

Local communities see payoff from soccer

Tourney gave Murfreesboro \$8.5M boost

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Spectators on Friday watch one of the many games during the U.S. Youth Soccer Southern Regional Championships in Murfreesboro. / SANFORD MYERS / THE TENNESSEAN

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With 15 fields and a grandstand that seats more than 1,000, few who have visited the Murfreesboro Soccer Complex at Richard Siegel Park can doubt that community's serious commitment to the sport.

The facility cost \$12 million to build, and it was events such as last week's U.S. Youth Soccer Southern Regional Championships for which it was designed. Officials say that tournament and others like it are paying off.

The regional tournament attracted 184 teams and approximately 11,000 people to Middle Tennessee from 11 states. These people spent an estimated \$8.5 million on hotel rooms, food and other amenities, much of it in Rutherford County.

The park also has played host to high school and lower-level tournaments, as have other venues in Middle Tennessee.

"We have been a destination for championship sports events for many years," said Robert Lyons, Murfreesboro's city manager. "People seem to enjoy coming to Murfreesboro for them."

Communities such as Franklin, Brentwood, Hendersonville and Bellevue, which have competitive "select" soccer clubs, all boast facilities where tournaments are held that draw teams and families from throughout the South and Midwest.

These communities have embarked on several projects over the past decade to improve their facilities. Hendersonville spent \$175,000 in privately raised money to build a 500-seat stadium at Drakes Creek Park in 2004. Brentwood and Williamson County joined together to build a \$3 million indoor soccer arena at Crockett Park in 2005.

Kids benefit, too

In Tennessee alone, 42,000 children play soccer, through community leagues organized by local recreation departments and through private clubs like those that squared off last week. They are among the 3 million children who play soccer in this country, making U.S. Youth Soccer the nation's biggest youth sports organization, larger even than Little League.

Growth of the sport has been fed by immigrant populations and increased exposure. It also has come as opportunities to play the sport in college have expanded, particularly for girls.

"The odds of becoming a professional are very slim," said Tom Condone, director of coaching and player development for the Tennessee State Soccer Association. "But certainly there is the opportunity for some to play the sport they enjoy for a scholarship."