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RACING AHEAD

*The Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth, Texas, hosts a variety of NASCAR and IndyCar races, including NASCAR's Sprint Cup Series Samsung 500 in April.
Photo by Jason Smith/Getty Images for NASCAR*

A large crowd of spectators is visible in the background, filling the stands of a race track. In the foreground, several race cars are lined up on the track. The cars are colorful and feature various sponsor logos, including 'CAMRY', 'Spice', and 'SAMSUNG'. The cars are positioned in a line, suggesting a race start or a pit stop. The overall scene is vibrant and energetic, capturing the excitement of a major sporting event.

**CITIES IN THE SOUTHWESTERN STATES LEAD THE
PACK WHEN IT COMES TO OFFERING VENUES THAT
FIT THE NEEDS OF SPORTS-EVENT PLANNERS**

BY JESSE REEVES



Hunter Martin/Getty Images

Colonial Country Club in Fort Worth, Texas, is home to the Crowne Plaza Invitational tournament each May. The golf course, nicknamed Hogan's Alley, has hosted the PGA tournament since 1964.

With a host of new venues that have recently opened or are under construction, cities in the Southwest have never been in a better position to host sporting events, whether it's professional, college, amateur, high school or youth activities. But in addition to the world-class facilities, the Southwest offers sunny weather

and attractive destinations that make hosting events even more appealing.

Fort Worth: Deep in the Sports Heart of Texas

Almost adjacent to Dallas, Fort Worth basically offers two cities to the

sports traveler. And, while the Dallas side of the Metroplex has a long history of notable venues (nearby Arlington just witnessed the opening of the NFL's new Cowboys Stadium, which cost \$1.2 billion to build), the city of Fort Worth stands out as a strong sports contender in its own right.

"It's all about facilities—you can never have enough fields and courts to play on," said John Cychol, vice-president of the Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau. "We try to always be open minded and flexible in the use of our facilities."

One such facility that is sure to be hopping on New Year's Eve is Amon G. Carter Stadium on the campus of Texas Christian University. The 46,000-seat, open-air football stadium will host the NCAA Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl on December 31. The site, which first opened in October 1930, is currently undergoing a five-year, \$175 million renovation.

Also well-accustomed to hosting a range of marquee sports entertainment is the Texas Motor Speedway. Since it opened in February 1996, the racetrack has hosted many NASCAR and Indy Car events, and Cychol said the crowds generally equal "three Super



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San Antonio Convention & Visitors Bureau

The Rock 'N' Roll San Antonio Marathon debuted in 2008 with 30,000 participants, making it the largest marathon and half marathon in Texas history. The 2009 event, held in November, attracted 32,000 runners.

projects are currently in the construction phase. The projects are being paid for by hotel and rental car tax revenue, as well as additional city and private funding. All told, the project will include nearly 100 new spaces for competition in sports that include soccer, baseball, rugby, swimming and fencing. Among the improve-

ments will be \$1.2 million for Classics Elite Soccer's five tournament-quality fields at McAllister Park, which are expected to open in April next year. The South Texas Area Regional Soccer Complex, expected to open in spring 2010, will feature 13 full-size, fully lit athletic fields dedicated to outdoor recreation. Con-

struction has also begun on the redevelopment of the McAllister Park Little League fields, which will include turning four Little League fields into Junior, Senior and Big League fields, and adding six new youth baseball fields. And the Southeast Skyline Pony League seven-field Pony League baseball complex is scheduled to open in April 2010 as well.

While these facilities will soon provide San Antonio with more options to plan and host athletic events, sports are already well-represented with a complete roster of venues throughout the city.

The multipurpose Alamodome has seating configurations that range from the low 20,000s to 65,000 and has 166,000 square feet of floor space. The AT&T Center (around 19,000 capacity) is well-suited to play host to basketball, ice hockey and other sports. Freeman Coliseum has seating for 9,000 spectators and the Alamo Convocation Center can hold 6,000 fans. These buildings host tournaments of all types, from NCAA Final Four basketball to taekwondo and gymnastics. In March, the Alamodome will once again host the women's Final Four.

Just as the population trend of San Antonio indicates that it's a desirable place for people to live, so too does the Bexar County sports building plan point

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toward a significant amount of growth for San Antonio's professional and amateur sports scenes. Local officials anticipate growth in sports tournament hosting once the facilities currently under construction join the city's existing amenities—not the least of which is this part of Texas' welcoming hospitality and reliably warm weather.

