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From Strategic Goal to Reality: The Development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational Basketball Tournament

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ABSTRACT

The Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, area was selected to serve as one-time hosts for two tournaments in 2017: the ACC Women's Basketball Tournament and the Puerto Rico Tip-Off Men's College Basketball Tournament, when circumstances required those events to relocate on very short notice. Following the success of these two one-time events, the region sought to become a permanent host of an annual men's college basketball tournament to be played in November or December. This manuscript examines the development process of this tournament and illustrates how tournament organizers addressed the most common elements found in such events.

INTRODUCTION

Sports tourism is an important and growing segment of the Myrtle Beach economy. In addition to hosting out-of-town teams for youth sports tournaments for basketball, baseball, soccer, lacrosse, dance, cheerleading, and volleyball throughout the year, the area has been a long-time host of the Beach Ball Classic (boy's high school basketball), the United Bank Holiday Invitational (girl's high school basketball) and the Carolinas Challenge (women's college basketball), with all events played each December in the city's convention center. In 2017 alone, sports tourism generated an economic impact of \$158 million and over 165,000 hotel night stays (Tomasic and Blondin, 2018).

Two separate events (one political and one weather-related) created two opportunities to grow the sports tourism category in the Myrtle Beach area. First, in October 2016, to protest state legislation in North Carolina (H. B. 2, "The Bathroom Bill," which limited the right of transgender people to use the bathroom of gender identity), the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC)

voted to move ten neutral-site championships out of the state. Conway, South Carolina (fewer than twelve miles from the seacoast city of Myrtle Beach) was selected to host the 2017 ACC Women's Basketball Tournament that March (Blondin, 2016). Second, Hurricane Maria forced ESPN Events to find an alternative host site for the Puerto Rico Tip-Off to have been held in November. Again, the Myrtle Beach area was chosen to host the event (Negrón, 2017).

In April 2018, ESPN Events announced the creation of the Myrtle Beach Invitational Men's Basketball Tournament to be played in late autumn. Below is an excerpt of that press release, which references the importance of these prior events in the ultimate creation of the tournament (goccusports.com, 2018).

"We are excited to launch the Myrtle Beach Invitational," said Pete Derzis, ESPN senior vice president of college sports programming and ESPN Events. "After collaborating with Visit Myrtle Beach and the City of Myrtle Beach to move last year's Puerto Rico Tip-Off to the area due to the effects of Hurricane Maria, we saw firsthand the community's outstanding facilities and passion for college basketball. Based on that experience, we determined Myrtle Beach would be an ideal location for college basketball teams and their fans to visit each November."

At the time of this writing, the tournament has been held twice (2018 and 2019), with the 2020 tournament cancelled due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The eight participating teams have already been announced for the planned 2021 tournament. A college football bowl game (Myrtle Beach Bowl) was introduced in 2020 (ESPN Events, 2018).

This manuscript examines the development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational Men's College Basketball Tournament. The next section describes the competition to host such events and their resulting economic impact, followed by a chronological review of basketball tournaments hosted in the Myrtle Beach area. We then review a content analysis of the components of successful tournaments from a sampling of twenty-five tournaments. Next, we discuss the most common traits of NCAA-exempt basketball tournaments identified from our content analysis with respect to their application to the Myrtle Beach Invitational. Finally, we identify the lessons learned from the development of the tournament to help guide other communities seeking to develop and/or attract similar events.

THE COMPETITION TO HOST SPORTING EVENTS

Planned tourism events can be divided into four categories: (1) business events; (2) festivals and cultural events; (3) entertainment events; and (4) sporting events. The latter requires special facilities such as parks, arenas, or stadia (Getz and Page, 2016). Virtually every city in

North America has a sports tourism initiative to draw such events to their communities, with this effort dating back to the 1980s and 1990s with the identification of the revenues attached to sports tourism (*Sports Business Market Research Handbook*, 2000).

