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The Role of Sports & Recreation at the World's Top Entertainment Company

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Abstract

The paper delves into how sports and recreation is factored into the goals of the Disney Company. Since Disney is more known for its entertainment and tourism ventures, its sports ventures can often go unnoticed by people who do not follow sports that closely. This paper explores the contributions that Disney has made in the sports world and how these contributions have helped improve the company. This paper will discuss the numerous recreational activities that Walt Disney World offers to its guests. The opening and growth of the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex will also be discussed extensively. Lastly, the effects that Disney has had on sports in the Central Florida region will be looked into.

*Keywords:* Walt Disney World, sports, recreation, ESPN, ESPN Wide World of Sports Orlando, Central Florida

## Role of Sports & Recreation

### The Role of Sports & Recreation at the World's Top Entertainment Company

The required curriculum for my major, Sport Management, requires me and my fellow Sport Management majors to have a large amount of hands-on, practical experience within our field. For instance, we have to do two practicums working at least 120 clock hours and one internship working at least 480 clock hours before we can officially graduate. I completed my two practicums during the past two summers, and I am participating in my internship program that will last until June 1.

My internship is with the Disney College Program. The Disney College Program is an internship program for college students that allows them “to advance their strengths and interests, meet guests and cast members from around the country and take part in educational opportunities students can't get anywhere else” (<http://cp.disneycareers.com>). Participants of the program have the opportunity “to network with leaders, take part in personal and career development classes, and build transferable skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, guest service and effective communication” (<http://cp.disneycareers.com>). Participants have the opportunity to choose to work in a number of different areas. Among these areas are Merchandise, Transportation, Operations, Entertainment, etc.

Unfortunately, the Disney College Program does not offer any positions that are specific to Sport Management. Disney certainly has opportunities in the field of Sport Management, but these are beyond the scope of the College Program. I was somewhat disappointed that no opportunities within Sport Management were available within the College Program, but I tried to find the next best alternative. My current job (or “role” as it's called within Disney) is considered in the field of Recreation. One of the good things about the College Program is that

## Role of Sports & Recreation

Disney allows the participants to choose which area they would like to work in. My thought process behind choosing to work within Recreation was because of how closely related the Recreation and Sport Management majors are at UT (The two majors have actually combined into one major during my time at UT.) and because of my past employment experience within the field of Recreation. Even though I was not sure what my exact job would be, I felt that I would enjoy myself more and get the most out of my experience working in the field of Recreation.

At Disney, the field of Recreation entails a number of different jobs and is located at a number of different places within Disney World. A couple of the main jobs within Recreation are lifeguard and marina operations. For the most part, Disney's recreational opportunities are not offered within its four main parks, but instead are offered at its hotels and resorts. The resort that I primarily work at is Disney's Contemporary Resort. Located near Disney's Magic Kingdom, the Contemporary Resort is definitely one of the more exclusive and popular resorts that Disney has to offer. The recreational activities that the Contemporary Resort offers include a pool, an arcade, and a marina. In my job, my duties entail the latter two of these.

Many of Disney's resorts offer a marina to its guests, and the Contemporary Resort is one of these resorts. At our marina, we oversee the rentals of SeaRajcers, Boston Whaler montauks, and pontoon boats to our guests. My job duties at the marina include explaining to guests how to operate our different boats, assisting them within any questions and concerns, loading them onto their boats and bringing them back in when they return. Also included within my job duties at the marina are explaining all safety procedures and rules to guests, including getting the guests to sign waivers and release forms before they can use our boats and instructing them to get the proper life jackets to wear during their time on the boats. When we are not dealing with guests,

## Role of Sports & Recreation

our main duty is to keep the marina and the boats as clean as we can. The Contemporary Resort also houses an arcade, and this falls under the area of Recreation as well. While there are not quite as many responsibilities in the arcade as there are at the marina, the arcade is an important job too. Our main duties in the arcade are to assist guests with how the arcade operates, handle any cash transactions, refill each game with tickets, and help guests redeem prizes for the tickets they win from the games. All of our duties are aimed at pleasing our guests, and this is something that Disney does in a variety of areas.

