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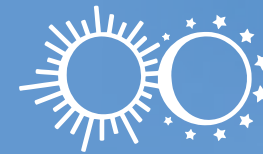
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3 Meet the Team at Spokane Sports
- 4 Get to Know Spokane Sports CEO, Ashley Blake
- 8 A Day in the Life of Spokane's First World Championship Sporting Event
- 16 Fast Facts and Figures
- 18 Spokane: A Premier Running Destination
- 22 The State of The Podium
- 26 Two Premier Downtown Sports Facilities? What is the Difference?

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OVERVIEW & MISSION

Founded in 1989, the Spokane Sports Commission is a non-profit, economic development organization responsible for recruiting, retaining, and facilitating sports events for the Spokane region. As advocates for sports development, our efforts help our region realize the economic, social, and community development benefits of sports.

SpokaneSports.org

MEET THE TEAM AT SPOKANE SPORTS

After entering 2023 with new CEO **Ashley Blake**, Spokane Sports moves into 2024 with a staff that's undergone wholesale change — including five new hires: **Keytra Lewis**, Director of Marketing and Communication, will propel the organization to new heights with a fresh marketing and brand strategy; **Marit Jacobs**, Director of Business Development, a new role emphasizing local business engagement and relationships; **Carmen González-Aller Winslow**, Project Coordinator, focused on researching and vetting events and administrative support; **Jessie Ward**, Sports Management Coordinator, who will take the lead on cross-country event development and assist with track and field; **Haley Steele**, Hospitality Coordinator, who handles catering for all events as well as travel and hotel coordination.

In addition, holdover staffers have been promoted to more specified roles. **Anna Alsept**, now the Director of Sports Management, will focus on the indoor track season's technical planning and logistics. **Erin Magnuson** has been named Brand Manager, concentrating on the organizations positioning in the marketplace. **TJ Crater** is now Event Operations Manager, with additional duties overseeing interns and volunteers. And **Cheríe Gwinn** has been promoted to Senior Director of Events which will include relations with grassroots sports groups and national governing bodies, as well as hoteliers. **Dana Haynes** remains in her Media Relations capacity, as do **Jason Drake** and **Linda Lanker** in coordinating functions during the indoor track season. Spokane Sports has also outsourced its finance team, with a part-time CFO and Bookkeeper, as well as a Human Resources Manager.





GET TO KNOW SPOKANE SPORTS CEO, ASHLEY BLAKE

One way to think of Ashley Blake is as the undrafted free agent who didn't just survive the first roster cut, but over time became the franchise player.

She doesn't put quite the same spin on her time at Spokane Sports, however.

"They just haven't been able to get rid of me," she joked.

In the 12 years and counting since she joined the organization while still working on a master's degree at Gonzaga University, she's almost lost track of the number of hats she's worn. "Volunteer, intern, administrative assistant," she said, beginning to tick them off. Manager and then director of sports development. Vice president. And, as of November 2022, Chief Executive Officer — selected over more than

100 candidates to succeed Eric Sawyer, who retired after 30 years in charge.

Her first year on the job hasn't lacked for achievement. She's overseen a wholesale expansion of the Spokane Sports team, doubling the number of staffers, and adding key contractors. The organization staged its first international championship in The Podium Powered by STCU that brought badminton athletes and officials from 55 countries to Spokane. And giant steps were taken — including the pitch of a \$4.4 million grant — toward turning an unused parcel in the Spokane Valley into a cross country facility that could accommodate local and national meets.

Blake fielded a few questions about the changes in motion and her vision for Spokane Sports, the region's place in the sports tourism industry and what might be in store for the organization's event calendar.

“ Every person on our staff believes in what sports can do for the community.”



High school athletes race around the track at the 2023 ICCU High School Invitational.

Q: In your dozen years at Spokane Sports, what have you learned about the city's appetite for sports?

A: What doesn't get lost on me is how supportive Spokane is. There's a readiness to help us move forward, an ownership, and a responsibility. From the governing bodies that have brought events here, we always hear how unique Spokane is in the way we roll out the red carpet. It's something you can't mimic. It's a genuine interest in why people have come to our city and wanting them to have a good experience.

Q: What have you done to put a different stamp on the organization in your first year?