"A lot of tournaments are planned here because of our weather," Hanson said. "If it's in the 70s in San Antonio in the winter, you know you'll get your tournament in here. It's nice to have that type of winter weather. Also, south Texas is noted for its hospitality,

so we're extremely well-supported by a great volunteer force."

Stillwater: Cowboy Country

Home to Oklahoma State University, Stillwater is also home to a youthful population and a vibrant, growing sports scene. To accommodate this growth, sports facility building projects and renovations are taking place to accommodate future generations of Oklahoma's athletes.

"We're the quintessential college town, so we're basically made up of

half college students," said Cristy Morrison, executive director for the Stillwater Convention & Visitors Bureau.

In Stillwater—especially on Saturdays for home football games—all roads lead to Boone Pickens Stadium, fresh off a building renovation project and now able to seat 60,218 fans. The stadium—named for businessman and entrepreneur T. Boone Pickens, who gave \$165 million to the university—serves as home to the OSU Cowboys football team. The facility, which opened in 1920 and was called Lewis Field until 2003, is the oldest football stadium in the Big 12 Conference.

In addition to college football, Stillwater will be transformed into a hotspot of high school football as Boone Pickens Stadium is slated to host five state championship games this month; organizers expect to draw 10,000 to 15,000 spectators per game. Beginning in 2010 and continuing for the next four years, the stadium will play host to six high school state football championships.

The newly built Stillwater High School Pioneer Stadium may be smaller in scale but stands equally impressive in its own right. Opened in September 2009, the stadium seats 4,000 on the home side and 2,000 on the away side and sports a 30-foot Jumbotron scoreboard. The complex, which doubles as a soccer stadium, also includes wrestling training rooms and an eight-lane track that has been rated better than most NCAA tracks in the Big 12, OSU's conference. One of only three of its kind in the state, the Stillwater High School track is being considered as a venue for Big 12 events in coming years.


Next door to Boone Pickens Stadium, Gallagher-Iba Arena—known around these parts as "The Madison Square Garden of the Plains"—was recently ranked the best arena in the country by CBSsportsLine.com and ranked as number two on ESPN's greatest venues list.

Still using its original 1938 white maple basketball court, the arena is also well-known for its steep seating, which produces significant crowd noise during games. That din was increased in the 1990s when a renovation increased the facility's capacity from 6,381 seats to 13,611.

An annual tradition in Stillwater, the Special Olympics will celebrate its 26th year in the city in the summer of 2010. It's the largest amateur event in Oklahoma, and the participants mainly compete on the OSU campus, which is

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a fitting location because the Special Olympics is the charity of choice for the Big 12 Conference.

To better accommodate visiting athletes and sports spectators, five new hotels have opened in the area during the past two years. The addition of those 451 rooms brings Stillwater's total to 1,219 hotel rooms.

Away from the sports, Morrison said, Stillwater officials are working hard to provide visitors with plenty to do once the games are finished. From boutique shopping to family activities, Morrison said, Stillwater's downtown district is keeping up with the pace of the growing sports scene.

"We have a small-town feel that a lot of people like, along with the big-city amenities," Morrison said. "A lot of money is being invested in the downtown area, and it's actually turning into an entertainment district—downtown is turning into something of a destination area."

Rio Rancho: New Mexico-style Sports

The third-largest city in New Mexico, Rio Rancho boasts an impressive roster of sports events that has grown



Peter G. Aiken/US Presswire

Boone Pickens Stadium in Stillwater, Oklahoma, is home to the Oklahoma State Cowboys football team. The stadium recently underwent a significant renovation and now seats more than 60,000 fans.

greater with each passing season. And those who call the Land of Enchantment home say the seasons are part of the reason.




"We have a four-seasons climate, but it's a mild four seasons," said Matt Geisel, manager of the Rio Rancho Convention & Visitors Bureau. "We




have two or three snowstorms per year, but they usually melt off in a day. And we rarely crack 100 degrees. So, we don't get frozen out, but we don't get overheated, either."

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doors activities such as cycling, marathons and climbing are always popular. Also big hits in the area are college and high school athletic activities. New Mexico does not have a franchise from one of the four major professional sports leagues, so it makes up for it with high enthusiasm for college and prep sports.

The new Cleveland High School, built at a cost of more than \$100 million, opened in August 2009 with sports facilities that rival those of many colleges and universities. A 6,500-seat football and soccer stadium also includes a nine-lane track, a gymnasium with seating for 3,000 spectators and a baseball stadium and softball fields.

