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## Calling all fans

### Lacrosse, soccer, horses and big fish lure tourism dollars to Maryland

by Lindsey Robbins | Staff Writer

More than 70,000 fans filled the 71,008-seat M&T Bank Stadium in Baltimore last summer to watch a soccer match between Italian Serie A team A.C. Milan and Chelsea, a mainstay of the England's Premier League.

Maryland officials would like to see a similar turnout next month, when teams from the respective leagues — Inter Milan and Manchester City — face each other on July 31.

Last year's match contributed \$20 million to local businesses and more than \$1.5 million in combined state and local taxes, according to Maroon PR, which marketed the match.

Meanwhile, in Harford County, youth soccer and professional lacrosse championships at Cedar Lane Regional Park in Bel Air generate as many as 3,400 room nights for area hotels and attract more than 5,000 spectators. Those numbers could jump dramatically when the county hosts the U.S. Youth Soccer Region I Championship in 2013 and 2014, which is expected to result in \$17 million in economic impact during the weeklong event.

Both of these ventures have emerged within only the past two years and represent the state's increasingly aggressive approach toward sports tourism marketing.

Besides its major professional attractions — the Washington Redskins, the Baltimore Ravens and Orioles — and its more established minor league teams such as the Bowie Baysox and Frederick Keys, the state increasingly hopes to cash in on a wide range of sports, from soccer and lacrosse to equestrian events and fishing contests.

"Sports generates \$182 billion per year nationally, with 27 percent of that coming from travel and contributing to 47 million hotel room nights annually," said Terry Hasseltine, director of the Maryland Office of Sports Marketing.

The state created the office last year, and charged Hasseltine with fostering more exposure for sporting venues and supporting the recruitment and retention of events. During its first year, Hasseltine's office pursued a potential impact of \$600 million from sporting events, securing \$150 million. This contributed to the state's total of \$505.2 million in economic impact from all tourism in 2009, up from \$486.0 million in 2008.

"We're changing the culture of the sports conversation," Hasseltine said. "A year ago, we would not even be talking about world-class soccer."

#### **'Nothing' out of realm of possibility**

Both M&T Bank Stadium, home of the Ravens, and FedEx Field in Landover, home of the Redskins, have submitted bids for the FIFA World Cup in 2018 or 2022. Although FedEx Field represents the

Washington, D.C., bid, tourism officials for Maryland and Prince George's County expect significant tourism spillover. Both bids remain on the World Cup's list of 18 sites.

Professional and youth tournaments already attract large crowds to the Maryland Soccerplex in Boyds. Initially funded by Discovery Communications of Silver Spring, the Soccerplex features 22 fields and welcomes more than 600,000 visitors each year, hosting more than 4,500 annual matches.

"We've created an environment where nothing is out of the realm of possibility if we assemble the right team," Hasseltine said.

The state also anticipates 100,000 visitors and about \$70 million in economic impact from the inaugural Baltimore Grand Prix in August 2011. The race, part of the Izod Indy Car Series, will be staged on a temporary street circuit around the Inner Harbor, officials announced Wednesday.

"The Baltimore Grand Prix will add to the impressive list of exciting and significant sporting and entertainment events Maryland is home to every year," Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) said in a statement.

Maryland's major advantage in attracting sporting events comes from its ideal position between Washington and New York City, making it accessible within a day's travel to two-thirds of the U.S. population, Hasseltine said. He described Maryland as a "tank of gas state," saying people can get around to most prominent locations on just one tank of gas.

### **Prince George's tops in tourism dollars**

Prince George's maximized this advantage in 2009, leading the state in tourism dollars. The county generated about \$82.6 million through county admissions and amusement taxes, county hotel and motel taxes and state tourism sales taxes, according to the Maryland Office of Tourism.

"People are really starting to recognize the county's stature as a sporting venue in the state," said J. Matthew Neitzey, executive director of the Prince George's County Conference and Visitors Bureau.

