taxable value, private capital invested, occupancy, business growth, and local visitation, all against the headwind of substitution.

Economists have measured residents' willingness to *pay* for civic pride, community identity, and the amenity of having a major team nearby, finding that these benefits can be real and widely shared.¹⁹⁰ North Carolina's own examples from a Stanley Cup parade or an ACC championship in Greensboro to a Friday night high school football game give people a reason to gather and give communities identity after the buzzer. Those benefits don't increase tax revenue or hotel rooms but not considering them risks understanding why communities compete for sports in the first place.

Whoever ends up paying for things is another part of the equation. Hospitality tax resources used in many urban communities like Raleigh or Charlotte are restricted to tourism-related purposes and benefit many sports and sporting events. These funds limit the public risk associated with general fund revenue. Private capital can absorb risks for construction or operations even when a project still depends on public infrastructure or financing. Nearly every North Carolina sports project blends these resources in some way. This makes the financial picture more complicated but can also invite private capital into the deal. Lower-cost public financing, including tax-exempt municipal debt, can reduce the overall cost of a project while private owners and developers share risk and cost. Research published in the *National Tax Journal* examined 57 stadiums built since 2000, found that 43 were funded at least partly through tax-exempt bonds, and estimated the present-value subsidy to issuers at \$3.6 billion.¹⁹¹

Public cost, private capital, visitor spending, tax revenue, facility revenue, neighborhood development, statewide growth, resident use, and civic value can all be legitimate parts of the same project without being interchangeable. In North Carolina's successful examples, the public contribution is tied to an asset or event, operating responsibility is clear, and results can be observed long after the crowd leaves. That approach gives the state a better, more defensible basis for comparing sports with other public resources going into infrastructure and economic development. Some other states have begun organizing their own sports economies in different ways, through statewide sports commissions, event funds, facility strategies, and dedicated tourism structures. Their approaches may prove useful in thinking about how North Carolina's existing sports assets fit into its broader competitive position.

¹⁸⁹ Robert W. Baumann and John Charles Bradbury, "Estimating the Fiscal Impact of Stadium Developments: Evaluating a Pro Forma Model," *Public Finance Review* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10911421231199517>

¹⁹⁰ Bruce K. Johnson, Peter A. Groothuis, and John C. Whitehead, "The Value of Public Goods Generated by a Major League Sports Team: The CVM Approach," *Journal of Sports Economics* 2, no. 1 (2001): 6–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/152700250100200102>.

¹⁹¹ Ted Gayer, Austin J. Drukker, and Alexander K. Gold, "Tax-Exempt Municipal Bonds and the Financing of Professional Sports Stadiums," *National Tax Journal* 73, no. 1 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.17310/ntj.2020.1.05>

15. How Other States Approach Sports as an Economic Asset

By 2023, at least 21 other states offered grants built specifically to help destinations bid on and operate sporting events.¹⁹² Today, recruiting a national championship event looks just like recruiting a distribution center. A market that hosts a major event successfully accumulates proven operations, relationships with event owners and governing bodies, and a track record that lowers risk. Event owners compare host markets the way site selectors compare industrial sites, and past performance is part of the calculation. Yet each state approaches this differently with some looking to grow their visitor and tourism sectors, others increasing tax revenues, while others view this in lockstep with how they treat industrial economic development. Some states are also investing in facilities, capital and finance or event recruitment while others are aiming to connect their technologies, education systems, and workforce with the sports economy.

Some states start by trying to capture and quantify their sports economy. Working with Tourism Economics, the Virginia Tourism Corporation published the commonwealth's first statewide sports-tourism study, putting direct spending at \$2.7 billion in 2022, roughly 8 percent of Virginia's visitor economy, supporting more than 28 thousand jobs and \$344 million in state and local tax revenue.¹⁹³ Their analysis counted only youth, amateur, and collegiate tournament travel over 50 miles or requiring an overnight stay. This does not take into account regular college, minor league, or professional games. Sports Virginia works through a statewide network of destinations, commissions, facilities, parks departments, and convention and visitors bureaus.¹⁹⁴ Virginia has treated sports tourism as a distinct enough part of the visitor economy to measure on a statewide basis.