One of Rio Rancho's biggest draws is the Santa Ana Star Center. The SASC opened in October 2006 and holds about 6,500 people for basketball, ice hockey and other sporting events. The arena—which cost \$47 million—is home to the New Mexico Scorpions of the Central Hockey League, as well as the New Mexico Wildcats of the American Indoor Football Association.

Upcoming events in Rio Rancho include the Mel Otero Girls High School Basketball Tournament and the New Mexico Oil and Gas Boys High School Basketball Tournament, both this month; the New Mexico Activities Association state wrestling championship in February 2010; the NMAA state basketball championship and the Southwest Judo Championship in March 2010; the NMAA spirit and cheer championship in April 2010; and the U.S. Youth Soccer Region IV far west regionals June 19–27, 2010, played at the State Farm Insurance Soccer Complex on the neighboring Santa Ana Pueblo land.

Other facilities in the area include the Rio Rancho Indoor Aquatic Center with the 10-lane, 25-yard Pulte Homes competition pool; the Rio Rancho Sportsplex with seven baseball and softball fields and multipurpose fields for soccer and football; and the Loma Colorado Youth Soccer Complex for ages 12 and under.

Geisel said the mixture of Native American and Spanish cultures with the modern feel of present-day New Mexico offers the visitor an experience unlike any other in the United States. Combined with amenities such as 13 nearby wineries and 90 holes of golf in the area, he said, Rio Rancho is a destination beyond the sports scene.

Geisel said that Rio Rancho's sports facilities are mostly new with a mod-

ern feel, which matches the way residents feel about their city.

"We have a lot of new facilities," Geisel said. "Plus, Rio Rancho is one of New Mexico's newer cities—it's about 30 years old—so we feel as though we're part of the future of New Mexico moving forward."

Phoenix: Arizona's Sports Capital

Arizona's biggest city is also the biggest player on the statewide sports stage. Phoenix has a sunny climate, pro sports pedigree and great reputation for event organization that allows it to put on a full athletics slate year after year.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find a sports destination like Phoenix when you consider we're only one of a handful of cities to have all four major sports represented as well as a WNBA team," said Marc Garcia, vice-president of visitor marketing and community development at the Greater Phoenix Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Plus we're a destination that knows how to host mega events, from Super Bowls to Wrestlemanias."

The Phoenix Suns NBA team is based in the US Airways Center (formerly America West Arena) downtown—other resident teams are the Phoenix Mercury of the WNBA and the Phoenix Roadrunners of the East Coast Hockey League. The facility also hosts concerts, professional wrestling and other entertainment events, and its nicknames include "The Purple Palace" and "The Snake Pit".

The 90-block Copper Square neighborhood that is home to the US Airways Center—as well as more than 20 other entertainment venues and more than 3,000 events each year—is receiving more than \$4 billion in revitalization funding. Also located within the zone is the Phoenix Convention Center, which opened in January 2009 with nearly 1 million square feet of space, including 312,500 square feet of exhibit space.

The Arizona Diamondbacks have played in Phoenix's Chase Field (formerly Bank One Ballpark) since 1998. The facility, which has a capacity of 49,033 spectators, is scheduled to host the MLB All-Star game on July 12, 2011. Last year, the ballpark debuted its high definition scoreboard in center field. (The 46-by-136-foot board, which cost \$14 million, is the second-largest HD screen in Major League Baseball: Kansas City's Kauffman Stadium, which is



Rio Rancho High School football stadium seats 4,000 fans and boasts a state-of-the-art press box as well as sound and light systems. The school also features a four-field softball complex and three gymnasiums.

home to the Kansas City Royals, boasts the only larger screen.)

Beyond the facilities of the Diamondbacks, the NFL's Cardinals, the NBA's Suns and the NHL's Coyotes, Phoenix and the nearby city of Glendale offer an array of college and amateur sports venues throughout the Valley of the Sun.

Some facilities play host both to professional and college events. For instance, University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale houses both the Cardinals and the annual NCAA football Fiesta Bowl. The only stadium in North America with a retractable roof and a removable, roll-out grass field,

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Mark J. Reblus/US Presswire

The Arizona Diamondbacks play in Chase Field in downtown Phoenix. The stadium, which features a retractable roof and a swimming pool just beyond right field, will host the 2011 MLB All-Star Game.

the stadium can hold 63,400 to 72,200 spectators and has hosted such events as college football, rodeo, motocross and international soccer. In 2000, it was also home to the first outdoor college basketball game ever played.

