

# Always A Good Sport

By Bill Hutchins

**T**he eyes of the sporting world have been on South Africa for the past month as the once-apartheid nation hosted its first ever World Cup tournament

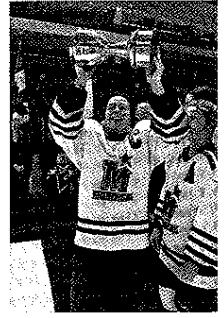
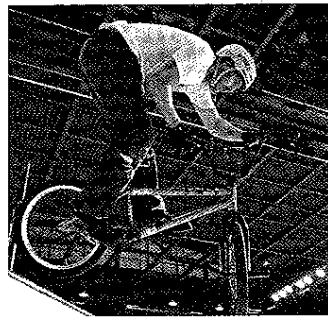
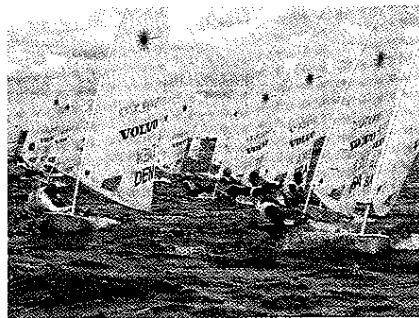
The beautiful game of football, better known as soccer in North America, is arguably the most popular sport on the planet. High scoring it ain't. But soccer's global appeal may lie in the fact that it's an affordable sport that can be played virtually anywhere at any time in both the rich and developing nations. You don't

perception that they spend their days globe-trotting from one ritzy hotel to another, being wined and dined at the taxpayers' expense while waiting for bidding nations to suck up to them. How do I become a member?

Anyway, it wasn't that long ago that Canada basked in the global glory of hosting the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver. We used to be the only country ever to host an Olympics, summer or winter, without winning a gold medal. The jinx started in Montreal in 1976 and continued in

fanned out from the Montreal Summer Games in '76. It was, and remains, the biggest sport tourism draw in the city's history because of the Olympic connection. But Kingston has made solid inroads to build on its reputation as a place where you can come to play or watch others play a variety of sports.

The city's goooaaal of promoting sport tourism is really a no-brainer, since there are always tournaments. Even when the economy tanks, our sports go on and on. It is part



need a neatly manicured field, cleats and shin guards to boot the ball, though it helps. World Cup competitors, past and present, such as Beckham, Pele, Kaka, Ronaldo (first names need not apply) and a host of six-packed, seven-figure salaried players are household names, along with the voice in your head from that colourful Hispanic announcer who can yell Gooooaaal for a minute without taking a breath. I think his name is Andres Cantor. Most impressive. *Viva le Fifa!*

Yes, soccer is the world's sport because it has the ability to draw people together like few other global tournaments can do. The sport tourism concept doesn't get much bigger than the World Cup. Except, of course, hosting the Olympics.

Forget, for a moment, the chosen few of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the public

Calgary in 1988. But that embarrassing footnote was finally erased big time in Vancouver. Our nation didn't "own the podium" as organizers promised, but we raked in more gold medals than any other nation has ever done at any Winter Games.

We got to hear Canada's national anthem played 14 times on home soil. And who could ever forget Sidney Crosby's famous overtime goal that put the icing on the Olympic cake to win gold in men's hockey. It's the "where were you?" moment that ranks right up there with Paul Henderson's legendary '72 Summit Series goal. The Winter Games were an unparalleled success in terms of national pride.

The pinnacle of sport tourism.

Kingston will likely never land an international tournament of such magnitude, though we did host Olympic sailing events that were

entertainment, part escapism, part tourist bucks and part pride to watch sports, play them or host them.

But there is a downside to playing the host with the most. Some tournaments cost tax money to stage, and there is a certain level of local inconvenience that's generated to make room for young and old athletes. Many Vancouverites, for example, did not embrace the glory of sport in their own backyard. The Olympic spectacle brought 250,000 athletes and spectators, plus traffic, congestion, lineups, inflated prices and noise. It prompted a mass exodus of locals out of the city for two and a half weeks in February.

Our city can't compare to a net loss like that, but we have our own challenges when it comes to staging events. Take the Thousand Islands Poker Run, for instance. The speedboats are poised to return to



Confederation Basin in August. Even though this event is more about machine over man, it still qualifies as sport tourism, which is generally defined as any event that "attracts participants, spectators and media to come to the city."

Still, the popular spectator event became an unwilling poster child for greenhouse gas emissions when a locally done environmental report concluded the powerboat run from Kingston to Prescott generates more air pollution out the tailpipe than a round trip 757 flight from Toronto (Canada's Olympic bridesmaid) to Vancouver. For a city that prides itself on being sustainable, councillors had no choice but to respond.

