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2022 Minor League Markets: Charleston's Holy Trinity

Riding the strength and longevity of its baseball, soccer and hockey teams, the Holy City is the first Southern region to top SBJ's minor league markets rankings



*The Charleston RiverDogs at Joseph P. Riley Jr. Park.
Photo by Charleston RiverDogs*

With its cobblestone streets, gaslight lanterns, stunning waterfront sunsets, Palmetto trees and world-class hospitality, a Southern coastal town might not

immediately fit a sports fan's psychological image of a typical minor league market. But with the nation's oldest professional soccer team, a hockey team that is about to drop the puck on its 30th season, and a 43-year-old baseball team that spends every day proving to the city that "Fun is Good," Charleston, S.C., is Sports Business Journal's 2022 No. 1 minor league market.

'I'LL NEVER LEAVE'

"While our market is growing leaps and bounds, it is still pretty small to be home to three professional teams," said Dave Echols, who has been with the Charleston RiverDogs for nearly 22 years, and at the helm since St. Patrick's Day 2004. Born in Delaware, Ohio, Echols began his career in sports in 1991 as an intern for the long-defunct World Basketball League Dayton Wings. In Charleston, he has seen his hockey brethren change owners, his soccer neighbors change venues and owners, the relocation of an international tennis event to the city, and the birth and demise of a basketball team and three indoor football teams.

And lots of fun at the ballpark (boss's orders).

The Tampa Bay **Rays** affiliate, owned by the Goldklang Group since 1989, has long been admired throughout minor league sports for its stability and creative marketing prowess. Goldklang Group executive adviser Mike Veeck spent his career running professional baseball teams, so when the company purchased the team in the 1990s, Veeck was sent in to help with the transition. "I moved here 15 years ago with the intention of working here for one year," Veeck told SBJ in 2011, when Charleston ranked No. 7 in the study. "Now I'll never leave."

It's a mantra shared by the leaders at each of the market's pro teams.

For its part, the market's most-tenured team — well-known for not taking itself too seriously — is having some serious success on and off the field.

The 2021 squad won the most games in franchise history (85 total) en route to its first South Atlantic League championship. The RiverDogs topped that this season (88 regular-season games, with at least one playoff game as of press time), and won more games than any MiLB team this season. Wins and losses do not factor into SBJ's rankings methodology, as that rarely affects attendance in minor league sports. But the RiverDogs' average playoff attendance last year was more than 50% higher than their regular-season average, which is not usually what happens

in most markets. And 2022 is the 25th straight season that the team has averaged 3,300-plus fans per game, and the fifth in a row with an average of more than 4,300.

The team also set all-time sales records for both tickets and sponsorship sales this season.

The RiverDogs made MiLB's annual top-25 merchandise sales 14 times from 1994 through 2019. Data has not been released by MiLB since the 2019 rankings were announced, but the club set back-to-back team bests for merchandise sales in 2021 and the current season, according to Ben Abzug, the club's senior vice president.

Merchandise sales picked up in 2016, when the club introduced a Sunday-only jersey in response to a racially motivated tragedy that happened in Charleston the previous summer ([see related story](#)).

At the end of that season, the team unveiled the "Holy City"-branded uniforms to be worn every Sunday beginning in 2016. Charleston is home to more than 400 churches, some dating back to the mid-to-late 1700s, earning its nickname. To coincide with the rebranding, fans "are encouraged to show off their famous Charlestonian hospitality by greeting one another and extending hands in friendship," according to the team's announcement.

The Holy City theme earned the MiLB Golden Bobblehead Award for its "Here for the Holy City" multifaceted community outreach campaign that it activated during the 2020 canceled season. (See www.sportsbusinessjournal.com for a list of the team's other awards and honors.)

RiverDogs Rewards

2011, 2013: South Atlantic League (SAL) General Manager of the Year (Dave Echols).