In South Carolina, the SC Sports Alliance works directly with local destinations, venues, parks, commissions, and event owners, while the state's Sports Tourism Advertising and Recruitment (STAR) program helps communities compete for tournaments and participant events. State grants are matched locally and focus on event bid fees, promotion, and other event-recruitment costs rather than construction or capital investment.¹⁹⁵ South Carolina's approach aims to fill a calendar with soccer, softball, pickleball, rowing, running, basketball and other events whose economics run through hotel rooms, municipal sports facilities, and traveling families. (This approach with a focus on participant-driven sports tourism is already at play in Cary, High Point, Wilmington, and many other communities across North Carolina.) The state of South Carolina also funds venues through its Undiscovered SC Grant which provides funding for publicly owned tourism assets in communities with limited accommodations-tax revenue. This program has proven successful in

¹⁹² Broughton, David. "State Funds Help Cities Large and Small Attract Sports Events and Their Fans." *Sports Business Journal*, November 20, 2023. <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Articles/2023/11/20/tourism-state-funds/>

¹⁹³ Virginia Tourism Corporation. "Economic Impact of Sports Tourism." August 4, 2026. <https://vatc.org/research/sports-tourism-impact/>

¹⁹⁴ Tourism Economics. *Economic Impact of Sports Tourism in Virginia: Key Findings*. Prepared for Virginia Tourism Corporation, November 8, 2023. https://vatc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/TE-VA-Sports-Impact_11.8.23.pdf

¹⁹⁵ South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism. "Sports Tourism Advertising and Recruitment Grant." Accessed August 4, 2026. <https://www.scprt.com/tourism/grants/sports-tourism-advertising-and-recruitment-grant>

places like Aiken County and Anderson County where state funds helped support lakeside infrastructure to recruit rowing events and national fishing tournaments.¹⁹⁶

In Texas, sports recruitment is just bigger. It's also a bit more traditional as the Lone Star State approaches sports through a dedicated economic development office. Through the Event Trust Funds program, the state supports the recruitment of events on the projected tax revenue increases they may bring. The Governor's Economic Development and Tourism office manages this program which features three separate funding pathways including a trust fund, a major events reimbursement program, and a motorsports racing fund. Texas' approach considers five different types of tax and hosting must be won through a competitive selection process.¹⁹⁷ North Carolina's MEGA Fund is comparable, but Texas has built a particularly explicit link between public support and the incremental tax activity expected from events.

Pennsylvania's Sports Marketing and Tourism Account also lives in economic development through its Gaming Economic Development and Tourism Fund. In February 2026 the Keystone state put nearly \$5 million behind 15 events including the MLB All-Star Game and World Cup matches in Philadelphia, the State Games of America in State College, and even a Banana Ball stop at the home of the Lehigh Valley IronPigs.¹⁹⁸ Interestingly enough, esports is written directly into the eligibility language right beside amateur or professional sports. For Pennsylvania, however, venue construction and professional team relocation are both ruled ineligible.

Maryland took a different route and built an institution by creating the Maryland Stadium Authority in 1986 to keep baseball in Baltimore. Four decades later, it is a public corporation that issues its own tax-exempt debt and has planned, financed, built, or managed the Camden Yards complex, convention centers in Baltimore and Ocean City, construction around the Pimlico and Laurel Park racetracks, and a new multi-use sports and events facility in Hagerstown. It also runs feasibility and market studies for local governments weighing sports facilities of their own. Maryland Sports, the state's sports commission, operates inside it organizationally.¹⁹⁹ The people who know how to finance, build, and maintain a venue work and share institutional knowledge with colleagues recruiting events to the state.