A: The big one is staffing. In the last six months, we did an organizational redesign and we've doubled our staff size from five to 10, plus adding contractors and specialists. We're really moving away from the "we wear a lot of hats" mentality to a more specialized focus. We've especially put a lot of staffing, resources, and energy behind our operations team that works on indoor track and field and cross country with an eye to creating our own events.

Q: How will that "specialized focus" be expressed?

A: Before, our bid strategy was kind of all over the map — a lot of different sports at all levels of com-

petition. It's been a great mix of events. We've found success being generalists, but we want to lean into things in a different way. We want to build out our reputation as a running destination with our world-class facilities — The Podium and the cross-country facility we hope to have ready by the fall of 2025. And we want to do it in a way that can express our brand and our own event style. We'd like to put

more emphasis on quality events over quantity of events. We also want to start reaching for events that will attract media attention with significant spectator appeal.

Q: For example?

A: One we've worked on prior and we're still in the hunt for is the U.S. Gymnastics championships, congress and trade show. It's an event that would utilize all three Spokane Public Facilities District buildings — the convention center for the congress and trade show, The Podium for the training site and the Spokane Arena for eight sessions of men's and women's artistic gymnastics. The event is televised by NBC, with marquee athletes like Simone Biles and Suni Lee. That's the kind of event we really want to reach for — events that can drive ticket sales, engage our local sports community, and have national appeal that can showcase the city.

Q: Is bidding for events more competitive now? How do you make your organization stand out?

A: Other markets across the country are doubling down on their efforts and building world class facilities because they can point to how quickly the youth sports/tourism segment came back after the COVID shutdown. It requires us to rise with the tide. There are dozens of states now with some version

of a state tourism endowment or a special trust fund they can go to. Texas has unlimited access to dollars needed to secure major events. Washington doesn't have that. Cities in Texas are coming to the table with a \$250,000 check and we're coming with scrappy volunteers and interns. So we have to rely on our reputation and past performance, and that's been impeccable. On the other side of the table, national sports governing bodies are very tight-knit and they have a lot of dialogue about where they've had success. And all the things we've had on our side — great facilities, a welcoming hospitality infrastructure and the walkability of our downtown — are still there.

Q: So you're comfortable with where Spokane sits in the marketplace?

A: We're going to celebrate our 35th birthday as an organization this year. There is a broad range of models of sports commissions in the U.S. You can be a one-person department in a visitors bureau and just dabbling. We're so far at the other end now — highly focused on event facilitation and delivery, to the point that we're essentially an extension of a governing body's operating and marketing team. That's pretty unique.

Q: What else sets Spokane Sports apart?

A: A couple of things. One would be the intent of our team, their dedication and pride in hosting these events and showcasing the region. This year we welcomed 140,000 people to our market to spectate, coach, participate and officiate at our events. That's driving tourism, much of it in the shoulder season when our businesses need it the most. Every person on our staff believes in what sports can do for the community. And that's not just reflected in economic impact, but also in the opportunities created in our backyard for our local athletes to compete, and in helping them grow their own events. That's a powerful legacy. 🌀





International athletes compete at the 2023 BWF Badminton World Junior Championships.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF SPOKANE'S

FIRST WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP SPORTING EVENT

In the staging of athletic competitions, as any staffer of Spokane Sports has come to learn over the years, sometimes you have to improvise as players and coaches often do.

So it was for Haley Steele in her first gig after being hired as the organization's hospitality coordinator.

Her task: feeding up to 125 officials twice a day at the first world championship event in the city's history, the BWF World Junior Badminton Championships which set up shop for two weeks at The Podium Powered by STCU this fall.

Her challenge on one particular day: the changing tastes of her clientele.

An Indian dish served for lunch with both vegetarian and protein options soon ran out of chicken. Steele's solution: "I knew we had some leftover teriyaki chicken in the fridge and some leftover Korean barbecue beef. So I put those on heat – and noted if those weren't warm yet when someone wanted to dish them up they could throw it in the microwave."

At dinner, the unexpectedly carb-happy diners quickly blew through the pita bread supplied with the shakshouka delivered by one of the contracted caterers. Again, to the fridge: "I put out our last tray of rice," she said.