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) promote tourism events in their communities. They must work to position their destinations along the attributes used by event organizers when choosing their host sites (Getz and Page, 2016). For example, the NCAA announced its selection of future Division I men's basketball championship sites would be driven by four main variables: (1) lodging options (and competitive rates); (2) airline service (and frequency of arrivals and departures); (3) previous history hosting NCAA championships (attendance figures, net receipts, host's prior financial management of events); and (4) attendance potential (NCAA, 2014). More broadly speaking, when selecting which events to bid for, DMOs tend to focus on the potential economic impact, size of the event, media exposure, time of year, available venues, and local involvement (Getz, 2004).

Research by Shonk et al. (2012) identified the variables that rights-holders to sporting events (e.g., the entities that select host communities and then partner with them to deliver the events) deemed most germane to their intent to return to that community for other events. The list included: (1) event facility; (2) accommodations; (3) security; (4) supportiveness; and (5) travel/access. The reader should note the above quote by the ESPN Events professional who noted facilities and supportiveness as critical to the later development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational (goccusports.com, 2018).

Securing and hosting sporting events is a very competitive endeavor. For example, Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) had held both men's and women's Division II basketball tournaments in Charlotte, North Carolina since 2006. According to the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, the tournaments provided an economic boost of \$55.6 million for 2016 (up 19 percent from the prior year), \$47.4 million for 2017, and \$50.5 million for 2018 (Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association, 2017). With its headquarters in Charlotte, the CIAA has brought in roughly \$600 million in economic activity during those fourteen years (Smoot, 2020), thanks in part to celebrity concerts and appearances (Peralta, 2018).

With the expiration of the league's contract with Charlotte in 2020, the CIAA opened up the bidding process to other cities. Given the league's markets in the mid-Atlantic/southern region of the United States (the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania), as well as its proven track record of economic success and scholarship creation from the event, the Royal Farms Arena in Baltimore, Maryland was ultimately selected (*Charleston Chronicle*, 2019). In this competition, it could be said that Charlotte *lost* the event and Baltimore *won* the event. Within a year, the Big South Conference signed a 3-year deal to host their Men's Basketball tournament in Charlotte (2021-203). The other 'finalist cities' under consideration were Winston-Salem, NC and Hampton, VA (Foster, 2019).

Later, in July 2021, the Charlotte Sports Foundation announced a three-year deal with Jordan Brand to host the Jumpman Invitational, a holiday men's and women's college basketball tournament to be held in December in Charlotte. ESPN Events is the organizer of the tournament with all games broadcast on the ESPN family of networks. The teams selected were the first schools to sign football and basketball sponsorship deals with the Jordan Brand. All teams are from different athletic conferences (Florida, SEC; Michigan, Big 10; Oklahoma, Big 12; and North Carolina, ACC). The mayor of Charlotte described the event and its importance this way (Lee, 2021).

“Charlotte has a rich history of hosting high-profile basketball events, including the NBA All-Star Game, NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament games, the ACC Men's Basketball Tournament, the CIAA Men's and Women's Basketball Tournaments and this year's Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame Shootout,” said Mayor Vi Lyles. “We look forward to welcoming basketball fans from across the country to enjoy our hospitality and culture, and we're grateful to the Charlotte Sports Foundation and Jordan Brand for organizing this event that will bring so much recognition and positive economic impact to our city.”

Humphreys (2014) notes that much sport tourism research focuses on the event host or tournament organizer, and not necessarily the consumer. The author notes that golf tourists select their destinations based on six behaviors: constructing the golf holiday; emotional rewards of taking a trip; total trip expenditures; amenities and support facilities; course characteristics; and reputation of the destination. Relating this research to a possible trip to Myrtle Beach in November to support one's team, a fan would consider the following behaviors: (a) how will I get there? (b) what else will I do while I'm there? (c) how much will I spend? (d) how are the facilities there? and (e) what is the reputation of the destination? This information dovetails well with discussions about the importance of an appealing and accessible destination to select when hosting an NCAA-exempt basketball tournament.