Home to drinking milk and kissing bricks at the Indianapolis 500, Indiana has long considered its sports identity and sports economy to be a competitive asset. Indiana Sports Corporation was founded in 1979 and by its own count, has brought more than 500 significant events to the city,

¹⁹⁶ South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism, "Undiscovered SC Grant," <https://www.scprrt.com/tourism/grants/undiscovered-sc-grant>; South Carolina Association of Counties, "State Tourism Grant Opportunities Help Counties Boost Recreation Offerings," County Focus, Spring 2025.

¹⁹⁷ Office of the Governor of Texas, Economic Development & Tourism, "Event Trust Funds Program Guidelines," updated September 1, 2025; Texas Government Code Ch. 478, Major Events Reimbursement Program. https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/business/Event_Trust_Fund_Guidelines.pdf

¹⁹⁸ Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development, "Sports Marketing and Tourism Account Program (SMAT)," <https://dced.pa.gov/programs/sports-marketing-and-tourism-program-smat/>; DCED, "Shapiro Administration Invests Nearly \$5 Million to Support Sporting Events All Across Pennsylvania," February 13, 2026. Both accessed August 13, 2026.

¹⁹⁹ Maryland Department of Budget and Management, "Maryland Stadium Authority Fiscal Year 2026 Operating Budget," <https://dbm.maryland.gov/budget/FY2026Testimony/D28A03.pdf>; Maryland Department of Legislative Services, "D28A03 Maryland Stadium Authority," <https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/Pubs/BudgetFiscal/2025fy-budget-docs-operating-D28A03-Maryland-Stadium-Authority.pdf>; Maryland Sports, "Maryland Stadium Authority," <https://marylandsports.us/about-us/maryland-stadium-authority/>. All accessed August 13, 2026.

and more than \$4 billion in direct spending economic impact.²⁰⁰ In 2024, the state published its 25-year statewide plan organized around events, sports technologies, academia, sports business leadership, and the growth of women's sports.²⁰¹ It starts with hosting but reaches into the businesses, research, talent, and tech that can grow around sports between events. For technologies, the state hosts Sports Tech HQ, an Indiana Economic Development Corporation initiative aimed at making the state a global sports tech hub.²⁰²

Florida goes a step further in how it names its sports economy assets. The Florida Sports Foundation, mandated through state law, promotes and develops the state's sports and related industries, alongside amateur sports, professional franchises, major events, and spring training.²⁰³ Florida's tourism scale and professional sports footprint make it an imperfect peer for North Carolina, but it does show how the state has formally recognized the economic activity around sports extends past the event into industry worth developing.

Permanent sports institutions create a different economic relationship for a state. Colorado Springs hosts the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, its flagship training center, and a concentration of national governing bodies.²⁰⁴ Activity doesn't stop between major events as people work, train, and make decisions in the city year-round. For North Carolina, Pinehurst gives the state visions of that permanence through Golf House Pinehurst, resident USGA staff, testing and research work, and a recurring championship calendar. Utah also leverages Olympic and Paralympic sports with a sports commission that ties major-event recruitment to tourism, the sports industry, and infrastructure. The state's Major Sporting Event Venue Zone (MSEVZ) Act allows local entities to capture incremental tax revenue to fund professional and Olympic sports facilities, aging venue redevelopments, and transit infrastructure.²⁰⁵

What sets North Carolina apart from these peer states is just how all of the pieces come together. Virginia decided that sports tourism was worth measuring. Texas bolstered its ability to compete for events. Maryland concentrates on facility expertise within one organization. Indiana widened its target from sports events to sport industry. Colorado and Utah both show how institutional, long-term strategies can provide impact outside of the events calendar. For North Carolina, the sports economy is more dynamic. Racing grew from its early days of evading authority to be the foundation for high-tech automotive and defense industry. Golf, a part of the state's legacy since the 1890s, has helped bring the USGA to the state, while a robust university system carries deep athletics traditions and well-resourced programs to each corner of the state. Some towns and cities built ballparks, soccer fields, or other sports facilities and have benefited from active event calendars ever since.