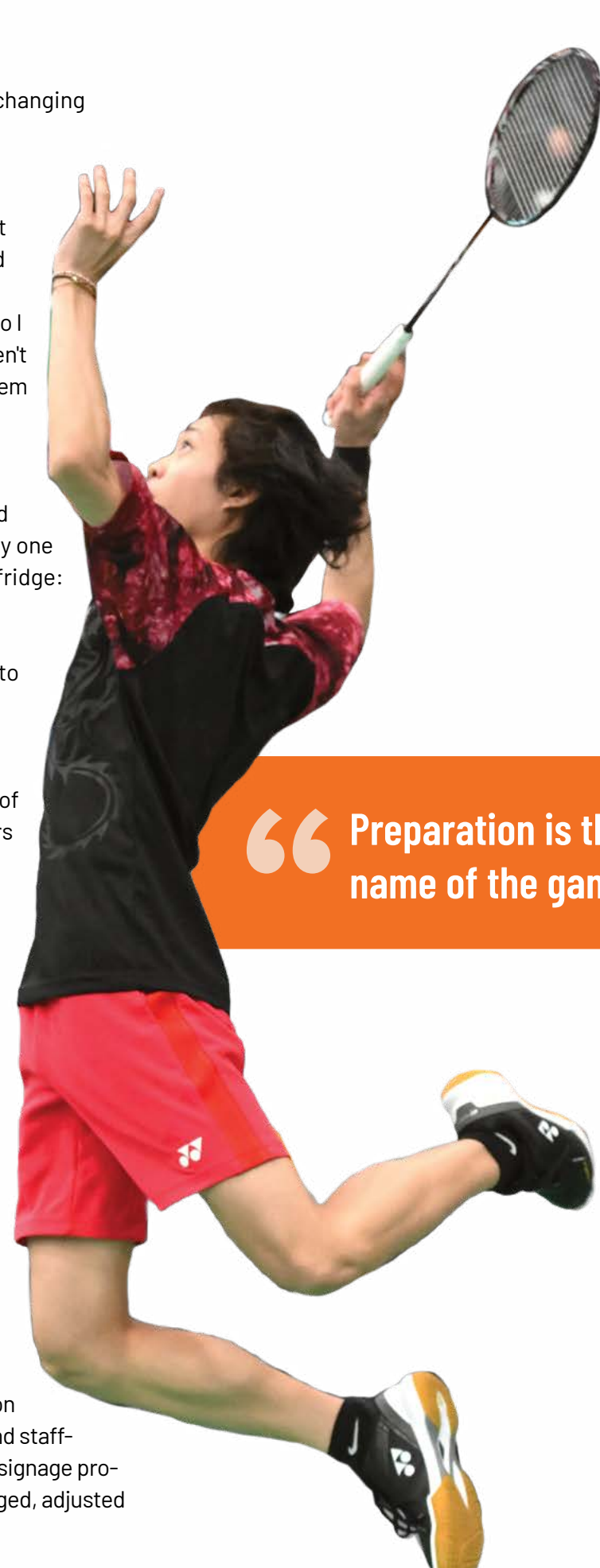
"There's always something. You just have to be flexible."

The power of prep

For two weeks it rolled on, this gathering of more than 400 teenage badminton players from 38 countries playing on nine courts – through the raucous team competition with its soundtrack of cheers, air horns and thunderstix, to the individual matches with more intensity and angst.

Two weeks is plenty of time for a lot to go amiss beyond running out of chicken at lunchtime. But lest anyone think that a Spokane Sports event is all about troubleshooting, be assured it's mostly about avoiding trouble. Here's a number out of thin air: probably 95 percent of the group's success is a product of what happens before the competition begins.

Preparation is the name of the game. Site set-up, medical coordination, transportation and hotel arrangements, catering supply and staffing, lining up volunteers, airport greetings, signage production – all that and more has to be managed, adjusted



“Preparation is the name of the game.”

and nailed down in a kind of rolling, controlled chaos so that the event itself can run on cruise control, or appear to.

So when did preparations for the badminton worlds begin in earnest?

Would you believe when ground was being broken for The Podium?

"Badminton was a sport we had to consider when we were designing and building," said Spokane Sports CEO Ashley Blake. "The requirements are so finicky. We spent a lot of time talking about our HVAC system and how forced air through the building would affect the flight of the shuttlecock. Our construction team pulled a lot of information for us on that."