McKercher and Tolkach (2020) conducted research into consumer motivation for selecting a specific destination. The authors concluded travelers seek an “attraction specific experience.” This is consistent with Humphry's “emotional reward of taking a trip” by going on the road and supporting your favorite team. Additionally, fans (consumers) will make positive associations with winning and their destination image of the host city (Kaplanidou et al., 2012). Put another way, “... we love Myrtle Beach. We won a championship there.” Similarly, Kaplanidou and Vogt (2007) noted that destination image and past experiences with a location have a significant impact on a visitor's intent to return to that specific area. Applied to the Myrtle Beach tourism market, attracting teams to a tournament that come from the primary visitor target markets for Myrtle Beach tourism can help deliver future visitors to the region.

Conversely, Liu (2013) found that positioning a sporting destination to a general tourist audience can actually have a negative impact on a foreign tourist's image of the destination and reduce tourism as some visitors seek to avoid the area. This is noteworthy given the large number of Canadian visitors who celebrate Can-Am Days in the area. The 2021 festival was to have been the 60th annual celebration but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Visit Myrtle Beach, 2021). Clearly, DMOs must know their target consumer and segment their markets accordingly.

Visitor spending in the Myrtle Beach area peaks during the summer tourist season. Local leaders have been working to create events that draw visitors to the region outside the peak season, particularly in the youth sports category. According to a spokesperson for the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, families are more likely to travel for their children's youth championships than they might for the typical family vacation. Taking the kids to the youth tournament has a better chance of surviving household budget cuts than other summertime getaways (Johnson, 2017). A college basketball tournament, played in November or December, would be a very welcome addition to the portfolio of sports tourism events in the Myrtle Beach area, as it would pair well with the existing events (e.g., Beach Ball Classic, Crescom Bank Holiday Classic / Carolinas Challenge).

The Economic Impact and Multiplier Effect of Sporting Events

Hosting sporting events that draw out-of-town teams and their associated fans has the ability to have a larger economic impact than solely the direct spending of those teams and local spending at the event. In a manner analogous to the Keynesian Multiplier Effect in Economics, the spending multiplier results in a multiple result from the initial expenditure. While a community's own residents spend money at the local arena, the city's attraction is for the visitors to come spend *their* money. Hotel occupancy rates increase (the "heads-in-beds" argument), with out-of-towners spending their money on local restaurants, entertainment, ticket sales, concessions, and merchandise (the primary effect). The increased demand for local goods and services provides additional employment opportunities for the area (the secondary effect). Those employees earn income and subsequently spend it in the local economy, thus multiplying the economic impact of the original expenditure (Corporate Finance Institute, 2021).

Mitchell and Stewart (2015) evaluated the economic benefits of hosting large sporting events (e.g., the Olympics or World Cup). The authors note that host cities (and their governments) may not see the expected/promised economic benefits for hosting the events. However, these sports contests tend to make the citizens happy and that politicians may then try to capitalize on this "feel better" factor. Tracy (2021) cautions against the reliance of city forecasts of economic impacts of sporting events. Unlike out-of-town visitors, locals who attend do not stay in hotel rooms and temper their spending. If the event is large enough (i.e., a bowl game or March Madness site), locals may even stay home to avoid traffic, hence spending no

money in the city. Increased variable costs to service the additional economic activity might also be ignored in the analysis. This hypothesis is supported by Matheson and Baade (2003). In their study of men's NCAA Final Four sites from 1970 to 1999, the authors found that the event for the host city had a minimal, and even negative, economic impact. Specifically, the difference between actual and estimated city real income growth rates was not statistically significant (less than -0.5 percent), with a median loss of \$6.44 million.