They will try to charge poker run organizers an unspecified carbon tax this year. (It remains to be seen whether organizers will pay the fee, ignore the request or move to another port in future years.)

In any case, this summer's muscle boat show will go on, much to the delight of Downtown Kingston and the Kingston Economic Development Corporation (KEDCO), which has a mandate to expand the city's sport tourism horizon. Kingston has tried hard in recent years to reach out to visitors beyond the usual tour buses that pull up in front of City Hall (with a three-minute idling limit) or day trippers looking to visit Fort Henry and other attractions. The traditional drawing cards of shopping, sightseeing, visiting friends and dining out are Kingston's strong suit, but competition for the tourist dollar is fierce.

That's why Kingston has its eye on the ball to bring sporting events to town for a day, a weekend or longer. The competitors usually come with their families and attract local and out-of-town spectators who fill the hotels and restaurants.

"Sport tourism is one of those things that's always been around,"

says Gary Kelly, sport tourism manager with KEDCO. "But in the past ten years, it's taken on a more organized approach."

The proof of that is his job. Ten years ago, the city did not have someone like Gary Kelly to seek out and attract tournaments of all shapes and sizes — from hockey and figure skating to fishing and curling. That's been Gary's full-time job since 2007. He's also a board member with the Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance.

It's now a science to scout for tournaments, project their economic impact and make a pitch to land them. Generally speaking, the bigger the sporting spectacle, the more expensive the bidding process. Vancouver spent about \$34 million to make its successful pitch to the IOC, while Chicago spent \$100 million on its failed bid for the 2016 Summer Games.

The cost of smaller-scale bids from cities like Kingston can range from \$10,000 to \$400,000, and there's no guarantee the money will buy a winning bid.

But size doesn't always matter when hosting a sporting event. Sport tourism can range from a cheerleading tournament to packing Richardson Stadium to host Barclays Churchill Cup international rugby tournament games in 2008. Gary says each sport heightens the city's profile, credibility and tourist drawing power.

Let's face it, Americans are not exactly pouring into the city like they used to. The post 9-11 passport requirements and a strong Canadian dollar have weakened Kingston's traditional visitor base. Sport tourism has evolved to fill in some of the gap.

Aside from the "location, location, location" factor of being situated near major cities, Kingston plays up its 128 athletic venues — okay, I'm counting gymnastic and taekwondo clubs — plus bigger venues such as the K-Rock Centre, Invista Centre multiplex, Portsmouth Olympic Harbour, physical education facilities at Queen's, Royal Military College and St. Lawrence College and Woodbine Park. The city is also constructing a new track-and-field facility beside the Invista Centre and plans to revisit the need and cost of an aquatic centre with a 25-metre racing pool next year.

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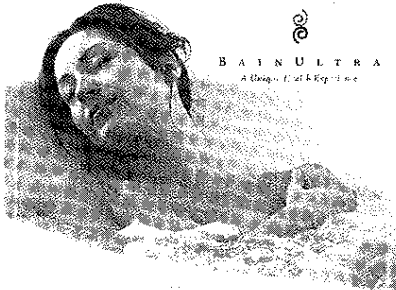
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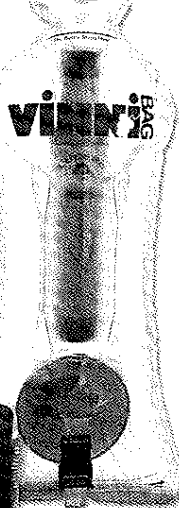
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do well at a lot of different sports, but we're not a Toronto or Vancouver that can bid for international events," says Gary.

The city also boasts more than 4,400 accommodation rooms — another selling feature that out-of-town visitors need to know.

So, let's take a moment to run down some of the sporting events Kingston has hosted and why they're popular, as well as some of the events the city would like to host in the future.

We landed Olympic sailing in '76, but the annual CORK (Canadian Olympic-training Regatta Kingston) competition has been around since 1969. This summer's regatta will host more than 200 entrants from 22 countries. Sailing is not exactly a head-down-to-the-shore spectator sport unless you have binoculars and a good sense of starboard and port directions, but the regatta is a great training ground (er, water) for athletes in a city that offers some of the best freshwater sailing in the world.

Kingston also hosts numerous court sports that are geared to the high school, college or university crowds. These often don't grab the headlines, but they build the sport tourism portfolio nonetheless. There's also triathlon, BMX racing, martial arts, rowing, Special Olympics, para-games, golf, cycling, windsurfing, baseball and ballroom dancing competitions.

