



EMBRACE THE



USA Triathlon's Collegiate Club National Championships in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, highlights how successful teams on and off the course make for a premium multisport event.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER

For adrenaline junkies whose enthusiasm can't be slaked by a single sport, a triathlon is just the ticket. The combination of running, biking and swimming make hearts beat fast and endorphins kick into overdrive.

USA Triathlon, the national governing body for the sport, has been fueling the multisport lifestyle since its founding in 1982. Each year, it sanctions more than 4,300 races and touches more than 500,000 members, making it the largest multisport organization in the world.

With a team of more than 50 full-time staffers, USA Triathlon combines in-depth event experience with community-focused relationship building to grow the sport and deliver resources that empower members of the racing community to reach their full potential.

As event producers, the NGB owns and runs four national championships each year. This year's schedule saw the Duathlon Nationals (run, bike, run) in Greenville, South Carolina; the Age Group Nationals in Cleveland, Ohio; and the Youth and Junior Nationals in West Chester, Ohio.

In April, it held the Collegiate and High School Club National Championships in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. This is the fourth year the "Druid City" has hosted, having previously welcomed teams in 2011, 2012 and 2017. The strong bonds forged between USA Triathlon, Tuscaloosa Tourism and Sports, surrounding municipalities, corporate sponsors and legions of local volunteers make the event a special spot on the calendar for more than 1,700 participating athletes and their coaches, families and friends.

Connect Sports got behind the scenes with the organizers, hosts and one of this year's participants to share an inside look at how the event came together.

BRIAN D'AMICO, EVENT ORGANIZER

Brian D'Amico, director of events at USA Triathlon, says the organization's mission is to inspire and support the entire triathlon community, from juniors all the way up to octogenarians.

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“We have participants in some of our events that are 90-plus years old,” says D’Amico. “Now, that is inspiring.”

D’Amico says returning to Tuscaloosa is special on many levels.

“There’s no other place we’ve held races where you have the main hub [Tuscaloosa Amphitheater] where all the action is,” says D’Amico. “It’s a big draw for the athletes to finish in a stadium, and being so close to the action at any given time is great for team camaraderie.

“The support we get from the city is unparalleled. They really get this event. Between police, DOT, firefighters, lifeguard support, people out patching roads, it’s the total city behind us. Tuscaloosa Tourism and Sports does a build-out schedule for its team that literally details everything each person is doing, working to make sure nothing is missed.”

D’Amico says part of what sets Tuscaloosa apart is the level of advance planning.

“We’ve had biweekly calls for the past year or so,” says D’Amico. “With most cities, it’s usually every month. There are 15 to 20 people on every call making sure everyone is on the same page throughout the entire process. Once we get on-site, we have a big all-city meeting on Tuesday of event week. It is very buttoned down come race day.”

Giving back and community building are important cornerstones in the way USA Triathlon operates. In addition to the economic impact of the event (estimated at more than \$3 million), D’Amico says the NGB wants to make a legacy and leave a positive impression on the city.

“We want to leave with all parties happy,” says D’Amico.

For instance, Tuscaloosa Kids Triathlon was held in conjunction with a free clinic last year. This year, the same kids’ race occurred a day later, exposing more than 200 high school student athletes to the University of Alabama and its facilities through campus tours.

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city,” says D’Amico. “Everyone in the city knows what’s happening, which is great not only for the event support and their athletes, but for the entire sport.”

TUSCALOOSA TOURISM AND SPORTS, HOST

The iconic Iron Bowl, the Alabama-Auburn football game, rocks Tuscaloosa’s sports tourism world every other year. But Sarah-Elizabeth Heggem, event operations director for Tuscaloosa Tourism and Sports, knows her city is an ideal destination for hosting nonpigskin sporting events as well.

“Tuscaloosa is built for nontraditional sporting events, particularly triathlons or duathlons,” says Heggem. “The Black Warrior River runs straight through downtown with Jack Warner Parkway built parallel providing a perfect setup for a triathlon. The run and bicycle courses are right alongside the swim course; there are incredible views of the city; and the finish leads right into the centrally located Tuscaloosa Amphitheater.”

Beyond Alabama football, Tuscaloosa hosts more than 125 sporting events annually with an economic impact per event ranging from \$500,000 to \$6 million, according to Heggem. The city has attracted several

air shows, including the Blue Angels and the South Regionals for US Quidditch in February.

USA Triathlon’s Club Nationals are a major event for Tuscaloosa, generating more than 725 room nights and contributing to a spring economic boon.

“Our community partners make a difference,” says Heggem. “This is a team effort, with constant communication with the university, the city of Tuscaloosa, our neighboring city of Northport, and our corporate, community and volunteer partners.

“Nucor Steel is a great example of how local businesses support the race,” says Heggem. “They are located along the river on Jack Warner Parkway, and the event hampers access to their facilities. Rather than be upset about this, they embrace it. They have signs encouraging the athletes, turn out many volunteers and even put out port-o-lets.”

Heggem notes working with USA Triathlon helps keep the tourism team at the top of their game.

“They are great to work with because their attention to detail is impeccable,” says Heggem. “We are well-versed on executing large-scale football events, though USAT has educated us on triathlons. They are thorough and excellent communicators. They want the best outcomes for athletes, and that’s what we aim to deliver.”

SEAN HARRINGTON, PARTICIPANT

University of California, Santa Barbara Triathlon club member Sean Harrington’s second year competing in the USA Triathlon’s Club National Championships in Tuscaloosa proved to be the charm, as he captured his first victory in the men’s overall race.

“This was my second year at Tuscaloosa and my sixth time competing in a USAT-sanctioned event,” Harrington says. “It’s a fantastic race setup. The city is welcoming with all the details you take for granted leading to a high-quality event. The parking is close by; the roads are all closed off; the course has great signage; and police were there to control the intersections. It was simply very well organized.”

Harrington says he enjoys competing at the highest level and the team camaraderie.

“I started with triathlon about six years ago, when I came to graduate school at UCSB,” says Harrington. “While I ran in college as an undergraduate, I wanted to do something a little bit new and unique when I came to Santa Barbara. I still wanted to compete and looked up the triathlon team, started with them, and found myself enjoying both the team environment and the new challenges of the sport.”

Harrington says he competes annually in about 10 triathlons and finds the communication from USA Triathlon particularly thorough.

“USAT puts out a brochure in advance with all the details you’d ever want to know regarding rules, parking, schedule and more,” says Harrington. “They have concise but informative meetings on-site and cover all that matters. The course is well-fenced; the transition areas are coned off for the bikes; and it is very clear where the course is.”

Beyond his first win, what will Harrington remember most about Tuscaloosa? “The city has some great barbecue,” says Harrington. “You definitely don’t get that in Santa Barbara.”