SportsNC, VisitNC, the North Carolina Sports Association, local commissions, and CVBs compete for visitors and events, and MEGA gives Commerce a recruitment tool. Tourism organizations sell

²⁰⁰ Indiana Sports Corp, "2050 Vision," <https://indianasportscorp.org/what-we-do/2050-vision/>

²⁰¹ WXIN Fox59, "Indiana Sports Corp Readies 2050 Vision Unveil," September 2024, <https://fox59.com/news/indiana-sports-corp-readies-2050-vision-unveil/>

²⁰² Sports ETA. "About Sports ETA." Accessed August 4, 2026. <https://sthq.org/about/>

²⁰³ Florida Sports Foundation. "About Us." Accessed August 4, 2026. <https://playinflorida.com/about-us/>

²⁰⁴ United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee. *2025 Impact Report*. June 2026. <https://www.usopc.org/2025-impact-report>

²⁰⁵ Utah Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity. "Major Sporting Event Venue Zones (MSEVZ)." Accessed August 4, 2026. <https://business.utah.gov/community-initiatives/mseviz/>

destinations while parks departments manage public assets. Universities run athletics and research; professional teams operate private businesses. An engineering firm in Concord, a youth soccer business in Cary, Golf House Pinehurst, a cricket field in Morrisville, a whitewater outfitter in Bryson City, and a Stanley Cup parade in Raleigh belong to the same sports economy, but no single organization's mandate or scope covers them all.

16. Strategic Takeaways and Conclusion

As barricades came down on Hillsborough Street a few hours after the last of the fans went home, the street sweepers swept in to clean up the aftermath. By September, the \$48.1 million, the 30,539 room nights, and the more than \$1.18 million in tax revenue had been counted. The Stanley Cup championship made headlines all across the state, and the conversations about its economic impact proliferated. It made the sports economy easier to see and understand. Hotels filled up, restaurants got busier, sponsors and the community gained national exposure, and public agencies and infrastructure moved thousands in and out of downtown Raleigh. What was not visible in that moment is the longstanding race shop in Mooresville, the golf pro giving lessons in Moore County, or the rafting outfitter on the Nantahala. North Carolina's sports economy is well-established and is meaningful for each and every part of the state.

Sports is a real driver for economic activity in the Old North State. Motorsports measured as total economic output accounts for an estimated \$3.82 billion in total economic output and nearly 20,000 jobs.²⁰⁶ Golf, accountable through direct spending, generates \$2.3 billion across 549 courses and supports close to 53,000 jobs.²⁰⁷ Outdoor recreation, counted as value added towards the state's GDP adds roughly \$17.7 billion, about 2.1 percent of state GDP, and more than 155,000 jobs.²⁰⁸ UNC System athletics, measured through a modeled economic impact analysis carries a \$1.13 billion figure.²⁰⁹ Those numbers were built by different organizations, using different metrics for different audiences and different purposes, but they are significant and if swapped out with a manufacturing vertical would draw serious attention from any economic developer.

North Carolina's sports economy also extends beyond the urban core into communities and regions. The Charlotte area has industrial density where racing turned into engineering, fabrication and defense-sector manufacturing. The Triangle carries professional sport and one of the deepest participant-event pipelines in the country. The Sandhills hosts a permanent national institution and significant events. The Triad provides championship venues and knows what an ACC tournament week offers economically and culturally. The mountains carry an outdoor economy large enough to show up in federal registers while the coast supports billfish tournaments, regattas, and working waterfronts that double as competition venues. A state

²⁰⁶ Performance Racing Industry, 2025 Economic Impact Report: North Carolina State Table, 2025.