DEVELOPING AN NCAA EXEMPT BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

With a history of hosting various basketball tournaments and a willingness to host other one-time events on relatively short notice, community leaders in Myrtle Beach sought to develop a new men's basketball tournament for their community. Tourism officials and event promoters noted the importance of a competitive market for hotel rooms, many restaurants, and an assortment of diverse attractions as adding to the region's appeal and competitiveness in securing and keeping sports tourism events in the community (Johnson, 2017).

Beach Ball Classic

The Beach Ball Classic, a high school basketball tournament conducted during the winter holiday break, started in 1981. At that time, a local high school coach assembled four in-state teams and four out-of-state teams to play at a local high school gymnasium. Today, the Beach Ball Classic is a 16-team national high school tournament attracting elite teams to the local convention center. Over the years, some of the most well-known high school players in the Beach Ball Classic have included Kobe Bryant, Vince Carter, and Jason Kidd (Guerin, 2016).

United Bank Holiday Classic / Carolinas Challenge

In 1998, the Crescom Bank Holiday Classic (later renamed the United Bank Holiday Classic) was added to the Beach Ball Classic to draw top women's high school teams to the region. Over time, the Carolinas Challenge was added with the participation of University of North Carolina, Coastal Carolina University, and others Division I competitors to the event (Guerin, 2016; Beach Ball Classic, 2021).

The 2017 ACC Women's Basketball Tournament

In March 2016, the North Carolina State Legislature passed House Bill 2 (H.B.2), removing anti-discrimination protection for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. The bill required transgender people to use bathrooms in public facilities that aligned with their sex at birth. In response, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) immediately moved all scheduled neutral-site conference championships out of North Carolina. That season, both the men's and women's teams from Coastal Carolina University were playing away games during the final

week of the season, meaning their arena (the HTC Center) was available for use during the already-planned tournament dates (Blondin, 2016).

Following a review of various cities and game sites, the Myrtle Beach area was selected with games played in March 2017 in the HTC Center on the campus of Coastal Carolina University. To ready the arena for the tournament, the ACC transformed the HTC Center, including the removal of all CCU signage and the installation of the new basketball court over the existing CCU surface.

The 2017 Puerto Rico Tip-Off

In September 2017, two powerful hurricanes (Irma and Maria) pounded the island territory of Puerto Rico and its 3.4 million residents. The storm's devastation disrupted all aspects of daily life. ESPN Events had planned to host the Puerto Rico Challenge (an eight-team college basketball tournament) at *Coliseo Municipal Tomas Donces* in Fajardo, Puerto Rico, the following November. However, the hurricane damage prompted ESPN to seek alternative sites that could host the tournament with 60-day notice. ESPN was well-aware of CCU and its ability to host such events as evidenced by its hosting the ACC Women's Basketball Tournament the prior March. Coastal Carolina University was selected as the one-year alternative tournament site (Blondin and Hughes, 2017).

NCAA Guidelines on Basketball Scheduling

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) provides guidelines for the scheduling of all sports, including the maximum number of allowable contests per team per year. However, new holiday basketball tournaments in Alaska (introduced in 1978) and Hawaii (introduced in 1984) had a significant impact on collegiate basketball scheduling. These events came to be known as MTEs (multi-team exempt tournaments). Early NCAA regulations allowed a team to play in two such tournaments in a four-year period. However, later legal challenges led the NCAA to make clearer provisions on exempt holiday basketball tournaments (Dobbertean 2015; Dobbertean 2016). There are four key provisions which impact the scheduling of exempt holiday tournaments (NCAA, *2018-19 Manual*, p. 230):

1. If a basketball team plays in an exempt tournament, that team can schedule 27 non-exempt games and play in up to four games in an exempt tournament (thus allowing for a 31-game schedule).
2. If a basketball team does not play in an exempt tournament, that team can schedule a maximum of 29 non-exempt contests (thus allowing for a 29-game schedule).
3. A basketball team can only play in the same exempt tournament once every four years.

