

The Sustaining Force of Sports

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The vitality of a community's sporting life reliably indicates its greater social, economic, and even political well being. The degree to which residents can engage in non-purposeful recreational play or participate in organized sport programs, and can consume as spectators amateur and professional sports, either live or via a myriad of electronic media, reflects and contributes to the quality of daily life in Hawai'i. It is worth reflecting on what we value as a sports culture, and on what we can do to preserve the sustaining force of sports in our community.

Participation

With year-round temperate weather, a broad network of parks and recreational facilities, and ready proximity to hundreds of miles of public trails and the surrounding ocean, Hawai'i is a player's paradise. Residents and visitors keep busy some seventy-five golf courses across the state. More than sixty active canoe clubs offer recreational and competitive opportunities for thousands of paddlers in multiple age divisions. In Honolulu alone there are ninety-one public tennis courts, nearly all regularly trafficked. On any given weekend, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of recreational athletes participate in road races, triathlons, time trials, open-ocean swimming competitions, and other events.

But access to recreational and organized sport is not equal across race, regional, and socioeconomic lines. While two-thirds of Hawai'i residents technically live within a half-mile of a park, the concentration of parks and population in Honolulu heavily distorts this measure. Of course, enjoying recreational sports depends not just on access but also on the quality of experience. Maintenance of parks, trails, and beaches can therefore significantly impact their accessibility and the health and safety of visitors. For many residents, particularly on O'ahu, however, such recreational experiences can be compromised by the encroachment of homeless encampments and by the crush of ten million visitors per year.

Ala Moana Beach Park is a hub of local recreational activity. By day, runners, cyclists, swimmers, surfers, stand-up paddleboarders, canoe paddlers, volleyball players, and other everyday athletes share the hundred-acre space. Local park users are also accustomed to the steady stream of Japanese wedding photographers and their clients traipsing through recreational areas, and to the throngs of visitors who,

spurred by guidebook recommendations, line the shore to take smartphone photos of the sunset. But a hard line was drawn in 2019, when the city approved a private developer plan to build a \$3 million playground, complete with zip lines, within the park. While promoted as a gift to the city, the project seemed more of a gift to residents of the pricey condominiums nearby. The resulting public outcry effectively scuttled the project, a victory of sorts for residents weary of seeing public spaces usurped for private interests, and perhaps a message to lawmakers that recreational spaces must be preserved and enhanced in ways meaningful to their host communities.

Native Hawaiians and Youth Sports

The significance of youth sports in Hawai‘i is compounded by their relation to educational opportunity. Children with potential at an early age are encouraged to specialize in a sport, and guided to private sports clubs and off-season camps to supplement the training and playing opportunities offered by their school athletic programs. Talent can help to secure entry into one of the elite private schools, a common goal for families seeking to escape the perceived inadequacies of the state’s chronically underfunded and underperforming public school system.

But private clubs can cost thousands of dollars per season, and young athletes with working parents may not have transportation to practices and games, perpetuating differentials in opportunity that stretch beyond the field. An Aspen Institute report specified that Native Hawaiian youth, particularly those living in rural communities, are disproportionately impacted by a lack of transportation to recreational centers and the inability to pay for private sports programs.

There are no easy solutions here, but a starting point could be for the state and counties to fund low-cost, well-staffed, park-based athletic programs as an alternative to costly private programs that take youth athletes out of their neighborhoods.

UH Sports

Despite lukewarm student support and continual budget shortfalls requiring regular loans from the university to the athletic department, the University of Hawai‘i remains the state’s top spectator draw. In 2019, the athletic department ran a deficit of \$2.94 million, necessitating a \$13.6 million loan to defray \$51.3 million in expenses.

Only a handful of sports—football, men’s basketball, men’s and women’s volleyball, and baseball—break even or generate a profit. The heaviest investment is in football, which supports the largest number of scholarship athletes and incurs the largest operational expenses. But the investment return, relied upon to help fund the non-revenue-generating sports, is negatively affected by high travel costs, travel subsidies paid to visiting conference opponents (a unique requirement of

Mountain West Conference affiliation), low student fee support, and a zero share of parking and concession fees from Aloha Stadium, where it plays its home games.

To avoid contraction of non-revenue-generating sports—a scenario that would endanger compliance with Title IX, which requires equal access to participation opportunities for men and women—and to establish a sustainable financial model for the athletic department, UH will need greater annual appropriations from the state, and find new ways to maximize its operating revenue. If local sports fans will not accept eliminating football or dropping it to the Division III level, as some have suggested, it may be time for UH to seek separate support for programs that ensure Title IX compliance, through dedicated state funding and private booster support.

Sports Marketing

Each year, the Hawai'i Tourism Authority spends roughly one-tenth of its nearly \$80 million budget on sports marketing. The investment is meant to maintain and build a sports tourism sector, which HTA values at \$150 million.

Prior to the game's relocation in 2015, the National Football League received an annual subsidy of about \$5 million to hold the Pro Bowl in Hawai'i. The HTA claimed that this subsidy secured an event that annually drew as many as 47,000 visitors, and promoted Hawai'i to millions of TV viewers. But a 2015 analysis by the North American Association of Sports Economists estimated that the actual number of additional visitors during the period was between 5,596 and 6,726. This analysis supports research indicating that subsidized sporting events have minimal economic benefit for the host community.

The Professional Golfers' Association is now HTA's most prominent sports affiliation. The state signed a four-year, \$2.1 million extension with the PGA to continue hosting championship events on O'ahu, Maui, and Hawai'i island. The arrangement provides promotional opportunities for Hawai'i's \$1 billion golf industry, and for the state as a whole. HTA sponsors dozens of other events, many tied to local sporting traditions such as the Nā Wahine O Ke Kai Canoe Race. In addition, HTA supports events packaged with outreach programs, such as a Los Angeles Rams youth football camp held in advance of an exhibition game against the Dallas Cowboys in 2019.

The state does not provide direct financial support for Hawai'i's largest and most economically impactful sporting event—the Honolulu Marathon. Staged each year on the second Sunday of December, traditionally a slow tourism period, the race draws tens of thousands of participants from Japan via aggressive in-country marketing by sponsor JAL and its subsidiary travel business JALPAK. While the Honolulu Marathon Association no longer commissions an annual economic-impact study, it previously reported over \$100 million in economic activity related to the event each year. But that figure only accounts for total

spending, and not for the amount that actually stays in Hawai‘i. More telling is the \$4 million to \$6 million in direct tax revenue, which benefits the local economy. The other major state-hosted international endurance event, the Kona Ironman Championship, claims \$30 million in economic impact, with an outside sphere of benefit to the many private, locally owned businesses in the area.

In recent years, HTA has increased its involvement with UH athletics, a positive refocusing that bears watching. For a 2019 UH-Washington road game in Seattle, HTA paid \$50,000 for an alumni reception, ti leaves for Hawai‘i fans, and flights for the UH cheer team, who joined UW cheerleaders in a visit to a local children’s hospital. By investing in the top local sports attraction, HTA can continue to promote Hawai‘i tourism in meaningful ways while also helping to preserve revenue-generating UH sports and the non-revenue-generating sports they support.

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