²⁰⁷ Business North Carolina, "NC Golf 2025: The State's 100 Best Courses and More," March 2025, <https://businessnc.com/nc-golf-2025-the-states-100-best-courses-and-more/>.

²⁰⁸ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Outdoor Recreation Economic Statistics, U.S. and States, 2024," news release BEA 26-13, March 5, 2026; NC Commerce, "NC Outdoor Economy Office," accessed July 2026, <https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/divisions-programs/rural-economic-development-division/nc-outdoor-economy-office>.

²⁰⁹ Econsult Solutions, Inc., "The Economic and Social Impact of UNC System Athletics," 2023, <https://econsultsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/UNC-System-Athletics-Economic-Impact-Study-2023-02-02-FINAL.pdf>.

usually has to choose between asset concentration or distribution. North Carolina somehow has both.

A sports venue is only part of the host economy around it. Airports, highways, hotels, parking, public safety, transit, utilities, digital systems, and experienced staff all help determine whether a community can successfully host an event. For many communities across North Carolina, each successfully hosted event builds skills and relationships, and gives that market a better sense of what it can handle. That experience becomes part of the infrastructure. Public investment in that



Charlotte's CityLYNX Gold Line streetcar passes Spectrum Center. Transit infrastructure connects Uptown venues with the broader visitor economy. Photo courtesy of Mark Clifton

infrastructure is vital but also deserves scrutiny. The academic evidence warns against assuming every sports subsidy will become an economic win. North Carolina's own examples are more varied than that debate allows. An event incentive, a rehabilitated speedway, a municipal rec facility, and a mixed-use district all carry different economics and deliver on different public demands. The nuance carries

over into the funding mechanisms themselves. For mixed-use districts, tax-increment-style financing can connect public infrastructure investment to the new taxable value generated by surrounding private development. This offers yet another tool for communities to consider as sports venues become anchors for these larger development strategies.

North Carolina knows a lot about individual events, teams, facilities, and organizations and considerably less about the collective sports economy. Some local markets report direct spending; others report total economic impact. Room nights, visitor origin, and raw attendance get the attention of some. Public cost is rarely presented next to public return. Some sectors also have statewide research while others rely on studies that are decades old. The lack of one comprehensive statistic is not fatal, though. The larger risk is that it's hard to see what is truly growing, where visitors are coming from, where businesses are clustering, or which investments are producing repeat activity and the elusive ROI.

Looking beyond North Carolina, Virginia decided sports tourism was large enough to measure statewide. Texas built a system that treats major-event recruitment much like competitive economic development. South Carolina uses smaller recruitment and infrastructure tools to build participant-driven sports tourism. Maryland has accumulated public expertise around sports facilities, finance, and event recruitment inside a longstanding institution. Indiana has taken decades of hosting experience and widened its sports strategy into technology, research, business leadership, workforce, and women's sports. Florida has gone so far as to write the "sports industry and related industries" into state policy. Each shows a different way states have chosen to think strategically about their sports economy.

North Carolina has flavors of each of these approaches blended together. Tourism organizations sell destinations. Commerce recruits activity and industry. Parks departments manage public assets. Universities run athletics and research. Professional teams operate private businesses while motorsports suppliers build products and technologies. Local sports commissions fill event calendars. There are lots of players on this field, but no single organization's mandate covers all of it. Nor should it.

North Carolina must fully recognize the economic value already sitting across these separate lanes and where each may reinforce another. A participant base can become sports tourism while a university can supply talent or research to a sports business. A facility can support local activity while also attracting visitors. Technical capabilities developed around a sport can move into entirely different industries. Many of North Carolina's opportunities do not begin with inventing a new sports economy. They begin with understanding the one already here and where existing strengths can do more work together. The teams, universities, resorts, parks, organizations, workforce, and communities described throughout this paper form a substantial economic asset base.

