

Charleston tops rankings of US minor-league sports markets

- By Andrew Miller apmiller@postandcourier.com
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From North Charleston to Patriots Point and the banks of the Ashley River, minor-league sports are thriving in the Charleston area. And folks are noticing.

Long considered a top tourist destination, Charleston also is being recognized as a hot spot for minor-league franchises.

The Sports Business Journal ranked Charleston as the nation's No. 1 minor-league market in its biennial study, which was released on Sept. 19. Charleston boasts the [Charleston RiverDogs](#) in minor-league baseball; the [South Carolina Stingrays](#) in the ECHL; and the [Charleston Battery](#) in the United Soccer League Championship.

The ranking is the highest for Charleston since the publication started rating minor-league markets in 2005, and the first time a city outside the Northeast or Midwest has topped the list. It's also the fourth consecutive top five finish for Charleston. Charleston was followed by Fort Wayne, Ind.; Tulsa, Okla.; Toledo, Ohio; and Des Moines, Iowa in this year's rankings.

"The stability of the ownership groups, the quick recovery from the pandemic and the metrics of the market make Charleston the top-ranked city for minor leagues," said Sports Business Journal researcher David Broughton, who puts together the rankings. "Each one of those franchises, the RiverDogs, the Stingrays, the Battery, are very proactive in trying to improve the fan experience."

"Charleston isn't your typical minor-league market like those cities in the Midwest. The constant attention to the fan and the investment in facilities make them model organizations."

The Battery and Stingrays hockey team have welcomed new ownership groups in recent years. Rob Salvatore became the majority owner of the Battery in 2019, while Todd Halloran took over the Stingrays in 2018.

"New ownership of minor league franchise usually signals the death knell or at the very least it's real negative for our metrics," Broughton said. "Instead of it

being a negative, the Battery and Stingrays have thrived with Rob and Todd at the helm.”

In 2021, more than 600,000 fans passed through the turnstiles of the three local minor-league teams, giving the city one of the most loyal minor league fan followings in the country.

Maybe it’s the wacky promotions the RiverDogs have become famous for over the years that keep fans coming back year after year. The Stingrays feature an “Pink in the Rink” night, when everything at the North Charleston Coliseum is pink, including the ice. And the Charleston Battery annually lure Major League Soccer clubs to Patriots Point in Mount Pleasant.

The Journal’s study is based on a formula that uses three basic economic statistics: Unemployment rate, population growth and total personal income over a five-year period. That data is combined with fan attendance, franchise stability and facilities to determine the rankings.

“It’s not very glamorous,” Broughton said. “Charleston is the picture of consistency. The team owners keep the facilities at the highest level. Charleston’s economy has seen more growth than most minor league markets, which puts pressure on the market to keep up with that growth, and it has. You could see Charleston making a run for No. 1 back in 2019.”

All three franchises have seen an uptick in ticket sales and corporate sponsorships. Salvatore has seen a 90 percent increase in ticket revenue, 147 percent increase in merchandise sales and a 240 percent jump in sponsorship revenue with the Battery, he said.

Volvo, whose sole U.S. manufacturing presence is located in the Charleston area, is the team’s jersey patch sponsor.

"We bought a team in this city for a reason because we knew the potential this area had," Salvatore said. "There's a lot of civic pride here in Charleston. I think the ranking is a testament to three very committed franchises and ownership groups. We all have tremendous fan support."

For the ninth straight year, Crews Chevrolet, a team sponsor since the late 1990s, will be the Stingrays jersey patch sponsor.

A new source of revenue for the Stingrays will come from the rental of two 40-person party suites at the North Charleston Coliseum that opened last season. Truly Hard Seltzer purchased the naming rights to one of them when it opened, and the two areas are 70 percent booked for what is the first full season as saleable assets.

"The demographic and local economics make this such a desirable place to do business," Halloran said. "There are 40-50 people moving to the area every day and a lot of those are from hockey country. I thought this was a great market back in 2018 and it's only gotten better."

The RiverDogs, currently playing for the Carolina League title, set all-time sales records for both tickets and sponsorship sales this season. The RiverDogs made MiLB's annual top 25 in merchandise sales 14 times from 1994 through 2019.

"If you take the professional sports scene together, the Stingrays, the RiverDogs and the Battery, plus the (Daniel Island) tennis center, I would think the driving force behind such a ranking would be the longevity and continuity we've had," said Charleston RiverDogs president Dave Echols. "That speaks volumes for the market and shows you how this market continues to grow. It shows how each entity has been able to thrive in a mid-size market. It's a huge honor and I'm thrilled to see it."

While from the outside the three franchises might appear to be competing for the same entertainment dollar, Halloran said there is a collaboration between the organizations.

“Do we compete a little bit with each other? Yeah, a little,” Halloran said. “But we also support each other. The RiverDogs are in the playoffs and we want them to win. In the end, I think we’re competing against everything that Charleston has to offer and not so much each other.”

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How Charleston Has Ranked

2005: 17

2007: 50

2009: 141*

2011: 7

2013: 11

2015: 5

2017: 4

2019: 3

2022: 1

* - Charleston lost 3 teams in three years — NBA D League Lowgators, af2 Swamp Foxes and NIFL Sandsharks.

2022 Minor League Rankings

1. Charleston
2. Fort Wayne, Ind.
3. Tulsa, Okla.
4. Toledo, Ohio
5. Des Moines, Iowa

6. Grand Rapids, MI

7. San Bernardino, Calif.

8. Quad Cities, Iowa

9. Reading, Pa.

10. Greenville