I was not even aware of all the recreational opportunities that Disney World has to offer prior to when I arrived down here. I, of course, knew about the parks like the Magic Kingdom and Epcot, but I had no idea that many of the resorts had boats that their guests could rent. Disney's recreational opportunities do not seem to be as well-known as some other things that Disney offers. One reason for this is probably the vast amount of renown and success that Disney has enjoyed in the entertainment industry. As most people around the world are probably aware of, Disney has made its presence felt in the entertainment industry for decades and continues to do so even today. Disney is "ranked #65 on the Fortune 500 list, and out of all the entertainment companies ranked in the Fortune 500, Disney is ranked #1" (money.cnn.com). From the Disney Channel to movies like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and The Lion King, it is not hard to recognize the clout that Disney carries within the entertainment industry.

What may not be quite as recognizable is Disney's success within the world of sports. Sports probably was not within the original plans of Disney World, but Disney has certainly morphed into the sports world and established its place there as well. The biggest claim that Disney has in the sports world is its majority ownership of ESPN. ESPN is, of course, regarded as the top sports network in the United States and perhaps the entire world. The most notable

## Role of Sports & Recreation

sports feature on the grounds of Disney World is the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex. This facility is one of the finest in its kind in the country. It hosts numerous tournaments in a variety of different sports throughout the year. Its most notable operation is involved with professional sports, and it is Spring Training for the Atlanta Braves of Major League Baseball (MLB). Disney World has also had somewhat of a more indirect effect on sports in the city of Orlando as a whole as well. The city of Orlando has one professional sports franchise-the Orlando Magic of the National Basketball Association (NBA). A major reason that Orlando was able to obtain the Magic is due in large part to the presence of Disney World in the city. Throughout the years, Disney has certainly realized the entertainment value that sports can provide, and they have done their best to build on this fact. Disney has definitely made an impact on levels of sports, from amateur athletics to professional athletics, and through these accomplishments, they have also improved their reputation in the field of entertainment. Disney's decision to broaden its horizons into the sports world has furthered its status as the world's top entertainment company through incorporating recreational activities, its association with ESPN, and has had significant impacts on sports in the city of Orlando as well.

Walt Disney World is obviously most well-known for its for its four main parks: The Magic Kingdom, Disney's Hollywood Studios, Disney's Animal Kingdom, and Epcot. These four parks are obviously the main attractions at Disney World. The popularity that these parks have gained come from the various rides they offer, the atmosphere that they convey, the shows and exhibits that they provide, and many other aspects. For instance, Magic Kingdom is best known for Cinderella's Castle, the iconic figure that is seen on many Disney commercials and other memorabilia. Epcot is best known for the "golf ball structure at its entrance, which is actually the Spaceship Earth ride, and for its World Showcase exhibit, which is a collection of

## Role of Sports & Recreation

pavilions housing shops, attractions, and restaurants from a number of different countries, such as Mexico, Germany, and the United Kingdom” (<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/parks/epcot/>). Hollywood Studios is known for the Terror of Terror ride, and Animal Kingdom is probably best known for its Wild Africa Trek, which is basically a safari-style tour. Along with these attractions are two water parks, and the Downtown Disney area, which is filled with numerous shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues. If a person were to just go off of these facts, they would probably not believe that Disney had any associations with the field of Recreation at all. Disney does not certainly hide their recreational activities by any stretch, but one has to look just a little deeper to find these activities.

Along with the parks that Disney provides, they also provide a great number of resorts for their guests to stay at during their time at the resort. Just about all of these resorts offer some sort of recreational activity. Some of these activities include jogging trails, swimming pools, playgrounds, and arcades. One of the more popular recreational activities that some (not all) of the resorts offer is watercraft rentals. Some of the resorts have a marina that guests can rent numerous amounts of watercraft equipment to use. At these marinas, such as the one that I work at, guests can rent SeaRacers, Boston Whaler Montauks, and pontoons. Through an outside company, guests can also participate in activities such as jet-skiing and parasailing. With the large amounts of lakes and other bodies of water that Disney consists of, it is easy to see how they have taken advantage of this and are able to provide their guests with a large amount of outdoor and aquatic activities.