And it wasn't just the managing the draft. Paul Christiansen, the Director of Sports for the Spokane Public Facilities District that operates the building, noted that the plastic flooring that's laid over The Podium's centerpiece track for other events creates a static issue.

"So overnight we're sucking in humid air from outside to tamp down that static," he said. "That doesn't happen for us with any other sport."

A close up at the competition floor of the 2023 USA Badminton Junior Championships.

In total, Blake estimated her staff had invested 2,500 hours into planning and preparation before a racket met the first shuttlecock — up to 500 just vetting the bid itself. Often they relied on past experience to tweak their own detail work. For example, when Spokane Sports hosted a previous international event, the Pan-American taekwondo championships, they had simplified their marketing to potential participants with a map of the United States, showing Spokane's location and the GEG airport code.

"And we ended up with four teams — including 22 people from Argentina — flying to Washington, D.C., instead of Spokane, Washington" Blake recalled with a smile. "So communication becomes the most important detail."

Manpower, too — especially when the work started with just a staff of five.



“It’s nice to be in the middle of it, and it gives you a cool perspective of the sport.”

The interns and volunteers

Logan Coddington saw a LinkedIn ad for an internship with Spokane Sports and came aboard in early June. He was one of a handful of interns, along with 30-some volunteers wrangled by events operation manager TJ Crater who were put to work at the badminton worlds in multiple capacities.

Youth badminton athletes congratulate each other after the completion of a match.



"I helped with set-up," said Coddington, an Eastern Washington University senior from Liberty Lake. "I maintain some of the hospitality areas. I make sure the water coolers are stocked. And I help out as a line judge as needed."

So it's not all behind-the-scenes schlepping and serving.

While the sanctioning Badminton World Federation and USA Badminton, the national governing body, provided officials and the sport-technical expertise, Spokane Sports was left to fill in some of the on-court staffing gaps. To that end, their volunteers were pressed into calling the ins and outs during matches alongside more badminton-savvy recruits

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Mid-shot action on the badminton court.

from the local club and others who paid their way from Seattle and "as far away as France and Chile," Coddington reported.

"It's nice to be in the middle of it, and it gives you a cool perspective of the sport," he said. "You might have played in middle or high school gym class, but when you watch kids who are truly elite at what they do, it's really eye-opening. You come to realize how quick the game is and it's fun to absorb a sport you never much thought of before."

The longest days

Though the badminton competition could stretch as long as 14 hours on a given day, the Spokane Sports staff attacked those in shifts. The five days of set-up were the most grueling, but in fact Spokane Sports staff and PFD personnel were engaged in adapting The Podium to the BWF's very specific needs for up to 15 months in advance through multiple site inspections.

Cherié Gwinn, the organization's Senior Director of Events, functioned as the operational lead, and noted there were times it seemed iffy that they'd even get to the point of turning on the lights – or off, actually.

"In The Podium, We don't have the ability to zone lights or shut off individual banks," she said. "When you're playing badminton, you can't have direct light over you – you're constantly looking up and you wouldn't be able to see the shuttlecock. So Paul

eventually had to get a scissor lift and disconnect 10 fixtures across the building, leaving just lights in the corners."

There were other challenges. A massive 60-foot awards stage backdrop had taken organizers at last year's event in Spain a month to build out of plywood. Spokane Sports went with a silk-screened backdrop held up with PVC pipe and grommets that played every bit as well. Badminton officials initially wanted all 75,000 square feet of The Podium around the playing courts covered in blue carpet; they settled for just having the center TV court set off that way. The moveable black curtains The Podium employs mostly for concerts became a lifesaver – not only creating a backstage area for the 10 practice courts, but also as a dark playing background for the white shuttlecock. Meanwhile, some frames they had for signage proved to be the wrong dimensions.

"So I made a run to Home Depot and spent some nights cutting lumber in my garage," Crater said. "There are so many details that they aren't all going to get communicated, so you adjust."

Anna Alsept, the group's Director of Sports Management, discovered as much early in the competition when badminton officials revealed that a city representative was expected to provide gifts at the award ceremonies.

"So Cherié and I represented the



“ I think that was the most rewarding aspect, seeing them have a great experience in our city.”

Top athletes celebrate following the completion of the 2023 USA Badminton Junior Championships.