Showplace Arena in Upper Marlboro hosted the Women's Atlantic 10 Conference basketball championships in April, drawing about 9,000 spectators and participants, including players and their families. The arena is slated to host the Women's Colonial Athletic Association hoops tournament in 2011 and 2012.

Competitive prices, proximity to Washington and cooperative hotel partners are burnishing the county's appeal in luring such events, said William Chambers, executive director of Showplace.

### **Lacrosse and mixed martial arts**

Baltimore, in particular, is an appealing venue because once visitors arrive in their hotel, they can tour the whole city on foot, said Roy Sommerhoff, the Ravens' vice president of stadium operations. Sommerhoff negotiated the soccer match for July 31.

A reported 116,289 fans attended the NCAA men's Division I lacrosse championship last weekend at M&T Bank Stadium. Although attendance was down from 147,097 in 2007, the last time the championship tournament was in Baltimore, Sommerhoff said local hotels still saw plenty of business. He

attributed the drop-off to the lack of local teams in the tournament, plus the absence of Syracuse University, which has a large fan base.

The Greater Washington Sports Alliance, in cooperation with Prince George's County, is vying to host the tournament at FedEx Field in 2013 and 2014.

Another Baltimore venue, First Mariner Arena, hosted an increasingly popular draw — mixed martial arts — in March. Shogun Fights II, which attracted almost 5,000 fans, generated about \$400,000 in revenues, excluding hotels and restaurants, said promoter John J. Rallo III. An after-party generated an additional \$40,000.

To the north, Harford County hosts the Cal Ripken World Series, supported by the former Orioles star. About 30,000 fans attend the annual weeklong youth baseball event in Aberdeen, which draws teams from 10 states and six other countries, said Kristy Seling, the series coordinator. In addition to the general tourism impact, the community also benefits from the foreign players visiting businesses with their host families.

### **Coastal assets**

Maryland's seacoast is another asset for marketing sports, with prime venues for fishing and volleyball.

The state's White Marlin Open in Ocean City generated a record \$16 million-plus in total economic impact in 2009, supporting 130 jobs, with 70 directly related to visitor spending during the five-day competition, according to state information. More than 5,000 visitors attended the fishing tournament, which draws more than 3,000 anglers alone, spending about \$2.2 million per day over seven days.

"Ocean City offers boat dockage, quality restaurants and a family atmosphere that's not as remote as other fishing areas," said Jim Motsko, president of the contest.

The tournament returns Aug. 2-6 for its 37th year.

Bad weather plagued Ocean City's hosting of an AVP Beach Volley tour event last summer, but the city is set to try again June 12 with the Pro Beach East Tour. The June 12 event is a qualifier for the AVP.

Tour sponsors enjoy Ocean City because of the huge number of tourists it attracts as a vacation destination, said Don Abramson, vice president of Corrigan Sports, which owns Pro Beach East and is affiliated with the AVP. Sponsor booths may see 150,000 each weekend, he said.

But Abramson said he has not noticed any increased efforts to land volleyball events, adding that Maryland has not offered AVP much funding to stay. Corrigan Sports also manages the Baltimore Marathon in October, which draws about 22,000 runners.

Cecil County will host its second ESPN Bassmaster Open in September. When the county first hosted the event in April 2009, it drew 400 competitors and an estimated \$1 million in economic impact, said Sandy Turner, tourism coordinator for the county.

"We have great partner hotels that work with us in offering good rates and packages," she said, adding that her office often works with Hasseltine.

## **Horsing around**

Cecil County also hosts the Dansko Fair Hill International, an equestrian event that serves as an Olympic qualifier, attracting 15,000 people each October.

Charlie Colgan, executive director of the event, said most visitors stay for most of the week, allowing organizers to market surrounding businesses to them.

"It works better for the community since it lasts four days," he said.

Hasseltine agrees, saying state officials hope people who visit for the tournaments will be inspired to either turn those trips into longer vacations or even return for a later stay.

"[Hasseltine] and his office have been wonderful for the state of Maryland," Turner said.

Staff Writer Chris Huntemann contributed to this report.