

THE SUN

HOWARD HOSTS HOLIDAY SOCCER BASH

COUNTY BUSINESSES BENEFIT AS ANNUAL TOURNAMENT DRAWS MORE THAN 6,000 YOUNG PLAYERS

The Sun - Baltimore, Md.

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Date: May 29, 2007

For many, Memorial Day weekend means backyard barbecues with family and friends. But at the Soccer Association of Columbia-Howard County complex at Covenant Park in Ellicott City, it's nonstop soccer.

Just how big of a deal it is can be told by the numbers: 370 teams - with more than 6,000 players between the ages of 8 and 18 - played 612 games over four days. Players from as far away as Canada - with families in tow - booked most of the county's 2,500 hotel rooms, with some staying in surrounding counties.

By the time the last trophy was awarded yesterday afternoon, the organization estimates, the annual Columbia Invitational Memorial Day Tournament had pumped \$3 million into the local economy.

"The minivan pulls up, and it's Mom, Dad, the player, at least two siblings and Grandma and Grandpa," said Rachelina Bonacci, executive director of tourism for the county. The players and their families not only sleep in the county, she said, but eat, shop and play between games. "The longer they stay, the more they spend."

For the families, the tournament is the culmination of a year's worth of practices and games. "We're never home," said Lisa Hall of Sykesville, whose 9-year-old daughter Abby plays goalie for the Under-9 Westminster Gray Wolves. "My older daughter's on the travel team so, basically, soccer is our life." "I'm their neighbor and I can vouch for that. They're never home," said Teresa Asher, who brought her family to the championship game yesterday to support her neighbor. "They have a pool. We just go - we don't wait to ask."

Waking up at 6 a.m. on a holiday weekend doesn't bother Mark Karukas of Westminster, whose 9-year-old daughter Nicole plays defense for the Wolves.

"I love coming to the games," said Karukas, wearing a black T-shirt that said "Eat. Sleep. Play." on the front and had a team photo on the back.

For older players, the tournament is a chance to be noticed by college scouts.

"They've had success and they'd like to continue playing down the road," said Karen Nickles of Ellicott City, whose son Garrett plays for the Under-16 SAC United Premier 90-91 team. "But they're all realistic."

Some took the tournament very seriously. With recruiters from more than 100 colleges registered to attend, several teams assembled bound manuals with photos of each player and pertinent information, including age, experience and grade-point average. Some parents hired videographers to record the games so they could send highlights tapes to colleges.

The tournament business is competitive, with SAC-Howard County's competing with events in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Washington and Northern Virginia.

The Flames from Bayside, N.Y., traveled to the Howard County event because it's more competitive than others, they said.

"It's good for the kids to play teams from outside New York," said chaperone Greg Betty.

"The level here is very high," said Eddie Rodriguez, whose son Justin, 13, plays forward.

The Flames were confident going into their final game. "We came to win and be known all over the world," said forward Kalief Lindo, 12. "It was worth the six-hour trip," said goalie Ken Martinez, 13.

White Marsh native Mike Libber first played at the SAC tournament in 1983 at age 8 for the Baltimore Kickers. Today, he holds the contract to run the tournament for the organization. "To bring them in, we have to do something different than anyone else," Libber said.

He notes the complex's eight fields - built three years ago on 55 acres off Centennial Lane for \$5 million - and more than 200 referees, some of whom have called national and international games. More than 440 teams applied to compete in the tournament, which featured the most teams in the 31 years of the contest.

That's why the nonprofit SAC decided this year to hire Libber's Championship Tournaments to run it, said SAC chief operating officer Jim Carlan. "It's just too big," Carlan said. "You need someone who can do it professionally. This is a business, no question."

With an annual budget of \$1 million, Soccer Association of Columbia-Howard County depends on membership fees, sponsors and tournament revenue to cover salaries and field maintenance. The operation more than breaks even, Carlan said, largely due to the Memorial Day event. "This is what pays for everything you see here," he said.

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