4. An exempt tournament may only include one school from each athletic conference.

The Benefits of Exempt Tournaments for a Basketball Team

Discussions with Division I basketball coaches, basketball operations personnel, athletic directors, and broadcast teams presenting such games identified the following benefits to a team for playing in an early-season exempt basketball tournament (Author Notes, 2021):

1. **More team-time.** Many coaches prefer the team-time that participating in an exempt tournament provides. This team-time can enhance cohesiveness and aid competitiveness by bonding individuals to their teams.
2. **More game preparation before beginning conference play.** Many coaches build their non-conference schedules to ensure their teams are ready for conference play (where they can qualify for post-season play). Exempt tournaments can provide strong competition while minimizing the number of separate road trips (and missed class time).
3. **Rewarding players and providing a recruiting advantage.** High-performing teams can be invited to Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, and other destinations. These trips can be viewed as an “earned reward” for a program and the promise of such trips can offer a recruiting advantage to a team (i.e., we play in desirable places in the fall and winter).
4. **More opportunity for wins.** Playing more games provides a team with more opportunity for wins (a key variable for assessing team success), as well as qualifying for post-season play.
5. **More opportunity for quality wins.** Playing better-ranked opponents provides a team with more opportunity for increased quality wins. Here, a mid-major may upset a major conference team or a major conference team can compete with strong non-conference teams (since only one team per conference is eligible to participate in an exempt tournament).
6. **A nice trip for our fans.** Playing games in desirable destinations can help improve fan connection to a team.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of other NCAA-exempt basketball tournaments provided Myrtle Beach community leaders with an operational list of conditions and partnerships needed for the successful development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational. There were 25 exempt NCAA men's basketball tournaments played in November and December 2018. The organization and delivery of these tournaments (n=25) were examined to identify their common elements. Content analysis of the characteristics of these 25 tournaments led to the identification of their most common elements.

RESULTS

The two most common tournament game schedules were: (1) play all games at the host site; or (2) play a combination of on-campus and host-site games. For example, the MGM Main Event tournament teams play some games in Las Vegas and others elsewhere (home games, away games, etc.). Regardless of the format and participant profile, exempt tournaments tend to have the following five elements in common: (1) lead organizer; (2) lead sponsor; (3) attractive destination; (4) balanced competitive field; and (5) broadcast media partner. These elements are reviewed below.

Lead Organizer

There are currently three main organizers of NCAA-exempt basketball tournaments.

1. **ESPN Events** (Gildan Charleston Classic, Puerto Rico Tip-Off, AdvoCare Invitational, Wooden Legacy, and other events).
2. **Gazelle Group** (2K Classic, Legends Classic, Gotham Classic).
3. **Bd Global Sports** (MGM Resorts Main Event, Gulf Coast Showcase, Islands of the Bahamas Showcase, and other events).

There are also athletic conferences like the Metro Atlantic Conference (New England) that manage the Naismith Hall of Fame Tip-Off (held at Mohegan Sun Casino in Uncasville, Connecticut). Perhaps most notably, one NCAA member institution (University of Alaska Anchorage) coordinates and hosts the Great Alaska Shootout.

ESPN Events organizes the most exempt tournaments of the groups listed above with a portfolio of ten such tournaments in 2019 (ESPN Events, 2020a). ESPN Events describes its portfolio of activities and the creation of broadcast content as follows (ESPN Events, 2020b): ESPN Events, a division of ESPN, owns and operates a portfolio of 35 collegiate sporting events nationwide. The roster includes four early-season college football games, 17 college bowl games, 11 college basketball events, a college softball event, and two college award shows. This accounts for approximately 400 hours of live programming, which reaches nearly 64 million

viewers and attracts over 800,000 attendees each year. With satellite offices in more than 10 markets across the country, ESPN Events builds relationships with conferences, schools, and local communities, as well as providing unique experiences for teams and fans.