For the win

The Spokane Sports team counted its successes in different ways – in the satisfaction of detailed preparation or whatever solutions they manufactured for day-to-day issues, in seeing athletes walking through Riverpark Square in their colorful warm-ups and, yes, in the business being done in the city's hotels and restaurants. But even as the day-after-day competition blurred together and the facility teardown loomed, they found other victories.

"After a while, the shininess wore off as it will in something that goes on for two weeks," said Crater, a former track & field athlete and coach. "But toward the end when the USA athletes were able to get on the awards podium for the first time ever, that was cool to see. There was an energy to it."

For Alsept, it was the cultural day staged at Riverfront Park's pavilion during the competition off

city and we gave out Spokane Sports backpacks, along with some flowers we ordered," she said. "And they had to be on trays."

So there was another store run – to At Home, for silver trays.

And yet Blake wouldn't even liken these issues to brushfires.

"If carpets and grommets are our biggest issue, we're doing OK, right?" she said.

If there's an example of just how thoroughly Spokane Sports had the event wired, it's this: Steele, who was hired full-time in July, actually spent the first week of the badminton event in Greece on a previously scheduled vacation. She'd covered all her catering bases in advance, and tied up a few loose ends via email and phone.

day, when Kalispel Tribe members drummed and danced and athletes got a chance to do something without medals at stake.

"Everyone was laughing and having fun and mixing with each other," she said. "You'd go to the barbecue and see Team Austria sitting with Team India, or they'd be playing cornhole or baseball. I think that was the most rewarding aspect, seeing them have a great experience in our city."

And having such a far-flung participant group in Spokane – from Armenia and Peru, Ghana and the Cook Islands – was a reward in itself.

"A win for me is bringing something to our city that's unique," said Blake. "To host our first world championships – and the first time any U.S. city has been selected to host. That resonates with people. To have such a group here is really pretty incredible." 🌀



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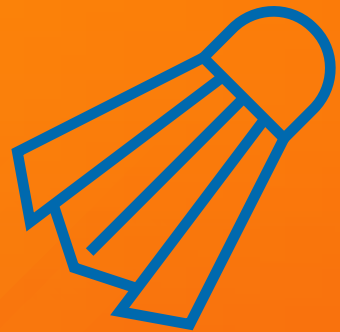
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FAST FACTS AND FIGURES



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World Championship

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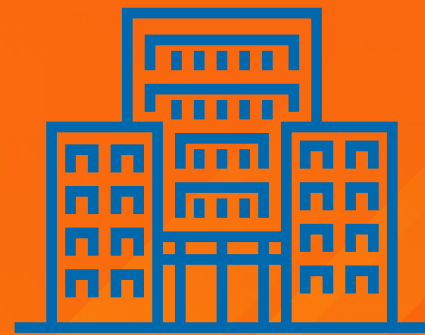


Projected Hotel Room Nights

75,104

Venues used

20



2.5 days

average length of stay in market



14 days

longest length of stay in market (For the 2023 BWF World Badminton Junior Championships)



\$250

average daily spend in market



63,740

Athletes



3,464

Out of Town Officials and Coaches



86,520

Visiting Spectators



5 years old

Youngest athlete age



81 years old

Oldest athlete age

LEVELS OF COMPETITION



Youth



High School



Collegiate

Professional

Community



Spokane Youth Sports Awards returned for the

FIRST TIME SINCE 2019



Currently working to bid on events

8 YEARS OUT IN 2031



5 New Hires

90%

Positive Media Sentiment



SPOKANE: A PREMIER RUNNING DESTINATION

In November 1973, about 4,300 spectators ringed what is now Latah Creek Golf Course for Spokane's first NCAA championship event — the Division I crosscountry meet, won by a running legend named Steve Prefontaine. Four years later, they did it again as another legend, Henry Rono, was first to the finish for host Washington State.

Is there a chance we could see it again 50 years later?

It's more plausible now that Spokane Sports and the City of Spokane Valley have made a pitch for a \$4.4 million grant to the city's lodging tax advisory committee to begin work on turning a 60-acre parcel just north of the Spokane River into a cross country venue to attract regional and national meets, as well as serve high school and youth competitions.

"We're looking to build a high-caliber facility," said Spokane Sports CEO Ashley Blake, "In addition,

Female cross country athletes' line-up at the start of a race.



we're looking to foster and build on the reputation as a running destination."