Aquatic activities are not the only sporting and recreational opportunities that Disney offers, though. The next most prominent recreational activity that Disney has to offer is golf. Walt Disney World has five golf courses to offer to its guests. They are: “Magnolia, Palm,

## Role of Sports & Recreation

Osprey Ridge, Lake Buena Vista, and Oak Trail” (<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/golf/>).

Throughout the past decade, these five golf courses have received many awards and been recognized as amongst the best golf courses in the country. These accolades include, but are not limited to: “2008-2009 Silver Medal Golf Resort from *Golf Magazine*, 2006-2007 Gold Medal Golf Resort from *Golf Magazine*, one of America’s Best Resort Courses in the year 2006 from *Golfweek*, and one of the world’s top 75 golf resorts from *Condé Nast Traveler*”

(<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/golf/awards-accolades/>). Many factors have gone into Disney and its golf courses being able to receive these awards. Some of the attributes include the “design, impeccable service, world-class amenities, and general playability”

(<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/golf/awards-accolades/>). Florida’s unique natural environment, plant life, and animal life also play a role in making the golf courses top-notch and world-class. The recognition has even enabled Disney to host an event on the PGA Tour. Walt Disney World has “hosted the Children’s Miracle Network Hospitals Classic for the past forty-one years, which makes it the longest-running PGA Tour event in Central Florida”

(<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/golf/childrens-miracle-network-classic/>). Through the recognition that Disney has gained from golf experts in America and across the world, it is easy to see that they have made a mark on the golf industry.

The last prominent recreational activity that will be discussed is camping. Even though many people may not realize it, Walt Disney World provides interested guests with some very fantastic camping opportunities. Disney’s Fort Wilderness Resort & Campground allows guests to enjoy a more outdoor experience at Disney World. Guests can literally camp out on the campgrounds at Fort Wilderness, or they can stay in cabins. Fort Wilderness is very unique amongst Disney World’s resort because it is the most outdoors-based of Disney’s resorts.

## Role of Sports & Recreation

Because of this, Fort Wilderness provides a large amount of recreational activities, perhaps more than any other resort. Camping is of course the most prevalent recreational activity, as people from Boy Scouts to adults take advantage of the excellent campground. Since the resort is a campground, walking is main way to get around the facility, so the campground has a “2.3-mile exercise trail” for its guests to walk, run, or use however they wish

(<http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/resorts/campsites-at-fort-wilderness-resort/>). Other outdoor recreational activities at Fort Wilderness include fishing, horseback riding, and biking. Also, just like the majority of the other resorts at Disney, Fort Wilderness has a marina from which guests can rent boats to use for certain amounts of time. While it may not be readily thought of, Disney even provides great recreational activities for people that enjoy camping and “the great outdoors.”

The recreational activities at Walt Disney World are tremendous, but the sporting activities do not end there. Disney also has an extremely strong presence within the sports industry specifically. Disney’s strongest claim to fame within the sports industry is its affiliation with ESPN, which stands for Entertainment and Sports Programming Network. Founded in 1979, ESPN has grown into the dominant sports network in the United States and has stretched into many other areas of the world as well. Disney’s affiliation with the network began in 1996. At this time, they “purchased Capital Cities/ABC, and in the process, they picked up an 80 percent stake in ESPN” (Wasko, 2006). In other words, Disney is just the majority owner of ESPN; however, they are not the full owners of the network. Disney’s purchase of ESPN was basically a jumpstart to its leap within the sports realm.