2012: MiLB's Best Overall Promotion and Best Non-Game Day Event awards for hosting the SAL All-Star Game Home Run Derby on the flight deck of the USS Yorktown, a World War II aircraft carrier adjacent to what is now the Charleston Battery's stadium.

2017: Bob Freitas Award as the top Class A organization, by Baseball America.

2019: SAL Club Merit Award, for best all-around franchise.

A big reason for the team's success, of course, is Joseph P. Riley Jr. Park, located on the bank of the Ashley River marsh, just 2 miles from the historic open air markets. A \$3 million renovation before the 2017 season included construction of the 214-seat Segra Club at Riley Park, a premium seating area that the team calls "the most significant ballpark addition" in the history of The Joe. This year, 125 private non-game-day events have been booked in the 6,000-square-foot club, and this season game-day sales (parties of 10 or more, \$95 per person) hit a record high.

Beyond Segra, the club's top-tier sponsors are Budweiser, Boeing (one of the region's largest employers), MUSC Health and REV Federal Credit Union.

The team handles the ballpark's food and beverage operations. The Wicked Sausage Stand opened this year with local sausages from Cooper River Farms, served with Wicked Weed (a North Carolina brewer) beer cheese. Also popular this summer was the new Joe's Shrimp Shack, located behind home plate opposite of the Belly Itcher Bar.

Because fun is good, and even better with food.

HOCKEY IN THE SOUTH WORKS

South Carolina Stingrays President Rob Concannon was born and raised in Dorchester, Mass., 15 minutes south of the old Boston Garden.

He started playing for the Stingrays in 1995 — the club's third season — and was a member of the 1997 Kelly Cup championship team. In 2009, he took over as president and alternate governor.

"I fell in love with the people and the community, and really, everything about Charleston," he said in his Southie accent, noting that most of his family still lives in the Northeast. "Now I've been here for 28 years."

He acknowledges the obstacles the market has overcome as it prepares to host its 30th season of professional hockey.

"Minor league hockey was in such a different place when the team was born," he said, referring to an era when 74 teams played in seven leagues, most of which were gone within a decade. "Hockey in the South was a novelty, right? Now we're

the longest-running team in the league to have played continuously in the same city.”



*Longtime sponsor Crews Chevrolet will be the jersey patch partner for the South Carolina Stingrays for the ninth season. **BRIAN PRINCIPLE PHOTOGRAPHY***

The Washington Capitals affiliate won the ECHL’s 2018-19 Team Award of Excellence, which recognizes the league’s best all-around club on and off the ice, and has gone to the Finals in three of the last seven seasons.

On the business side, Concannon said the club was on pace in 2020 to increase its revenue in season-ticket sales, groups sales, and corporate sales for the 10th consecutive season. But the pandemic eliminated its final eight home dates, or nearly one-quarter of its home schedule. Additionally, the Rays had the league’s best record at the time, so dreams of postseason revenue also melted.

All 2022-23 revenue metrics are trending up, Concannon said. Crews **Chevrolet**, for example, a team sponsor since the late 1990s, is returning for its ninth season as the club’s jersey patch sponsor.

A big source of that new revenue 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% booked for what is the first full season as saleable assets.

The addition follows \$32 million in publicly funded renovations at the city-owned arena that were completed in 2012 and 2016, which modernized the suites and the back of the house, where Sodexo Live has handled food and beverage operations since the venue opened in 1993. The complex is operated by ASM Global's SMG.

Todd Halloran, a private equity partner and avid hockey fan, became the majority owner of the team in 2018. The Zucker family, local philanthropists with deep roots in the city who founded the team, retained a 10% share.

Halloran grew up in Boston playing hockey and has four children who did the same, including a daughter who plays at Williams and another at Wesleyan. He is also a minority owner of the Class AA New Hampshire Fisher Cats.

CHARLESTON + SOCCER: INVESTMENTS ON THE RISE

The USL Championship Charleston Battery played its first match on May 1, 1993, exactly one week before the country's *second-longest* running pro soccer team (the USL Championship Richmond Kickers) began.

