

## **A closer look at the ACC baseball tournament – is it really a 'multimillion-dollar gift' to Louisville?**

Danielle Lerner , May 22, 2017



With Louisville still abuzz from the Kentucky Derby, another premier sporting event is coming to town this May – the Atlantic Coast Conference Baseball Championship, to be hosted May 23-28 at Louisville Slugger Field.

The 12-team tournament will be the first ACC championship played in Kentucky, and is expected to have an estimated \$5 million impact on the city, Louisville Sports Commission President Karl Schmitt said.

That figure was determined by predicting the influx of visitors to the community – players, coaches and team personnel, league officials, game officials, families and fans. People will be arriving by the busload, bringing with them previously untapped dollars waiting to be spent at Louisville's hotels, restaurants, attractions and bars.

"There's an opportunity for the 'wow factor' of a lot of people saying, 'Hey, we're going to Louisville, Kentucky, and look at all the things to do there in late May,'" Schmitt said.

How many people, exactly? It's hard to say. Schmitt said Louisville Sports Commission (LSC) has looked to projected room nights in hotel room blocks the ACC has reserved for teams and university "baseball entourages." So far, that's 6,000 rooms, not including additional rooms which will be sold to fans and families.

Kris Pierce, ACC Senior Associate Commissioner for Championships, said Wednesday that over 1,000 weekend passes (\$50-60) and 600 full-session passes (\$125-140) to the tournament have been sold so far. Pierce called the numbers "great" and said that although attendance at day games might be limited, the league is optimistic regarding turnout for night and weekend games.

The championship was moved to Louisville from Durham after the league pulled all its neutral-site championship events out of North Carolina in opposition to the state's controversial House Bill 2 – a "multimillion-dollar gift that the ACC is giving to Louisville," said Ken Ungar, president of Indianapolis-based sports marketing agency Charge.

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Karl Schmitt, Louisville Sports Commission president

"If you look at the ACC championship, it's a more sustained event than just a convention," Ungar said. "(For a convention) you're spending money to come to Louisville but spending all your time at the convention for whatever you're doing. With (the baseball tournament) you're spending money at every level of your stay. You pay for the hotel, then go to Slugger Field and buy a ticket, a hot dog and a soda, then do something entertaining in the evening. And you're doing it over a sustained amount of time."

In a deal with the ACC, the Triple-A Louisville Bats agreed to shoulder the burden of operating expenses at Slugger Field, which include among other things concessions and utilities. Pierce and Bats president Gary Ulmer declined to provide financial details regarding costs and ticket revenue sharing.

"There are a lot of good things involved in hosting a championship, not just dollars and cents," Pierce said. "It's about promoting good attendance, filling the seats and creating a good atmosphere for our student athletes."

Hosting duties extending outside the stadium will be shared between LSC, Louisville Convention and Visitors Bureau, Louisville Slugger Museum and Louisville Downtown Development Corporation. Aided by donations, Schmitt said the organizations expect to spend about \$25,000 total on signage and marketing downtown, courtesy cars for coaches, ACC staff and game officials, and the FanFest that takes place the weekend before the tournament.

"It's pretty standard," Schmitt said of the arrangement. "It's all about creating a great experience and making an impression on players and coaches and fans so that they come away with a great experience not just on the field, but off the field."



*A statue of legendary Pee Wee Reese sits in front of Louisville Slugger Stadium*

The tournament's impact on the city comes down to a lot more than just economics, Schmitt said. There's what he calls the "coolness factor," meaning the event will add to quality of life in the community. Secondly, there's the prestige. A Power Five conference baseball tournament is undoubtedly considered a major sporting attraction. Playing host means Louisville can stake its claim as an even more valuable part of that landscape.

"An event like this has a built-in, portable fan base," Ungar said. "There is only one local team playing in this tournament but the rest of the schools are coming from as far away as Boston, Syracuse and Miami and all points in between. ... It's a great way to expose new visitors to Louisville for the first time."

The event is also a chance for Louisville to strengthen its relationship with the ACC, one that has sometimes been strained by the city's geographic distance from the league's

other campuses.

"If we do this well, it adds to our portfolio as a community of hosting major events," Schmitt explained.

The baseball tournament is the first of three ACC championships to be hosted in Louisville in 2017. The conference's cross country and field hockey tournaments – sports that don't require neutral sites – will be played at U of L in the fall.

The baseball championship also goes hand-in-hand with the large-scale development planned for downtown Louisville, said John Boyd, principal of economic development firm Boyd Company, which has worked with clients in the Louisville area.

Eight new hotels are expected to be constructed in and around downtown to complement the impending \$207 million renovation and expansion of the Kentucky International Convention

Center. The city also recently announced the construction of a 10,000-seat soccer stadium and related development, an estimated \$200 million investment.

"The basic theme here is, in 2017, tourism and economic development are indivisible," Boyd said. "Sports tourism is a common denominator around successful growth around the country. ... So much of the Louisville brand is related to sports. This baseball tournament really creates the perfect storm for a city in the midst of a billion-dollar development boom."