Soon after Disney’s acquisition of ESPN, Disney opened a new sporting arm at Walt Disney World. Known as the Disney’s Wide World of Sports Complex, it opened in 1997 and is

## Role of Sports & Recreation

still one of, if not the premier, sporting complexes in the entire country. The complex, “which is 220 acres,” provides seemingly endless opportunities for athletes of all levels and in numerous sports, from softball to football to gymnastics and many others ([espnwwos.disney.go.com](http://espnwwos.disney.go.com)). Shopping and dining opportunities also exist at the Wide World of Sports Complex. The complex has certainly made its mark on every level of sport, from the amateur level all the way up to the professional level.

Even though the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex has made significant strides in all levels of sports, its most well-known association is in the professional level. The Atlanta Braves of Major League Baseball have used the complex as their spring training facility ever since the complex opened in 1997. In fact, the Braves “are in the middle of a twenty-year contract with the complex to use their facility” (Atkin, 1997). The Braves “play their spring training games at Champion Stadium, which seats about 9,500 people” ([espnwwos.disney.go.com](http://espnwwos.disney.go.com)). One of the better spring training facilities in all of Major League Baseball, Champion Stadium has even been used for even larger baseball events, like actual regular season Major League Baseball games. For instance, the stadium has “hosted regular-season baseball games for the Tampa Bay Rays, and it also was home to six games of the 2006 World Baseball Classic” (Antonen, 2007). Through the Braves and other high-profile baseball events, the complex has proven itself to be a very viable baseball facility.

Baseball is not even close to being the only sport that Wide World of Sports caters to. The complex has two indoor sporting facilities that are adjacent to Champion Stadium. These facilities, known as the HP Field House and the Jostens Center, host a wide variety of indoor sporting events throughout each year. With the headquarters of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) being located in Orlando, some of the major sporting events that these two facilities host

## Role of Sports & Recreation

are AAU-sponsored events, such as AAU basketball. The “opportunity to host events at the complex was actually one of the key reasons that the AAU relocated its headquarters from Indianapolis to Orlando around the time that the complex opened” (Atkin, 1997). The facilities host games throughout the AAU season, which typically lasts from April to August. Another prominent basketball event is “the Old Spice Classic, which a Division 1 Men’s Basketball tournament that takes place during the week of Thanksgiving” (espnwwos.disney.go.com). The tournament is broadcast on ESPN and hosts many of the top teams in the NCAA each season. Other events hosted at the indoor facilities include gymnastics, cheerleading, and volleyball.

Other than the indoor facilities, Wide World of Sports also has a vast array of outdoor facilities. The complex is set up in a way in which every sport is located in a specific section of the complex. For instance, the baseball fields are in one section of the complex, while the softball fields are in another section. For baseball and softball, each of their sections has four full-sized fields each. Some of the other outdoor facilities include “a 10-court tennis complex, a track complex, and a set of multi-purpose fields that can be used for sports such as football, soccer, lacrosse, baseball, and softball” (espnwwos.disney.go.com). Wide World of Sports not only has a grasp on indoor sports, but it has one on outdoor sports as well.

Walt Disney World has almost certainly had an impact on the United States and probably the world as well. More specifically, Walt Disney World has made significant strides in the city of Orlando and the Central Florida region. The presence of Walt Disney World is probably one of the major reasons that Orlando has a professional sports franchise. The franchise, the Orlando Magic of the National Basketball Association (NBA), has been in existence since 1989. A strong argument can be made that this team would not exist without the presence of Disney World. Soon after Disney World opened in 1971, Orlando, understandably, experienced a very

## Role of Sports & Recreation

large growth in its population. The city grew enormously in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, Orlando was “the second-fastest growing city in the Sunbelt during the mid-1980s and had also become the most popular tourist destination in the world” (Foglesong, 2001).

