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Girls' Sports Pack Economic Punch

By [KATIE THOMAS](#)

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — Ten members of Kirsten Grant's family converged here last week to watch her play in a major youth softball tournament. Her mother, father, sister and brother had driven 13 hours with her from their home in suburban Toronto. Other relatives had traveled from as far as Salt Lake City. During lulls in play, they all went shopping and visited local attractions.

But last year, when Kirsten's older brother, Erik, played on a traveling baseball team, the experience could not have been more different. Parents rarely accompanied the team, he said, and the coach frowned on anything that distracted from the game. "No leisure activity," said Erik, 19. "It was eat, sleep and drink baseball."

As the popularity of youth tournaments has intensified over the past decade, a peculiar trend has emerged: girls' sporting events tend to attract more relatives and generate more revenue for tourism than similar events for boys. And that is drawing increased attention from economic development officials.

"There are far more people who will travel with 12-year-old girls than even 12-year-old boys," said Don Schumacher, executive director of the National Association of Sports Commissions, a trade group that advises communities on attracting sporting events. "And vastly more people will travel with 12-year-old girls than 18-year-old boys."

Although Schumacher said he and others did not keep statistics on the economic impact of girls' sporting events, many of his 500 members nationwide have reported anecdotally that such events are often more lucrative than those for boys. He and others mentioned several possible reasons, including a tendency among parents to be more protective of daughters; a heightened interest in girls' sports; and the increased attendance of mothers at games.

Mika Ryan, president of the Mercer County Sports and Entertainment Commission in New Jersey, said the potential for increased revenue from girls' sporting events was one factor her group evaluated when deciding which events to go after.

"We consider that because one of our priorities is to bring people to our county and put people in our hotels," she said. "It's not like parents love their sons any less, but it is a phenomenon that you see happening."

Mercer County hosted 24 youth sports tournaments last year.

One city [poised to capitalize on the situation is Chattanooga](#), where the mayor, [Ron Littlefield](#), recently unveiled an \$11.8 million softball complex aimed at returning the city to national prominence in the sport.

Kirsten Grant, a 17-year-old catcher, was here to compete in the National Softball Association [Class A Eastern World Series](#), a fast-pitch event for girls' teams in four age brackets, from under-10 to under-16. The event drew 232 teams and roughly 7,500 people, and city officials estimated that visitors would spend \$3.6 million for the week.

Chattanooga once had a reputation for its quality softball facilities, but years of neglect left the fields in poor condition and the city without major tournaments. Littlefield, who was elected in 2005, wanted to revive the sport.

He worked with the city to build a [softball complex](#) on 85 acres next to a former landfill. The Summit of Softball complex has [eight fields](#), with lighting, Webcams and awnings to shelter the bleachers from the sun. The Summit complex, along with a separate 2,500-seat softball stadium, has made the city increasingly attractive to groups like the National Softball Association, which operates tournaments nationwide, said Greta Hayes, the city's assistant director of parks. Already, she said, about 20 youth softball tournaments were scheduled for the city this season. The city held 72 youth sports tournaments last year.

City officials acknowledged that they did not set out to capitalize on the girls' sports market, yet they are grateful for the added revenue that it brings. Three new hotels have opened near the softball complex, and Littlefield said the income from sales and hotel taxes was "a real payback."

At the softball tournament, several parents said that they spent more money, and brought more family, to girls' sporting events.

"I would let my son go off on a team for 20 days, but I don't think I would let my daughter do that," Kirsten's mother, Rosalind Grant, said.

Others said that watching their daughters play was still more of a novelty and more exciting than watching a son. As a result, more relatives tended to travel with girls.

"I think probably with boys, it's expected," said Jay Davis, who traveled from Laurel, Del., to watch his daughters, Hannah and Rachel, as part of a group of 200 players and parents. With girls' games, he said, "you get the dads coaching, you've got the moms in the bleachers."

When both parents accompany a daughter, the other children often go, too. Before long, it is a summer vacation. Several families said they planned to spend \$1,500 to \$3,000 during the tournament.

"When you're here, you tend to do the tourist attractions, you're going to look for entertainment," said Melissa Dowd, who along with her husband traveled from Baton Rouge, La., to cheer on their daughter Abbie. When Abbie wasn't playing, the family visited the local aquarium, checked out the mall and ate in restaurants near Chattanooga's riverfront.

Of course, boys' events can also help local economies. The opening of several youth baseball camps near Cooperstown, N.Y., for example, has transformed the surrounding communities over the past two decades. Parents rent hotel rooms and eat in local restaurants while their sons attend camp, said Deborah Taylor, director of tourism for Otsego County, which includes [Cooperstown](#). "It's a huge economic impact," she said.

But Bobby Dodd, the president and chief executive of the [Amateur Athletic Union](#), a national youth sports

organization, is skeptical of financial comparisons.

“I have three granddaughters,” Dodd said. “They love to shop. But I can tell you my boys darn near love to shop as much as the girls.”

Dodd said that the youth sports events for boys and girls were faring well in the recession, perhaps because parents were reluctant to deny children their soccer or softball tournaments.

Several parents in Chattanooga agreed. Sue Wagner of Plymouth, Mich., traveled with her husband and younger daughter to watch Sarah, 14, compete. She said that her husband had been laid off from his job as a manager in a medical equipment firm in the fall, but that supporting their daughter was never in question. She persuaded her employer, a construction company, to sponsor Sarah.

If things are worse next year, she said, she and her husband will make it work again. “This is our family vacation,” she said.

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