

# Championships are expected to boost city economy

NCAA Men's lacrosse tournament in town for three-day weekend

*By Lorraine Mirabella, The Baltimore Sun*

*9:03 PM EDT, May 27, 2010*

Downtown hotels are sold out, with waiting lists. Restaurant and pub managers are rolling out specials on oysters and beer and awaiting big crowds. And a slew of vendors will be setting up shop at the Inner Harbor.

All hope to lure thousands of lacrosse fans coming to town this weekend. The NCAA men's lacrosse championship is coming to Baltimore for the fourth time since 2003, and area businesses say the timing couldn't be better.

The three-day, five-game event at M&T Bank Stadium is expected to compensate for lingering economic doldrums and for what is typically one of the city's sleepier holiday weekends, when residents decamp for Memorial Day. The tournament, with a projected weekend attendance of 120,000, is expected to bring an estimated economic boost of roughly \$20 million.

"We probably would have closed on Memorial Day if it wasn't for lacrosse," said Eric Cotton, owner of Pickles Pub near Camden Yards. "I've been here since '94, and for Memorial Day, if there was nothing going on, we were better off closing because there's just no business in downtown Baltimore."

Cotton said the tournament draws families and lacrosse fans "looking to go out and see the town."

The estimated attendance this weekend would outstrip the tournament's disappointing draw of about 102,000 last year in Foxborough, Mass.

M&T Bank Stadium's proximity to accommodations and other attractions as well as the city's proximity to lacrosse fan bases in New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia all gave Baltimore an edge in securing the championship this year, said Terry Hasseltine, director of the Maryland Office of Sports Marketing. Those factors also should help in meeting ticket-sale goals, he said.

Ticket sales combined with spending at hotels, restaurants, shops, gas stations and other businesses are expected to bring in \$18 million to \$22 million, state officials estimate. The tournament includes the Division I semifinals and final and the Division II and III finals.

In 2007, the tournament set single-day and three-day event attendance records in Baltimore, which also played host for the event in 2003 and 2004. The overall attendance record three years ago in Baltimore was 146,000.

"Our ability to draw fans to the stadium was proven in '07," said Hasseltine, whose office is a partnership of the Maryland Stadium Authority and the state Department of Business and Economic Development. "This is huge for the city of Baltimore and state of Maryland. Lacrosse is our state team sport, and the culture of lacrosse here in Maryland is second to none."

As the sport's popularity has soared, total attendance for the NCAA men's lacrosse championships has grown over the last decade, said Steve Stenersen, president of Baltimore-based U.S. Lacrosse, the sport's national governing body.

He said attendance fell in 2009 because the event moved out of its usual location in the mid-Atlantic and failed to attract fans from key lacrosse markets such as Baltimore, Philadelphia and Long Island.

"People view Baltimore as a great site for this event," Stenersen said. "It's very easy to get in and out, and you can get everywhere by cab and people seem to like that."

The event, while not a sellout at the stadium, can have a significant impact on the city and region because it brings people in over a four-day span, with many fans arriving Friday and staying through Monday or even Tuesday.

The region also will benefit this year from two other lacrosse events being held, coincidentally, this weekend: the NCAA Division I Women's Championship at Towson University, which drew 15,000 people last year when it was held there, and U.S. Lacrosse's Women's Division National Tournament at Cedar Lane Regional Park in Bel Air.

Organizers of the men's championships, which include the Baltimore Ravens, state officials and four local universities, have tried to extend the tournament beyond the confines of the stadium, with fan events throughout downtown.

A pep rally will feature players from all eight teams Friday night at the Inner Harbor Amphitheater, a free concert Saturday night by national recording artist Parachute outside Power Plant Live, and a lacrosse festival to run all weekend across the Inner Harbor, from the Maryland Science Center <<http://findlocal.baltimoresun.com/harbor/home/community-genre/maryland-science-center-baltimore-community-venue>> to the National Aquarium. As many as 12,000 people are expected for the free concert, said Chris Furst, marketing director for Power Plant Live.

Several downtown bars have been designated "fan gathering restaurants," one for each of the Division I teams - University of Virginia, Duke, Notre Dame and Cornell.

"Baltimore is crazy about lacrosse, and this is a great opportunity for a friendly competition between the bars," said Scotti Offutt, events manager for the owner of Ryleigh's Oyster on East Cross Street, where Duke fans are expected in force. The restaurant is offering \$1 oysters and \$2 draft beers from Friday through Monday and expects a 20 percent spike in typical weekend business.

MaGerks Pub in Federal Hill will be offering specials during the games and at any time during the weekend for anyone who wanders in "with any sort of Notre Dame gear on," said Sarah Clark, a manager. "We're psyched to have everyone coming. It's always huge for business. This will bring new people in."

Hotel managers said rooms have been scarce for weeks.

"The majority of the hotels in the city are either sold out or close to sold out," said Chris Orr, director of sales and marketing for the Renaissance Harborplace Hotel. "Memorial Day typically is not a holiday weekend that this hotel would sell out without some sort of a large group. NCAA lacrosse is that group for the entire city. This weekend we're completely sold out with wait lists."

Organizers set a goal of more than 40,000 people at the men's games each day, said Mark Burdett, vice president of corporate partnerships and development for the Baltimore Ravens. The ability to meet that goal will depend in part on the individual teams that ended up in the tournament and fans' ability to make last-minute travel plans.

"You can't expect a Cornell fan to just wake up on Tuesday this week and say, 'We're going to Baltimore,'" he said.

As of Thursday, nearly 36,000 all-session tickets for admission to all five games had been sold, including 8,000 in the past week, said Burdett. Single-game tickets were to go on sale at 10 a.m. Friday.

Burdett noted that the weather is "cooperating" and organizers are optimistic they'll meet their goal. "We feel very good."