

## Minor League Mecca: Charleston rises to No. 3 among nation's minor league sports markets

By Andrew Miller [apmiller@postandcourier.com](mailto:apmiller@postandcourier.com), The Post and Courier, September 26, 2019



It's hard to keep up with all the awards and accolades the city of Charleston has received over the past decade.

Charleston has long been considered a top tourist destination. Its history, architecture, restaurants and beaches have made it one of the most desired vacation destinations not only in the U.S., but across the globe.

But that's not all Charleston has to offer. The area's minor league sports scene has earned a national reputation as well.

The Sports Business Journal recently ranked Charleston as the nation's No. 3 minor league market in its biennial study. The ranking is the highest for Charleston since the publication started rating minor league markets in 2005, and the third consecutive top-5 finish for the Holy City.

Grand Rapids, Mich., earned the top spot in the rankings, followed by Greenville, Charleston, Toledo, Ohio, and Des Moines, Iowa, in the top five.

In 2019, more than 600,000 fans passed through the turnstiles for the three local minor league teams — Charleston RiverDogs (baseball), Charleston Battery (soccer) and South Carolina Stingrays (ice hockey) — giving the city one of the most loyal minor league fan followings in the country.

“If you take the professional sports scene together, the Stingrays, the RiverDogs and the Battery, plus the 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.”

Maybe it’s the wacky promotions the RiverDogs have become famous for over the years. Or it could be the Stingrays’ annual “Pink in the Rink” night when everything at the North Charleston Coliseum is pink, including the ice. Or perhaps it’s the Charleston Battery’s ability to lure European clubs to MUSC Health Stadium.

While the promotions and state-of-the-art facilities certainly don’t hurt the overall fan experience, they have little to do with the study or Charleston’s ranking. The 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,” said Sports Business Journal researcher David Broughton, who puts together the rankings. “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. Charleston’s attendance has gone up in each of the last five years.”

Over the past three years, each of the three franchises has made major investments in their facilities. The North Charleston Coliseum, home of the Stingrays, completed \$22 million in renovations, while the Riverdogs spent \$3.1 million on the 6,000-square-foot Riley Park Club. Charleston Battery owner Eric Bowman invested more than \$1 million in upgrades at MUSC Health Stadium, which included a state-of-the-art scoreboard.

Bowman recently sold MUSC Health Stadium, and the Battery could be under new ownership by next season, but the soccer franchise is expected to remain in Charleston.

If not for Hurricane Dorian, the RiverDogs would have had a record-setting season at the turnstiles as 301,320 fans packed Riley Park to watch the Yankees’ Single A affiliate on the field.

“When the governor reversed the lanes on I-26 for the hurricane, we had to cancel our last game, and that kept us from having another record year,” Echols said. “We had a great year because 300,00 is our benchmark. We’ve had another year of growth.”

The only downside for Charleston is that Greenville finished ahead in the rankings.

The RiverDogs won 12 of 18 games against the Greenville Drive on the baseball diamond, while the Stingrays went 5-3-1 on the ice against the Greenville Swamp Rabbits last season.

Unfortunately, on-the-field results matter little in this study.

“There’s always an ongoing rivalry between the Lowcountry, the Midlands and the Upstate about which region is better,” Echols said. “Of course, living in Charleston, we think we’re the top market. You always try and see how you compare within your industry and within your region. I think to have two cities in South Carolina in the top 5 is pretty remarkable. I’m happy for Greenville, but it just means that we will all have to work a little harder next time so we’re ahead of them.”