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With NCAA Ban Over, That Greenville Is Back in the Game

By Michael Popke

A YEAR HAS PASSED since the Confederate flag came down and the National Collegiate Athletic Association ended its boycott of predetermined championship sites in South Carolina. That opened the doors for Greenville to bid on NCAA, Southeastern Conference and Atlantic Coast Conference championships.

“It’s really a great time for Greenville and the entire state,” says Robin Wright, senior sales manager for sports at VisitGreenvilleSC. “South Carolina is back in the game again.”

With the flag matter resolved, there are new opportunities for Greenville, including the ability to bid on hosting any of 83 NCAA championships available between 2019-2022. “I can assure you we’re bidding on more than one,” Wright says.

The NCAA’s move coincides with the next evolution of a broad sports marketing campaign in Greenville — or Yeah, THAT Greenville, as the city rebranded itself three years ago. Greenville is the county seat of Greenville County, which has a population of almost 500,000.

VisitGreenvilleSC’s staff calls the city one of the most active places in the coun-

try, with two arenas, world-class soccer, baseball and softball fields, tennis courts, swimming pools, trail and park systems and even an ice rink.

“We rebranded ourselves three years ago, and part of that included ‘Yeah, THAT Greenville,’ because that’s what other people are saying,” Wright explains, adding that there are 36 Greenvilles located in the United States. “We stand out from the pack as THAT Greenville. If you were to visit this city right now, you would be blown away by everything we have to offer. I’ve heard countless people say, ‘Wow — I had no idea.’”

Over the past several years, Greenville’s revitalized downtown area has been ranked among “America’s 10 Best” by *Forbes* magazine. The downtown has been redesigned, and former four-lane roads were

Photo by Bon Secours Wellness Arena/Gwinn Davis Media ©



reduced to two lanes to allow for tree-lined sidewalks, with many quaint shops, boutiques and local eateries beckoning. Paris Mountain is visible throughout the city, and scenic natural locations are abundant.

“People are discovering where Greenville is, who we are, and wondering what we’re going to do next,” Wright says.

Tournament Central

Greenville is doing a lot these days.

For starters, the city welcomed the 2016 National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics Men’s and Women’s Lacrosse National Invationals to Sistine Stadium in May. The event will also return in 2017 to the same facility, which regularly hosts lacrosse, football and soccer and is home to the Greenville Senior High School Red Raiders.

Men’s and women’s lacrosse is in the first year of a two-year process toward becoming an NAIA National Championship sport, and Greenville — where lacrosse is growing — is playing a pivotal role.

From traditional sports such as basketball, softball and soccer to running and cycling to less conventional sports searching for places to play, Greenville welcomes them all.

“I want to get the best tournaments and championships that are going to work for us and the client,” Wright says. “The variety makes it really fun for the community. A lot of people think the only spectators who attend tournaments are friends and family members of the athletes. But people who live here love to attend the events we bring in because of the exciting competition and the quality of our venues.”

Among those venues:

• **Bon Secours Wellness Arena:** A new curtain system, a 360-degree ribbon board, a high-definition video scoreboard, digital menu boards, concourse signage and parking lot upgrades are some of the \$13.1 mil-

Photo courtesy of VisitGreenvilleSC



lion renovations completed within the past three years at Greenville’s signature venue. With seating for 15,000, the multi-purpose facility is an ideal setting for hockey and college basketball events and recently was awarded the 2017 Southeastern Conference Women’s Basketball Tournament for the first time in more than a decade.

• **Fluor Field:** Modeled after Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox, Fluor Field boasts its own “Green Monster” — a 30-foot-high wall in left field equipped with a manual scoreboard — and the outfield dimensions are the same as at Fenway, including “Pesky’s Pole” in right field. Home to the Greenville Drive, a Class A Red Sox affiliate, the stadium seats 5,700 spectators and hosted the Southern Conference Baseball Tournament five times since 2009, including this spring. Fluor Field also is the site of the conference’s 2017 tournament.

• **Latham Baseball Stadium:** Located in the heart of Furman University’s modern athletics complex on one of the nation’s most scenic campuses, Latham Stadium offers seating for 2,000, and is undergoing a series of renovations to enhance both player and fan experiences.

• **Minor Herndon Mickel Tennis Center:** The central building of Furman’s tennis center features four indoor courts, and the complex also boasts an outside stadium court with seating for 400 people and 15 other outdoor courts.

• **Pepsi Softball Stadium:** With seating for 300, this Furman facility offers enclosed brick dugouts, a laser-graded infield, bullpens, two batting cages located down the right field line, a scoreboard and a padded outfield fence.

• **Eugene Stone Soccer Stadium:** Surrounded by a brick and wrought-iron fence, this stadium on the Furman campus provides 3,000 permanent seats, a fully automated scoreboard, a press box, lights and a second-level open-air spectator plaza.

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• **Timmons Arena:** A 100,000-square-foot Furman facility that seats 3,500 people for basketball, the arena features two regulation-size basketball courts, a complete sports medicine facility and a 7,000-square-foot strength and conditioning center.

Working Together

Wright is proud of the complementary working relationship VisitGreenvilleSC has with officials at Furman University, the Bon Secours Wellness Arena and the Southern Conference, which is headquartered in nearby Spartanburg, South Carolina.

In May, a strong contingent from Greenville that included Wright, Furman University Athletic Director Mike Buddie, Southern Conference Senior Associate Commissioner Geoff Cabe and Bon Secours Wellness Arena General Manager Beth Paul traveled to Indianapolis for the NCAA Host Symposium. It was important for the city to be well represented at that event, which is designed for representatives from communities looking to host NCAA championships between 2018 and 2022.

“I think we made a point that we are serious about bringing events to Greenville,” Wright says. “People noticed we were there.”

Greenville also recently introduced what

Wright and her staff refer to as the “Happy G Guy” — an evolution of the destination’s logo that personifies the sports and championships that Greenville hosts. The playful and flexible design has become part of the overall sports campaign, including print, and will be incorporated into as many sporting events as possible, Wright says.

For the NAIA Men’s and Women’s Lacrosse National Invationals, the Happy G was outfitted with a lacrosse helmet and face mask; when other sports come to town, he might be wearing a ball cap or a cycling helmet.

However he appears, the Happy G embodies the spirit of Greenville’s people, the city’s charm and — as VisitGreenvilleSC.com proclaims — “an unexpected contemporary cool” that makes it “one of America’s hottest emerging destinations and fastest-growing cities.”

Downtime from competition in Greenville can easily be filled with a visit to the city’s one-of-a-kind Liberty Bridge at Falls Park on the Reedy — a 345-foot-long, 12-foot-wide structure supported by a single-suspension cable. Falls Park on the Reedy is one of the top 10 parks in the country and is consistently listed in the same rankings as San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park and New York City’s Central Park.

There are several museums, galleries and theaters, too, as well as lakes, rivers and mountains that rival some of the world’s most beautiful natural settings.

Greenville also expects to add another 1,200 hotel rooms by the end of 2017 with the addition of at least six new hotels, bringing the total room availability to more than 10,000, according to Wright.

“That indicates the growth in Greenville,” she says. “It’s just a great place to be right now.” **SDM**



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