Another sports hub in Phoenix is the Reach 11 Sports Complex, Arizona's

largest soccer facility. The 73-acre venue, which opened in 2007 and completed an expansion earlier this year, offers 18 soccer fields and can also host field hockey, lacrosse and other turf sports.

The Phoenix area is a major player in Major League Baseball's annual spring training and preseason games

known as the Cactus League, with nine playing facilities in the greater metropolitan area. Several teams recently moved their spring training games from Florida to Arizona, including the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Chicago White Sox, both of whom left the Grapefruit League to play at the Camelback Ranch in Glendale, which has a capacity of 13,000 people making it the largest Cactus League stadium. Construction began in November on a new spring training facility near Phoenix for the Arizona Diamondbacks and Colorado Rockies, who have previously trained in Tucson. And despite the down economy, attendance at the preseason games in 2009 was up 20 percent over 2008.

As a large city, Phoenix has the resources to accommodate sporting events of any magnitude. The market has more than 55,000 guest rooms.

Garcia also points out that many sports travelers are golfers and that "there may not be more variety in the entire country than greater Phoenix with its 200 championship-style golf courses." As a result, he said, the National Golf Foundation named Phoenix the golf capital of the world. This mix of amenities, sunshine,

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knowledgeable sports organizers and first-rate facilities make Phoenix a vibrant sports town.

"We have 330 sun-filled days every year, and that means it's not likely that your event will be rained out," Garcia said. "And there is the peace of mind that our organizers have a high sports IQ and will know how to put on your event for you."

Mesquite: Small Town with Big Vision

In sports planning, there are big plans and there are really big plans. And then there is the planned 864-acre Desert Falls International Sports Resort in Mesquite, Nevada, where officials expect construction to begin soon. Some cities talk about becoming a sports destination, but Mesquite is acting by creating a sports oasis with a \$500 million price tag.

Ninety miles to the northeast of the glitz and bright lights of Las Vegas, Mesquite city planners are hoping to turn this town of 21,000 into a city synonymous with sports.

"Right now, we get about 1.5 million visitors a year who come for the gam-



Nathaniel S. Butler/NBA/Getty Images

J.R. Smith of the Denver Nuggets participated in the Sprite Slam Dunk Contest on All-Star Saturday Night. The event was part of 2009 NBA All-Star Weekend, which was held at US Airways Center in Phoenix.

ing and golf," said Bryan Dangerfield, economic development director for the city of Mesquite. "We think that will double with the Desert Falls project over the next three or four years and then double again within 10 years."

The first phase will include 24 soccer fields, a soccer stadium, 20 softball

fields, 16 tennis courts and a stadium tennis court. That phase is scheduled for completion in November 2011, although Dangerfield said games will start well before that deadline, and will make way for even more ambitious future phases.

Planners are envisioning a 15,000-seat baseball, softball and special



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Mesquite's MX Park played host last month to the 2009 Mesquite MX Winter Nationals. Mesquite city officials are planning to invest \$500 million in new facilities to establish the Nevada city as a sports destination.

events stadium; an indoor 10,000-seat football, basketball and volleyball stadium; an archery complex; an indoor facility with six basketball, 10 racquetball and 16 volleyball courts in addition to pools for swimming and diving; a golf course; and a sports medicine, rehabilitation and nutrition center.

In addition to all the playing surfaces for sports, planners aim to include 100 acres of commercial uses such as shopping and hotels and 495 houses and apartments.

"We already have the beautiful year-round weather and the great golf," said Rich Bohne, recreation and

parks director for the city of Mesquite. "With Desert Falls, it will open us up for new events as we transition into becoming a sports destination."


City planners expect yearly tournaments, camps and clinics to number in the hundreds while daily visitors could exceed 10,000 per day when counting the participants, spectators, support staff and tourists. Mesquite city officials have high hopes, predicting Desert Falls will become "the world's most comprehensive tournament, training, practice and championship facility for indoor and outdoor sports."

Southwestern Sports Stars

These six cities exhibit the growth in sports event planning in the Southwestern United States. Well-known venues, new building projects and competitive tournaments, both established and brand new, show the high level of athletic competition taking place in this region. From large cities with multiple professional franchises to smaller towns crazy over their colleges and high schools, the passion is the same and the love for all games runs throughout the American Southwest. ■



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