Spokane does have distance running in its DNA — from the days of Rogers High School's Gerry Lindgren beating the Russians in the Cold War-era duals to the advent and surge of Bloomsday to the high school dynasties of Mead and North Central. Spokane Sports' success in turning The Podium Powered by STCU into a winter indoor track mecca makes for a unique synergy with this project.

It began to take shape about a year ago when Spokane Valley officials met with the Spokane Sports team to explore some sports tourism ideas. Blake remembered offering to share a "special endeavor" with the city.

"But if we do it," she told them, "we have to do it to the fullest."

What Spokane Valley brought to the proposition was a valuable piece of wooded real estate wedged between the river and railroad tracks with access east of North Flora Road. The city purchased 46 acres from the Washington State Department of Transportation for \$2.1 million in 2020 with the help of a Recreation and Conservation Office grant, which established a 5-year window to develop it as a park. The remaining 14-plus acres in the plan remains with the state, and access may be gained through a land swap or lease.

The collaborative plan to develop the plot estimated a cost of \$7 million, and in October the city of Spokane Valley and Spokane Sports requested a \$4.4 million lodging tax grant.

"We'll have to come up with creative solutions to cover the remainder," Blake said. "There are some grants available, and we'll look at



A Master's athlete races to the finish line of the USATF Club Cross Country Championships.

naming rights and possibly other revenue streams."

The sports tourism mission means Spokane Sports, as with the indoor track market, will once again be targeting collegiate conference championships and high-level high school invitationals that will translate into hotel stays, on top of considerable local usage. But Blake acknowledged NCAA championship meets are in the sights, too, at all three levels.

As noted, Spokane has some history there — beginning with the Division I meets in 1973 and 1977. The Division II nationals were staged at Plantes Ferry in 2011 and 2013, and Whitworth hosted the Division III meet at Wandermere in 2000. But that was the last time it was staged in the West, and the DI meet has only been in the Pacific time zone five times in 85 years — the last in Arizona in 1996.

"And the reason, I think, is the lack of facilities," said Gonzaga cross country coach Pat Tyson. "Everybody out here runs on golf courses. Terre Haute has hosted a dozen times because they have a world-class course. This gives us an opportunity to have a world-class course and the only one in the West."

Blake acknowledged Terre Haute as a model, and said her staff will be scouting Oklahoma State's on-campus course, among others.

"But we'll be occupying a unique space with a much broader scope," she said, "we're aiming to serve youth on up to masters events, and not just college races."

A design concept hasn't been finalized, but Blake said the vision is for multiple loops of 2 and 3 kilometers that could be staged in various combinations and directions so as not to "rut out" the trails. A clubhouse, complete with an announcers stand, bathrooms, timing equipment, storage and a drug-testing venue — necessary

for NCAA events — will be part of the costs.

With cross country being a three-month fall sport, it's envisioned that the winter months will be filled with cyclocross — a bicycling steeplechase of sorts.

And in the spring and summer, Blake said, "you'll have a beautiful park with walking and running trails" — which was behind the city's acquisition of the property originally.

"This is something we've wanted to do for a while, and it's exciting to see it start to come together," she said. 🌀



THE STATE OF THE PODIUM



So how do we measure the value and impact of The Podium Powered by STCU? Is it by versatility? Seems like a good choice, given that in just the past year the \$54 million building has played host to badminton players from everywhere from Tahiti to Estonia, and to everything from girls wrestling to team handball to judo. And that's not even figuring in the concerts and high school graduations and parks department summer camps.

Or is the measure its jewel, the hydraulically banked track that fills the calendar from December to March? The 200-meter oval produced a world best in its first two months and staged an impressive

USA Indoor Track and Field Championships that brought 46 Olympians to town in 2022 – and was described by one visiting coach from California as "the Air Force One" of the sport.

Or is it in raves like that one? Or when West Side parents, in town to watch their kids in the 2023 state middle school basketball championships, repeatedly asked staffers, "Why doesn't Seattle have something like this?"

Or is it in hotel rooms filled? That was, in fact, the motivating factor behind the project, and in 2023 Podium events accounted for more than 50,000 occupancy nights, with the attendant spillover to restaurants and other local businesses.

Of course, it's all of that and more.