Lead Sponsor

Event sponsorship is an important part of athletics and event promotion. For exempt basketball tournaments, the title sponsor is often included in the event's name (e.g., Gildan Charleston Classic, AdvoCare Invitational, or the Maui Jim Invitational). Other times, the event sponsor is more of a presenter of the event (e.g., Progressive Insurance Presents the Legends Classic; State Farm Presents the Nike PK80 Tournament). Further, regional tourism boards sponsor events to promote area tourism (e.g., U.S. Virgin Islands; Jamaica Tourism; or the Hawaiian Tourism Authority). "Visit Myrtle Beach" was very interested in serving as the presenting sponsor of the Myrtle Beach Invitational if the event could be developed.

Attractive Destination

In order to increase the appeal of participating in exempt tournaments (and attracting a school's fan base), such tournaments tend to be held in popular vacation destinations. For 2017, exempt tournaments were held in such locations as Charleston, South Carolina; The Bahamas; Montego Bay, Jamaica; Hawaii; Las Vegas; and New York. The Myrtle Beach area received numerous awards, including "World's Best Beach" by *Yahoo! Travel* and "Overall Value for Money Destination" by *USA Today* (Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, 2018; Myrtle Beach Convention and Visitor's Bureau, 2019). It was believed Myrtle Beach would be an appealing destination for teams and their fans.

Balanced Competitive Field

There are over 300 Division I men's basketball teams. Most exempt tournaments have teams distributed widely across the lists of pre-season rankings. This diversity in pre-season rankings provides for both the "opportunity for wins" and "opportunity for quality wins" discussed above. ESPN Events is very experienced in assembling teams for such events. Additionally, many Division I conferences are in the visitor destination target market for the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce marketing efforts.

Broadcast Media Partner

The proliferation of sports media provided more opportunities for games to be broadcast. Consider ESPN Events, a division of ESPN that creates made-for-television events such as bowl games and basketball tournaments. In recent years, exempt basketball tournaments were broadcast by ESPN, CBS Sports, Fox Sports Channel, NBC Sports, as well as online providers such as FloHOOPS and Warfield Media. Furthermore, such events were broadcast on league-

affiliated networks (SEC Network, Big 12 Network, etc.). As noted above, ESPN Events “accounts for approximately 400 hours of live programming, reaches nearly 64 million viewers and attracts over 800,000 attendees each year.” (ESPN Events, 2020b).

DISCUSSION

The Development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational

The inaugural Myrtle Beach Invitational was held November 15-18, 2018, at Coastal Carolina University. The tournament addressed the five characteristics below:

1. **Lead Organizer** – ESPN Events
2. **Lead Sponsor** – Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce (Visit Myrtle Beach)
3. **Attractive Destination** – Myrtle Beach, South Carolina
4. **Balanced Field of Participants** – Achieved by ESPN
5. **Broadcast Partner** – ESPN networks

The tournament bracket consisted of eight teams. Games were played Thursday, Friday, and Sunday. The Day One bracket was pre-determined with Day Two (Friday) and Day Three (Sunday) games determined by game results. Each team is guaranteed to play one game per day regardless of game results. The two undefeated teams played each other in a championship game on Day Three (Sunday).

All games were broadcast on an ESPN network. Coastal Carolina University hosts the event and, by NCAA rules, can only play in the event once every four years. During the announcement of the tournament, ESPN Events was clear that its past satisfaction with hosting events at CCU, as well as the region’s array of hotels, venues, restaurants, and attractions, made the Myrtle Beach area an appealing location for such an event (Tomasic and Blondin, 2018).

A key to the development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational was securing ESPN as the media partner and its ability to spread games over a variety of ESPN networks. The eight-team tournament features four games per day over three days. Those 12 basketball games provide ESPN with 24-30 hours of broadcast content. The extended visibility of the host school’s logo (Coastal Carolina University) and the sponsor’s logo (Visit Myrtle Beach) provides a tremendous promotional opportunity for the parties.