Variety is also important. If you don't like fencing, you may enjoy fishing. This July 22 to 24, Bob Izumi and Dave Mercer are expected to attend the Canadian Open Bass Tournament in Confederation Basin. This live-release tournament is a huge deal for professional anglers who will compete for prizes of more than \$100,000, including a \$40,000 first prize, with proceeds to benefit the Soldier On program. The fishing "grand prix" will attract about 2,000 spectators to the downtown.

Let's not forget the hockey tournaments that abound in Kingston. The best known, perhaps, is the Kids for Kids tournament in March, which started as a relief fund in the aftermath of the 1998 ice storm. It has evolved into Kingston's biggest hockey tournament. Consider these numbers: Kids for Kids attracts 7,000 players and their families with a \$2.8

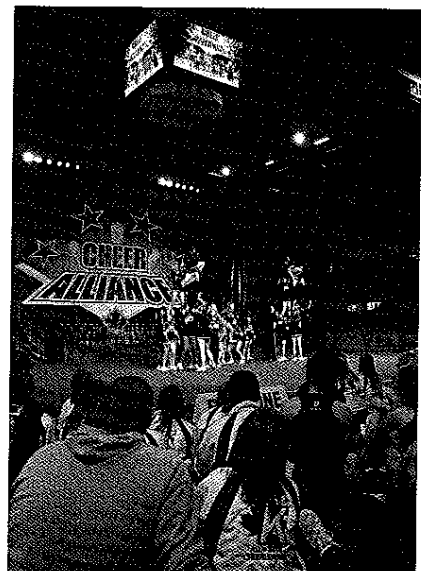
million annual economic impact, while raising \$600,000 for local charities since its inception.

As for what the city hopes to land in the coming years? We know the highly publicized 2011 Memorial Cup bid didn't go the way organizers had hoped. The national junior hockey tournament, instead, was awarded to Mississauga. Maybe the third time's a charm if the city wants to submit another bid when the tournament returns to Ontario in 2014. Meanwhile, the city's attempt to host the 2012 RBC Cup to crown the National Junior A champion looked promising, buoyed by the consistent, competitive play of the Kingston Voyageurs. Alas, the RBC Cup was awarded to the tiny town of Humboldt, Saskatchewan, much to the chagrin of local supporters who thought theirs was the superior bid.

Still on the ice, the city has made a play to host the 2012 Scotties Tournament of Hearts, the nation's top tournament for women curlers that comes with millions of dollars in economic spinoffs and national television coverage.

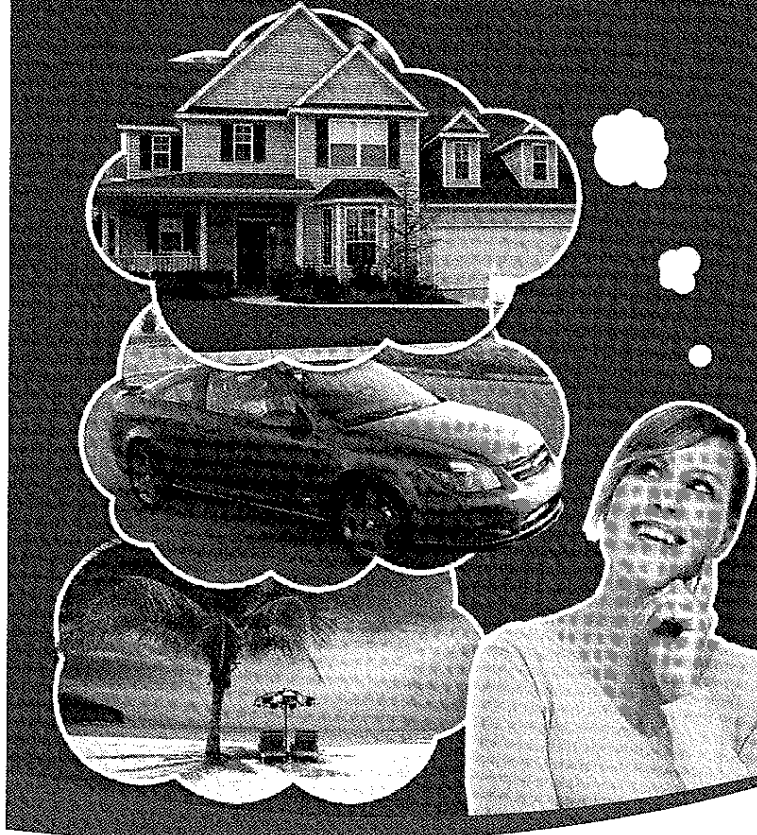
Other lesser known bids have been made, such as hosting the ultimate Frisbee championships this fall at Woodbine Park. Don't laugh. It will attract 600 university competitors, giving new meaning to the term, economic "spin" off.