Eventually, the city grew enough to be able to support a professional sports franchise. Sure enough, they were “awarded an NBA franchise for the 1989-1990 season after NBA decided to give the state of Florida two franchises (the other being the Miami Heat), even though the original plan was for the state to just have one. The people of Orlando were actually allowed to suggest names for the team, and one of the suggested names was the Magic, which is the name that team officials ended up choosing”(Silverman, 2012). The name is, of course, largely influenced by the presence of Disney World in the city. The Magic have enjoyed a large amount of success in their history, reaching two NBA Finals. Along the way, they opened up a new arena, the Amway Center, in 2010 and have had the privilege of hosting two NBA All-Star games, with the most recent being the 2012 game. These All-Star games would probably not be possible without Disney World. Since Disney World is such a big tourist destination, it allows the city of Orlando to have a large amount of hotel rooms and convention spaces across the city, many of which are actually located at Disney World. An event like the NBA All-Star Game requires a large number of hotel rooms (in the thousands) because of the many people that flock to the city to see the event. The city of Orlando “has over 100,000 hotel rooms, a figure that grew from 8,000 before the existence of Disney World. This number of hotel rooms is second only to Las Vegas in the country” (Foglesong, 2001). So naturally, the city is a perfect fit to host an event like the NBA All-Star game. This year’s event was seen as a resounding success by everyone involved.

## Role of Sports & Recreation

Even with the mentioning of the hotel rooms, many locals use Disney's facilities as well. For instance, many Boy Scout troops from the Central Florida area will use Fort Wilderness's campgrounds for weekend camping trips. In fact, some people will go as far as to set up an RV at one of the campgrounds and just live out of it for months at a time. Numerous locals just come for a day to use the golf courses or to take a boat out on one of the lakes. Disney World may be known as a tourist destination, but the locals that actually live in Orlando and in the Central Florida certainly do not take the park for granted either.

Even though Disney has made its mark on entertainment and tourism, sports has come a long way in the eyes of the company, and Disney has made its mark in it as well. Disney may not have starting out wanting to be involved in the sports world, but its decision to eventually expand into the sports world has paid major dividends. This decision has brought in a new demographic of people that would not normally be associated with Disney World, and this provides much exposure for the park. For instance, a family that is in Orlando for an AAU tournament at Wide World of Sports can also enjoy a day at the Magic Kingdom. Wide World of Sports not only provides exposure for itself, but it also provides it for the rest of Disney World as well. Disney's decision to broaden its horizons into the sports world has furthered its status as the world's top entertainment company through incorporating recreational activities, its association with ESPN, and has had significant impacts on sports in the city of Orlando as well.

### Walt Disney World Quick Facts

- Opened on October 1, 1971 with the debut of the Magic Kingdom and two hotels.
- Covers 40 square miles, or about the same size as the city of San Francisco or two Manhattan Islands.
- Home to 62,000 employees, or cast members as they are technically called at Disney, making it the largest single-site employer in the United States.
- Consists of four theme parks: The Magic Kingdom, EPCOT Center, Disney's Hollywood Studios, and Disney's Animal Kingdom, and two water parks: Disney's Blizzard Beach and Disney's Typhoon Lagoon.
- Epcot is the largest of the four theme parks, nearly twice the size of the Magic Kingdom.
- Twenty-eight different resorts are on the grounds of Disney World, in addition to the campgrounds at the Fort Wilderness Resort.
- Disney's Animal Kingdom is the largest animal-themed park in the world.
- Summit Plummet at Disney's Blizzard Beach Water Park is the longest, tallest, and fastest water slide on record in the world.

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and <http://disneyworld.disney.go.com>



## Role of Sports & Recreation

### ESPN Wide World of Sports Quick Facts

- Opened in March 1997 as Disney's Wide World of Sports.
- Nearly 2 million amateur athletes, coaches, and spectators visit the complex each year.
- Consists of 220 acres.
- Hosts more than sixty different sports and thousands of sporting events a year.
- Spring training home of the Atlanta Braves of Major League Baseball
- Home of Children's Miracle Network Hospitals Classic, an event on the Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tour and the longest-running PGA Tour event in Central Florida (41 years).
- Client list includes the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), NFL Youth Football, Pop Warner Youth Scholars, Inc., and the Atlanta Braves.

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Role of Sports & Recreation

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