A review of the fields for the first three Myrtle Beach Invitational tournaments shows a blend of days-drive-in teams (drawing largely from the primary tourism markets served by Myrtle Beach) and cross-country fly-in teams. Arguably, this is unavoidable given the constraints listed above. There are only a few NCAA Division I conferences in close geographic proximity to provide a short driving distance for teams and their fans. This is important as ESPN

Events wishes to maximize ticket sales and ensure a supportive crowd to enhance the “excitement in the gym” for the television broadcast.

Tournament Recap – 2018

The inaugural Myrtle Beach Invitational featured two schools from the Power Five Conferences (Wake Forest from the ACC; West Virginia from the Big 12) and six teams from other D1 conferences, with teams from four conferences (Atlantic 10, American Athletic, Conference USA, and the Metro Atlantic) whose geographic footprints contain important visitor origin markets for the Myrtle Beach area. Six of the eight teams were located within 650 miles of the host site, making the tournament somewhat drive-able for those fans.

All-session tickets for the 2018 tournament were sold out before the first game was played, with fans from West Virginia University buying the largest allotment of tickets (Brooking, 2018). The Mountaineers were upset on Day Two by Western Kentucky, affecting fan attendance for the final game. Table 1 provides an overview of the 2018 tournament.

Table 1 – Overview of 2018 Myrtle Beach Invitational

Team	Conference	Final 2017-18 RPI	Distance to Conway, SC
Cal State Fullerton	Big West	133	2,521 miles
Saint Joseph’s	Atlantic 10	142	561 miles
Central Florida	American Athletic	96	491 miles
Valparaiso	Missouri Valley	212	856 miles
Wake Forest	ACC	153	203 miles
West Virginia	Big 12	28	530 miles
Western Kentucky	Conference USA	61	617 miles
Monmouth	Metro Atlantic	191	634 miles

Tournament Recap – 2019

The second Myrtle Beach Invitational featured three schools from Power Five Conferences (Baylor from the Big 12; Utah from the Pac 12; and Mississippi State from the SEC) and the 2018 national champion (Villanova from the Big East). Host Coastal Carolina played in the event along with Tulane, Middle Tennessee State, and Ohio University. Villanova had the largest block of fans, while Coastal Carolina played in prime time on Day One and Day Two, boosting attendance. Baylor defeated Villanova in the championship game played on Sunday at 5:00 PM and broadcast live on ESPN. Five of the eight teams were located within 650 miles of the host site. **Table 2** provides an overview of the 2019 tournament.

Table 2 – Overview of 2019 Myrtle Beach Invitational

Team	Conference	Final 2018-19 RPI	Distance to Conway, SC
Coastal Carolina	Sun Belt	194	Host Site
Villanova	Big East	18	562 miles
Mississippi State	SEC	27	637 miles
Baylor	Big 12	51	1,221 miles
Tulane	American Athletic	292	821 miles
Middle Tennessee State	Conference USA	246	573 miles
Ohio University	MAC	144	505 miles
Utah	PAC 12	112	2,249 miles

Tournament Cancellation – 2020

The teams for the 2020 Myrtle Beach Invitational were announced during the 2019 tournament. These teams are profiled in **Table 3**. Unfortunately, the 2020 event was cancelled due to COVID-19, but is scheduled to return in November 2021 (Negley, 2020). In the cancellation, the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce assigned a lost economic impact of over \$2 million for the local community. Local sports tourism professionals described the impact of the Myrtle Beach Invitational as follows (Naik, 2020):

“The impact this event has on our shoulder season is significant and a prime reason we initially brought the event to Myrtle Beach in 2018,” Jonathan Paris, executive director of sports tourism for Visit Myrtle Beach, said.