But perhaps the biggest sport tourism coup this year will be hosting some of the world's top figure skaters. Skate Canada International announced that Kingston will host the Grand Prix of Figure Skating series October 29 to 31. Though the skating star roster wasn't confirmed right away, we could see the likes of Olympic ice



Photography: 2008 Cheer Alliance Big East Championships by Matthew Mancor/CSCG

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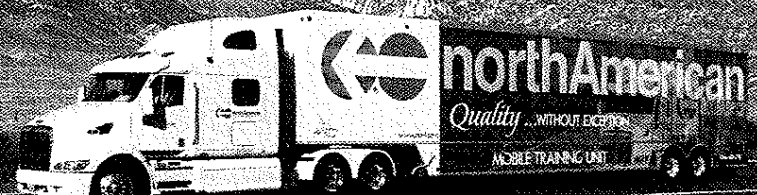
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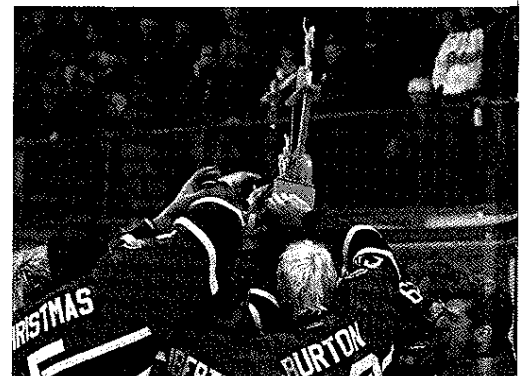
KEDCO chief executive Jeff Garrah predicts the three-day competition will generate at least 3,000 out-of-town visitors, plus the event is expected to get national television exposure.

Impressive names and numbers, but one thing that always frustrates a journalist is pinning down what "economic impact" means. The Grand Prix figure skating will generate \$5 million in local spending, we're told. But how do we know for sure?

Well, I'm told there is a standard formula to predict and measure the economic impact of hosting a sport tourism event. It's called STEAM Pro — I know, it sounds like a dry-cleaning company — but STEAM actually stands for Sport Tourism Economic Assessment Model. And Pro, well, that's the expensive version of gathering attendance numbers, projecting spending habits and conducting public surveys to come up with an estimated economic impact. STEAM Pro is widely used in the sport tourism sector. Their statistical bible, as it were. It's also expensive. It can cost up to \$20,000 to conduct a STEAM Pro for each event. City council asked KEDCO for a report on the economic impact of the Poker Run without setting aside STEAM Pro-like dollars to pay for it.

Using STEAM numbers, it's estimated that sport tourism events have produced a total economic impact of \$17 million based on factors such as number of visitors, how much was spent each night and how long they stayed.

If STEAM is the barometer of success, Kingston still needs a thermometer to determine what's hot and what's not before it goes bidding for every tournament on the block.



A study by Tourism Kingston says there are 130 sports organizations in Kingston. Some are not yet ready to host sport tourism events, while others work in isolation from tourism promoters. Tournaments may be a dime a dozen, but hosting them, or even bidding on them, usually comes with an upfront price or commitment. Organizers who award these games often look at whether the municipality has chipped in any funding to support the bid. No money, no ticket.

As an incentive to host the Scotties tournament, the city put up \$100,000 in cash and services. The provincial government kicked in another \$150,000 to bolster the city's bid to host the curlers (The winning city should be announced in September.)

In recent months, council has been asked to endorse a host of the host city bids, usually with money and facility rental waivers attached. KEDCO admits some bids are short notice and leave politicians scrambling to understand why they should sink public money into the bidding process. The solution?

"We're in the midst of meeting with all local sports organizations to develop a ten-year bid plan," says Gary. "We hope to have it finalized in the fall. It will determine what events we want to bid on."

Though some tournament bids will continue to crop up on short notice, a sport tourism strategic plan will take much of the guesswork out of planning and budgeting for the small, medium and large events that Kingston would like to host, according to KEDCO's point man on sport tourism.

The city's ultimate goal is to host competitions that produce economic and community benefits. A motherhood statement if ever there was one.

Kingston can never expect to host the World Cup, but the RBC Cup would be a welcome addition to the sport tourism portfolio. With an estimated 200,000 tournaments held annually in Canada, sport tourism is a \$2.4 billion segment of the country's \$62 billion tourism industry.

It's small wonder a city that has produced champion athletes, builders and coaches like Don Cherry wants a bigger stake in the game.

Now all the city needs is a catchy promotion: "Kingston — always a good sport" ■

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**July 17 - Taste of Kingston**  
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**August 1 - K-Town Triathlon**  
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