But what's every bit as telling is that as The Podium reaches just its second birthday, it has already become part of the furniture in Spokane's sports and economic estate. It certainly doesn't hurt that it's right in Spokane's living room, on a basalt perch on the north end of Riverfront Park. Good landlords – the Spokane Public Facilities District, and seasoned professionals – Spokane Sports, which is charged with booking the facility – help, too.

"I don't think it's possible to overstate what's been done there in just the first two years," said Ashley Blake, CEO of Spokane Sports. "When the feasibility study was done (in 2015), there were 22,000 room

nights projected. We've blown by that, and created a market for the building that's only going to grow."

There are other staggering numbers in addition to those 50,224 room stays. Among the 37 events The Podium hosted in 2023, some 33,217 athletes were involved, and Spokane Sports estimates an economic impact of nearly \$88 million in tourism spending.

Much of that came during the "shoulder" season for hoteliers, the slower post-Christmas months – a gap welcomingly bridged by seven full weekends of track and field visitors, and then by the hordes of players that arrived for the massive Pacific Northwest Qualifier Volleyball and Washington State

Middle School Basketball tournaments, both multi-weekend affairs.

"The PNQ has over 800 teams with maybe 50 of those local, and the basketball is close to 600 teams now," said Paul Christiansen, the Spokane PFD's director of sports. "Those are the largest (revenue) generating events in Spokane. Bloomsday and Hoopfest get all the hype, but those two are the biggest."

Naturally, these events don't get off the ground without the human

factor, from leaders like Blake and Christiansen down to eager volunteers. But let's touch on some other aspects of the building that have made it a success, and what might be in store down the road.

Where records fall

Pat Tyson brings his Gonzaga University runners to The Podium to work out one day each week during the season, as do other local college teams. That's nice enough, but he's also mindful of the other advantages.

"It's a game-changer," he said. "You see the Stanfords and Or-

egons bring their athletes here, and that's four or five meets where we don't have to go in search of competition. A guy like Wil Smith can break four minutes in the mile against good people in his hometown and you can't buy that. And you certainly see a lot of elite high school runners coming from the West side, Oregon, and California wanting to run fast."

Which is one of the great ironies in the building of The Podium.

"We toured a lot of other facilities and got asked, 'How is your high school indoor track scene?' " Christiansen recalled, "and the answer was, 'It doesn't exist.' There is some club track, but it's not a WIAA-sanctioned sport. And everybody told me, 'If you don't have high school track, you should not build this building.' "

But Spokane Sports has done some cloud seeding by launching a couple of high school events, which have proved popular, and has had no problem attracting college competition. Athletes from 84 colleges in 13 states and Canada beyond the Inland Northwest have competed on The Podium track, to say nothing of elite post-collegians from across the nation.


The outdoor patio of The Podium looking towards the Spokane Pavilion.



An aerial view of The Podium during construction looking towards North Spokane.

Talks toward bringing back the USATF championships are ongoing, and Spokane Sports is trying to pencil out a way to bring an NCAA championship in one of the three divisions to The Podium, though limited warm-up space for that many athletes is a mitigating factor. Also, room must be found on the schedule. Some collegiate conference championships have been booked through 2031 and conflict with the USATF's normal dates; the mid-March NCAAs would displace the lucrative middle-school basketball event. Beyond sports, the PFD looks to expand its concert trade.

Meanwhile, other western cities are trying to get in on the act. Groups from Sacramento, Portland, Phoenix, and Reno have made trips to Spokane to assess the facility and track, and how they might emulate or adapt what's happened here. Christiansen said he fields regular phone calls from cities wondering how Spokane has made the multi-sport concept work.

"I think we've impressed people with what we've done," he said, "and there's certainly some growth ahead of us." 

"When pro athletes step on the track and say it's a premier facility and know that records are within their reach," Blake said, "that's very powerful."

The unsung MVP

Would you believe 1-2 inches of high-density polyethylene plastic?

After being told by other facility stewards that a track building couldn't be operated without high school programs, the Spokane planners were getting another "you can't" message – that other sports couldn't be staged over the top of their state-of-the-art oval.

"We found there were no other track (buildings) trying to do what we needed to do," Christiansen said. "All the hype was about the track, but if we didn't find a way to use the whole floor, we had a big problem. We'd only be able to put down nine courts for the PNQ instead of 16, for example, and

that wasn't going to cut it."