“In a typical year, the event had more than 1,600 total room nights contracted over five nights, not including our out of town fans which are harder to track specifically. In addition to the hotel impact, our restaurants and attractions felt the impact of the teams and fans in the area. However, all sporting events in 2020 have been limited in terms of fans and overall capacity, so we would not have expected that same level of impact from the traveling fans this year.”

Table 3 – Overview of Cancelled 2020 Myrtle Beach Invitational

Team	Conference	Distance to Conway, SC
Pittsburgh	ACC	604 miles
Nebraska	BIG 10	1,334 miles
Utah State	Mountain West	2,247 miles
Dayton	Atlantic 10	612 miles
Pennsylvania	Ivy League	560 miles
Missouri	SEC	1,010 miles
UNC Charlotte	Conference USA	165 miles
Loyola of Chicago	Missouri Valley	912 miles

Note: The 2020 Myrtle Beach was cancelled due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

A list of the participating teams for the upcoming 2021 Myrtle Beach Invitational for November 18-21 is provided in Table 4 (Kelly, 2021).

Table 4 – Overview of Planned 2021 Myrtle Beach Invitational

Team	Conference	Distance to Conway, SC
Davidson	Atlantic 10	185 miles
East Carolina	American Athletic	200 miles
Indiana State	Missouri Valley	830 miles
New Mexico State	Western Athletic	1,875 miles
Oklahoma	Big 12	1,210 miles
Old Dominion	Conference USA	330 miles
Pennsylvania	Ivy League	560 miles
Utah State	Mountain West	2,247 miles

IMPLICATIONS

As illustrated above, communities must compete for the right to host events such as the Myrtle Beach Invitational or the Myrtle Beach Bowl. The development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational provides a template for other communities as they seek to grow the portfolio of sports tourism events in their communities.

- **Be Guided by a “Can-Do” Attitude** – The sports tourism category of the Myrtle Beach economy was started almost forty years ago when a local high school basketball coach assembled four in-state teams and four out-of-state teams to play at a local high school

gymnasium. Every time a new event has been added, it has benefitted from this “can-do” attitude and tireless efforts of people committed to doing something in their community that had never been done.

- **Be Strategic in Your Planning** – The Myrtle Beach area sought events to stimulate visitors to the community outside of the peak summer season. Sports tourism provides such events. The community has invested in facilities and coordinated its efforts to promote the community as a host site for these events.
- **Be Ready When Opportunity Knocks** – The Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce, Coastal Carolina University, and area hospitality partners were ready to serve when the opportunity presented itself to host one-time events when circumstances required those events to relocate on very short notice.
- **Be a Good Partner** – Working with ESPN Events on the two aforementioned tournaments allowed the Myrtle Beach contingent to demonstrate its ability to deliver a high-quality event and be a reliable partner for ESPN. This short-term partnership led to the development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational men’s basketball tournament and the Myrtle Beach Bowl in December 2020.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research on the impact of mega events suggests the hosting of such events can have the effect of enhancing the destination image of the host city (Arnegger and Herz, 2016). This is seen with the growing sports tourism portfolio in the Myrtle Beach market. Simply put, the successful hosting of some events makes it easier for a destination to attract more events in the future.

The Myrtle Beach Invitational has become an important event to the Myrtle Beach community in just two short years. The tournament provides four games per day played over three days, providing as many as 24-30 hours of broadcast content for ESPN networks. The extended visibility of the host school’s mascot (the Chanticleer of Coastal Carolina University) and the sponsor’s name (Visit Myrtle Beach) provides a tremendous promotional opportunity for the parties. Regional teams are able to drive to the Myrtle Beach area and enjoy the beach community prior to the advent of winter. Competitive fields of teams are secured to provide the teams, coaching staffs, and their fans the benefits of playing balanced competition. The successful delivery of one-time events created opportunities for the eventual development of the Myrtle Beach Invitational. When opportunity knocked, the Myrtle Beach community was ready, and a new sporting event was added to its expanding portfolio of sports tourism events.

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