



Sports ETA 2026 State of the Industry Report

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In April, I attended the annual Sports ETA Symposium in Las Vegas. Sports ETA is the only trade association for the sports events and tourism industry. My fellow colleagues at hundreds of Convention & Visitor Bureaus around the country are all members of the association along with individuals from sports commissions, sporting event owners, and industry vendors. In total, more than 800 organizations and over 2,400 individual professionals are members of the association. We trust Sports ETA to deliver quality education, ample networking opportunities, and event management and marketing know-how to protect the integrity of the sports events and tourism industry.

At the symposium, Sports ETA released its 2026 State of the Industry Report. The report reveals that sports tourism has evolved into a \$274.5 billion total economic impact industry, generating \$111.2 billion in direct spending, supporting 1.6 million jobs, and producing \$20.5 billion in state and local tax revenue nationwide. In total, 339 million sports travelers generated 124.3 million room nights, reinforcing the industry's role as one of the most powerful and reliable drivers of economic development in the United States.

The 2026 report underscores the complementary roles of two key segments: Participatory Sports Tourism and Spectator Sports Tourism. Since the majority of the work that we do at the Fox Cities CVB focuses on participatory sports tourism, let's take a deeper dive there. Driven by primarily youth and amateur events, participatory sports tourism generated \$60.1 billion in direct spending and \$149.1 billion in total economic impact, driven by 227.6 million travelers, supporting more than 880,000 jobs and producing \$11.3 billion in state and local taxes. For a reference, in 2019 (pre-pandemic) participatory sports-related travel spending was \$45.1 billion annually (so a \$15 billion increase in six years) and total travelers in 2019 was 179.3 million (so a 48.3 million traveler increase in six years).

If you made it through all those stats in the last two paragraphs, thank you! I know that was a lot to take in. My biggest take-away from the report, beyond the massive figures, is the continued impressive year-over-year growth of the industry. Youth and amateur sports travel shows no signs of slowing down.

So, how does all of this impact you, the reader? Here are some take-aways that you can ponder. If you are a parent of a youth travel athlete, you may want to ask yourself: "I know how much we spend as a family on travel sports. Can my team(s) host more events locally so we don't have to travel out of the area so much?". If you work at or own a business that does, or could get, traffic from travel sports, you may ask "Are we doing everything possible to cater to travel sports customers and maximize our revenue?". And if you are a community leader, you may want to ask yourself "Does my community have all the necessary infrastructure to host high-level sporting events?".

If you want to discuss any of these thoughts further, shoot me an email: mtenhaken@foxcities.org.