

Charleston area could finally make a bid to host money-making March Madness

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The North Charleston Coliseum has a capacity of 10,170 for college basketball games. Brad Nettles/Staff

March Madness is a money-making behemoth. Besides the NFL's Super Bowl, the NCAA men's basketball tournament has few peers when it comes to generating revenue for every entity it touches.

In 2019 alone, the tournament that was held that year — the last to allow full spectator capacity — raked in nearly \$1 billion between television rights, ticket revenue and merchandise sales.

The NCAA netted more than \$864 million in profits.

"It's one of those rare sporting events that reaches non-sports and non-basketball fans across the country," said College of Charleston athletic director Matt Roberts. "It's like the Super Bowl. Millions of people will fill out a bracket each March, and a lot of them probably haven't watched a single college basketball game all season."

It is not uncommon for host cities — either savvy or fortunate enough to land any portion of the tournament — to reap a \$15 million financial windfall over a single weekend.

The economic impact on Columbia, for instance, was \$19.1 million in 2019, when the 18,000-seat Colonial Life Arena hosted the opening two rounds of the tournament. It included \$11.3 million in direct spending, according to a University of South Carolina study.

Greenville brought in more than \$6 million when it hosted a 2017 regional. Greenville city officials are expecting to haul in more than \$10 million in direct spending for local businesses this weekend as March Madness returns to the Palmetto state for the first time since the pandemic two years ago. The first tip-off at the Bon Secours Wellness Arena was Friday.

The Charleston area, one of the nation's top tourist destinations, has always been an afterthought when it comes to the NCAA Tournament.

But that could be changing. The region could be in the mix as a host city for future tournament sites when NCAA bids are considered.

"We would certainly take a look at making a bid, but we would need a buy-in from a lot of people across the community," said Frank Lapsley, general manager for the North Charleston Coliseum Complex. "We'd need a buy-in from the business community and all the municipalities from the area would have to be brought in as well. This would be the kind of endeavor that would require everyone pulling in the same direction."

Flag and capacity

In the past, the biggest obstacles facing Charleston's bid to land the NCAA Tournament were the Confederate flag issue and the seating capacity at the North Charleston Coliseum.

For about 15 years, the NCAA had shut out the entire state of South Carolina, banning it from its list of potential March Madness host venues.

The 2017 tournament games were the first in the Palmetto State in decades and were only possible after the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the Statehouse grounds two years earlier. The NCAA had refused to allow championships to be played in the state during the controversy.

Greenville became the first city in the state to play host since the ban started in 2002. With South Carolina, Duke and North Carolina among the college teams tipping off at the 15,000-seat Bon Secours arena five years ago, the regional site scored one of the highest attendance marks of the tournament, with more than 42,000 tickets sold.

“I think those attendance figures caught the NCAA’s eye,” said USC professor Tom Regan, graduate director of the College of Hospitality, Retail and Sport Management, who measured the economic impact of the 2019 March Madness stop in Columbia. “It’s one of many reasons why the tournament is returning to Greenville this year.”

For years, the NCAA also required that a host venue have a capacity of at least 15,000 seats. That was reduced to 10,000 during this past bidding cycle.

The North Charleston Coliseum’s capacity of 10,170 for basketball games would make it one of the smaller sites. It also has just eight luxury suites and two rental suites available. By comparison, Bon Secours Wellness Arena has 30. And Jacksonville’s VyStar Veterans Memorial Arena, which hosted the tournament in 2019, can seat 15,000 and has 36 luxury boxes.

“With the capacity requirement being reduced, it certainly makes it feasible for us to think about putting together a bid,” said Kathleen Cartland, executive director of the Charleston Area Sports Commission. “In the past, the attendance requirement had been a non-starter for us.”

Hotels could be another challenge for landing a regional in the Lowcountry.

The NCAA requires a city to have at least 10 full-service hotels in “close proximity” to the venue, meaning they must offer room service. Columbia, which has six such properties, was granted a waiver when March Madness descended on the Midlands three years ago.

“I can’t see 10 full-service hotels from the top of the roof of the coliseum,” said Lapsley, the general manager of the city-owned event complex. “I think we’ve got five or six in the immediate area, but if the NCAA lets teams stay 15 to 20 minutes from the arena, then I think we’d be fine.”

Luck of the Draw

The Lowcountry and the North Charleston Coliseum have hosted high-profile college basketball tournaments before.

Both have a proven track record.

NBA superstar Steph Curry dazzled fans at the coliseum when he led Davidson to back-to-back Southern Conference tournament titles in 2007 and 2008.

From 2014-17, the Colonial Athletic Association tournament was played at the coliseum. The three tournaments in the Lowcountry drew an average of 19,697 fans for the entire event.

ESPN's Charleston Classic tournament, which is held on the peninsula at the College of Charleston's TD Arena each November, has become a popular destination for top college hoops programs.

The NCAA Tournament is like those events on steroids.

"Greenville had South Carolina, North Carolina and Duke at its regional," Regan of USC said. "Duke and Virginia both were in Columbia in 2019. Those were brand-name programs that traveled well and drove the economic impact at those tournaments."

Regan is convinced that the Charleston region has the potential to be an NCAA regional site, noting that it's a vacation destination and is known for a lot of other entertainment options.

"The ability for fans to take part in activities outside of the basketball games would be significant," he said.

“It would mean more people would spend more days in the area and other attractions would see an increase in attendance. When people came to the Columbia tournament, we noticed they would take day trips to Myrtle Beach or Charleston. People inland will tend to go to the coast if given the opportunity.”

Roberts, the College of Charleston athletic director, hopes the sports commission along with the coliseum will enter a bid for the tournament.

“The city has a tremendous track record for hosting festivals and national sporting events,” he said. “To have the country’s greatest sporting event in the nation’s top tourist destination would be a win-win for the NCAA and the Lowcountry.”

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