In time, a suitable sub-flooring was located that could spread weight loads without damaging the track underneath. The 160 pallets of flooring create storage challenges and facility turnover can be as much as five days on both ends, but The Podium would be a one-trick pony without it. Other PFD improvements to acoustics, fire suppression and motor rigging for curtain partitioning have made the building even more versatile.

"The curtains were a make or break for the world badminton championships because they gave us a black background," said Blake. "And hosting the PNQ the first year without acoustics was torturous. We're extremely grateful for those additions."

What's next?

Competition – inside, and from afar.



TWO PREMIER DOWNTOWN SPORTS FACILITIES?

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

Side by side they stand, separated by a ribbon of old Dean Avenue that has been renamed Joe Albi Way. Come spring, you might find a noisy volleyball tournament inside one, professional soccer outside at the other – not more than 100 paces apart.

They have a matched-set quality in that respect, these two shiny new sports venues on the north bank of the Spokane River – The Podium Powered by STCU and ONE Spokane Stadium.

Except they're not a set, really.

This has become a complicated thing to explain for the staffers of Spokane Sports in their interactions with a public that simply sees a couple of sports venues next door to each other in a virtual campus setting – and might wonder why there needs to be two.

That they opened less than two years apart doesn't lessen the confusion. Or that a Google search for the outdoor stadium might produce an initial hit that

describes "an all new, indoor multi-sport venue."

"Sometimes people just blur all that sports facility stuff together," noted Dana Haynes, media relations director for Spokane Sports.

So let's try to unblur it a bit.

The superficial way to boil it down is to say The Podium is where you'll see indoor track and assorted Olympic sports events, both national and regional, brought to town by Spokane Sports. The stadium is home to Greater Spokane League high school football and soccer and the new United Soccer League franchises – the Velocity

and Zephyr – that are to begin play in 2024.

That only suggests at the disparate missions of the two facilities.

The Podium was, in some form or another, nearly two decades in the making, largely the brainchild of Spokane Sports, which pitched the project to the Spokane Public Facilities District. A 2015 feasibility study commissioned from Sports Facility Advisory of Florida added an important endorsement, and a contract was eventually awarded in 2018, with the PFD funding it with its own reserves, an existing sales tax rebate, lodging taxes and help from the city and county. The \$54

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— in an advisory vote within the district boundaries only — whether they would fund a \$495 million bond for district-wide improvements, including \$31 million for a new stadium. Voters endorsed the bond, but wanted the stadium rebuilt on the Albi site.

Three years later, the Downtown Spokane Partnership, with financial support of the

fill up hotels and bring out-of-town guests for restaurants and local businesses," Blake said. "The stadium was built as a high school facility first, with the soccer teams an important partner. Sports tourism isn't the drive of the stadium."

Which is not to say that you won't see Spokane Sports events there in the future, necessarily.

"We haven't really looked deeply at that yet, and our booking

“ Sometimes people just blur all that sports facility stuff together.

Construction of the One Spokane Stadium.

million indoor facility opened in December 2021, in time for the \$8 million banked hydraulic track to be in use for the 21-22 indoor season.

"The Podium never went out to a public vote because we were not asking for public dollars," explained Ashley Blake, CEO of Spokane Sports. "That was a constant conversation while the Podium was breaking ground (in 2019), because it was getting all jumbled with the Albi Stadium issue."


Albi was the 1950s-era stadium built in Northwest Spokane, and its lack of upkeep and crumbling infrastructure led to calls for a replacement. In 2018, Spokane School District 81 asked citizens

USL, asked District 81 to reconsider. With the PFD agreeing to operate the facility — and guaranteeing long-term cost savings, as well as carte blanche access for the schools — the district approved building downtown, where the \$37.9 million ONE Spokane Stadium opened in September.

The management roles add to the confusion. The PFD owns The Podium, though its usage for athletic events is managed by Spokane Sports. The school district is the stadium landlord, but the PFD is the operational arm.

But the missions are fairly distinct.

"The Podium, as it came into being, was meant to be an economic driver — the events we stage there

parameters make it difficult," said Blake, noting that there are events scheduled into The Podium as far into the future as 2031. "I'm not saying it won't be done. I would love to host a Davis Cup tennis event there, or the Big Sky Conference soccer championships, it would just have to make sense with the booking priorities and scheduling for the facility" 



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