The sports economy also belongs at center court in the state's competitiveness conversation. Sports may have contributed to a record-setting visitor economy in 2025 at \$37.2 billion, but it also offers a competitive advantage beyond any ledger.²¹⁰ Companies deciding where to put people or investment often ask about *quality of place*. Recruiters ask what there is to do on a Saturday. Youth sports infrastructure influences where a family chooses to live, and where families live impact workforce availability. Airports, hotels, arenas, broadband, and public safety capacity built for sports events may also serve conventions, concerts, and emergencies the rest of the year. North Carolina already treats ports, broadband, transportation, energy and water, and site readiness as competitive infrastructure. The state does not need to go out and build a sports economy. North Carolina is already in the sports business. Considering all of these activities *collectively* offers insight into just how well sports fits with tourism, infrastructure, manufacturing, higher education, workforce, community development, quality of place, and just where the next round of North Carolina's cultural and economic advantage may be developing.

²¹⁰ Visit North Carolina and Tourism Economics, "N.C. Tourism Hits Record Spending, Loses Market Share in 2025," 2026, <https://www.visitnc.com/media/news-release/nc-tourism-hits-record-spending-loses-market-share-2025>.

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Data and Methodology Notes

College athletics finance data: Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act filings show what athletic departments take in and spend. They do not show visitor impact or contribution to state GDP. Duke and Wake Forest figures come from those filings. Figures for the state's smaller private programs are harder to compile consistently, so the private-college total here is an informed midpoint rather than a hard count.

UNC System athletics impact: The \$1.13 billion figure comes from a study commissioned by the UNC System and covers public institutions only. It adds capital investment and attendee spending on top of an operations-only estimate closer to \$807 million. Duke, Wake Forest, and every private program in the state sit outside it.

Motorsports figures from different eras: The 2005 estimate of \$5 to \$6.2 billion and Performance Racing Industry's 2025 figure of \$3.82 billion were built with different scopes and methods. The two are not a time series, and the difference between them should not be read as decline.

Studies paid for by the parties they measure: The Whitewater Center's \$267.4 million, the PGA Championship's \$192 million, the ski industry's \$244.3 million, and the equine industry's \$2.9 billion each come from research commissioned by an organization with a stake in the result. All four use accepted methods.

Ski industry measures: Reporting on the same ski study cites \$244.3 million in economic impact, \$148 million contributed to the state economy, and roughly \$67 million in resort revenue. This paper uses the \$244.3 million economic impact figure.

Estimates from event organizers: The Lenny Peters Cup's roughly \$1 million and the Savannah Bananas' \$38.6 million over two nights come from event operators rather than independent analysis.

Projections, not results: The Adidas Clash's \$10 million, the Cary pickleball championship figures, and Visit Raleigh's \$46.5 million in booked business all describe activity expected in the future. None of them measures an event that has already happened.

Little League Softball World Series: Published materials do not disclose the visitor-spending assumptions, geographic scope, or multipliers behind the economic-impact estimate.

Wilmington Marathon and Ironman: Race director Tom Clifford provided the nearly \$10 million marathon estimate. Kim Hufham of the New Hanover County Tourism Development Authority provided the \$7 million Ironman figure. Both work as planning benchmarks, though neither published account explains how the number was reached.

U.S. Open projections: The USGA projections rest on a 2014 study and include recurring championships, permanent operations, and related activity rather than a single event.

Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament: Big Rock conducted an economic impact study during the 2026 tournament. Findings were still pending as of July 2026.

Collegiate sailing research: The author has been involved with collegiate sailing in North Carolina, including the Sailpack program at NC State and the SAISA Conference. The SAISA analysis and other context should be read with that connection in mind.

Why the sector figures do not add up: Total economic output, direct spending, value added, and modeled economic impact answer different questions and cannot be summed. The federal outdoor recreation account also overlaps with golf and coastal activity counted separately in this paper. Each figure is a window into one part of the sports economy, not a slice of a single total.

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