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Sports Business

Greensboro hosts first pickleball tournament at coliseum as city adds to sports tourism portfolio



Players compete in the pickleball game.

HOPE ZHU



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Story Highlights

- Greensboro hosts its first pickleball tournament, attracting 209 players.
- City invested \$450,000 in portable pickleball courts for events.
- Greensboro has two more pickleball events on the calendar this summer.

Steve Wright never thought he'd be spending his week driving an hour each way from Lee County to Greensboro for a pickleball tournament.

But on a gray morning under drizzle, he rolled into the First Horizon Greensboro Coliseum's Special Events Center, paddle in hand and ready for his next doubles match in the 55–59 age bracket.

“You have to caution people about playing pickleball. It doesn't ever stop,” Wright said, “I had no idea two years ago that I would be traveling all week [for the tournament]. But wouldn't you say that it's more addictive than people have expected?”

Wright is one of 209 players registered for Greensboro's first major pickleball tournament, a five-day qualifier for the USA Pickleball National Championship. The tournament runs May 28 to June 1 and is expected to attract roughly 2,500 visitors, according to the Greensboro Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. There is no admission charge for spectators.

The convention bureau initially estimated that over 1,200 athletes would take part, but the actual field of about 200 is below 20% of that prediction, according to the USA Pickleball events website. “For a city the size of Greensboro, 300 players is a success,” stated Jose Moreno, chief marketing and strategy officer at USA Pickleball.

Despite the lower-than-expected turnout, officials maintain their expectation of a \$2 million total economic impact from travel, accommodations, and local expenditures.

While USA Pickleball is expected to draw top athletes from around the country for its national championship, the Greensboro tournament was open to all ages and skill levels, with the hope of creating a path for amateur players to participate in the national event this November in San Diego. The Greensboro tournament is the only event of its kind on the East Coast this year.



The first day of the USA Pickleball tournament at Greensboro Coliseum.

HOPE ZHU

Building a court, and a business base

Long known for hosting NCAA and ACC basketball tournaments, Greensboro is now diversifying its events portfolio with emerging sports like pickleball, wrestling, and gymnastics.

“We are always looking for the next big thing to help Tournament Town grow and evolve,” said [Henri Fourrier](#), president and CEO of the convention bureau. “Pickleball is a natural fit.”

Fourrier told TBJ [last November](#) that the total cost of the courts was about \$450,000.

Sarah Lanse, marketing director at Visit Greensboro, and Caleb Wilson, sports sales manager at GACVB, began watching the sport closely as interest surged after the pandemic. They pitched Greensboro as a tournament site during trade shows with USA Pickleball, backed by research on rising player numbers and facility needs.

“We looked at what product would be the best fit in terms of being used portably here at the complex, weighed our best needs, and landed on what we did,” Lanse said. “Once we had that research, the next thing was to market the capabilities that we had—the number of courts, the space—and show what we could support.”

The GACVB board approved the purchase of 40 portable courts to use across Coliseum events, funded through Guilford County’s hotel occupancy tax. Thirty-four are now in use.

“That’s the part about tourism,” Lanse said. “The stuff we’re able to invest in is not based on local taxpayers. (Hotel guests) pay in that tax, and while visitors

are in town, they're benefiting a lot of local establishments– restaurants, entertainment, attractions.”

USA Pickleball is one of several national governing bodies the city has worked to attract. The organization has hosted 14 Golden Ticket Event qualifiers across the country so far. According to its tax filings, USA Pickleball's revenue has [nearly doubled](#) each year since 2021.



Image: Sarah Lanse of Visit Greensboro

Players compete in the pickleball game.

SARAH LANSE OF VISIT GREENSBORO

For Greensboro, it's more than a game

The convention bureau worked with the Greensboro Sports Foundation and the Coliseum Complex to recruit national tournament organizers. Richard Beard, the foundation's president and CEO, said the pickleball tournament is part of a larger strategy to attract revenue-generating events.

“People travel, and that’s what we’re looking for—no different than youth sports,” Beard said. “Families stay overnight in hotels. And we think that pickleball is going to be one of those opportunities.”

According to USA Pickleball, 55% of players registered in Greensboro came from out of state, including competitors from as far as Canada. Most are from within a six-hour drive.

The coliseum already has two more pickleball events on the calendar: the BODYARMOR State Games of North Carolina (June 26–29) and the Play Team Pickleball East Coast Championship (July 12–13).

Beyond pickleball, the city is also investing in other tournament-ready gear. Wrestling mats, for example, for the N.C. Amateur Sports tournament in late June, and equipment for the upcoming gymnastics regionals.

“The hardest thing is just figuring out the schedule,” Beard said. “But we’re making sure the world knows we’ve made this investment and have these courts here. Because it’s a real advantage to know they don’t have to ship them in. We already have them: best courts, best nets, best barriers.”