The Battery opened the \$5.7 million Blackbaud Stadium on April 29, 1999, 20 days before the **Columbus Crew** opened the country's *second* pro soccer-specific venue.

That's the history lesson. The 30-year-old club recently began a new era, with a new owner, new logo and a new waterfront home where any team would love to play.

Bergen County, N.J., native and entrepreneur Rob Salvatore believes that the combination of a market with big growth potential and a sport with a similar trendline is a recipe for success. So he purchased the Battery following the 2019 season and moved his family south.

"The town is on fire," he said. "We invested for exactly those reasons. We came to Hilton Head [S.C.] in 1981 as a family when I was a kid. My parents had a

timeshare that they used for a couple weeks each summer and eventually built a house there 25 years ago. So the Lowcountry has been part of the Salvatore family for almost 40 years.”

Additionally, Rob’s brother, Lou Salvatore, a minority owner in the Battery and the **Miami Marlins**, is a senior managing director at private equity firm Blackstone.

Rob Salvatore worked with the **Patriots** Point Development Authority, the city of Mount Pleasant, the state of South Carolina and the College of Charleston to transform — at his expense — the school’s existing soccer field into the Patriots Point Soccer Stadium that it would share with the college.

“They saw the benefits of the investments right from the beginning,” he said. “They really helped cut through a lot of the red tape.”



Rob Salvatore, who bought the Charleston Battery in 2019, celebrates with players during a game at Patriots Point Soccer Stadium. COURTESY OF THE CHARLESTON BATTERY

The 450-acre site on Charleston Harbor was established in the 1970s and includes a naval and maritime museum with the USS Yorktown, where the RiverDogs hosted the 2012 SAL All-Star Game Home Run Derby.

The renovation was designed by local architect LS3P, which also worked on the Segra Club at The Joe and the recent \$50 million total upgrade of the nearby

Credit One Stadium, which hosts the annual **WTA** Credit One Charleston Open. The use of two repurposed shipping containers to serve as 30-person “suite boxes” was appropriate given that Charleston boasts one of the country’s busiest ports.

The Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge towers over the stadium and Spanish moss-draped Sabal palms, the state’s official tree, dot the grounds. The stadium’s capacity of 3,900 will slowly expand to roughly 5,000 over the next few seasons.

Since Salvatore took the reins, the team has seen a 90% increase in ticket revenue, 147% increase in merchandise sales and a 240% jump in sponsorship revenue, he said. Volvo, whose sole U.S. manufacturing presence is located in the Charleston area, is the team’s jersey patch sponsor.

Now the focus is getting fans in the stadium and building out premium experiences, he said. One thing that helps their bottom line is that they handle all the food and beverage operations. One of the local favorites they have brought in is Coastal Crust, a wood-fired pizza shop whose owner, Brian Piesner, played for the team in the early 2000s.

“We don’t need to make tens of millions of dollars in revenue, on a gross percentage, to net out,” said Salvatore. “We can be lean and mean and startup-y about it to make it work.”

Salvatore is excited, but not surprised, that the increased activity on the Point — the team has averaged about 2,700 fans per game since moving there — has caught the eye of real estate developers, as a 30- to 50-acre mixed-use project has been approved directly across the street from the stadium.

“We moved to a place that we love but we were also walking into a place that we felt had a great entrepreneurial upside,” he said. “That’s why we’re invested in Charleston.”

Past No. 1 Minor League Markets

The top minor league market in each of the nine rankings SBJ has compiled since 2005.

Year	Market
2005	Rochester, N.Y.
2007	Fort Wayne, Indiana
2009	Hershey-Harrisburg, Pa.
2011	Hershey-Harrisburg, Pa.
2013	Toledo, Ohio
2015	Quad Cities (Illinois-Iowa)
2017	Des Moines, Iowa
2019	Grand Rapids-Comstock Park, Mich.
2022	Charleston, S.C.