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People wearing masks walk downtown Fort Worth, Texas, on July 20, 2020, amid the coronavirus pandemic.

FORT WORTH BUILT IT, NOW, WILL YOU COME?

Arrival of NCAA Tournament is start of Fort Worth's bid to be a bigger sports market

By Mac Engel

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

Fort Worth, Texas

Fort Worth's attempt to become a "major league" city will be done through events not associated with the conventional major league brands.

For the last 30 years, cities all over the United States have pumped taxpayer money into professional sports teams, and sports leagues, in hopes of attracting teams, which in turn attracts tourists and businesses to create commerce and raise the profile of their region.

Whether the plan actually works, and therefore whether it is worth the investment, is debatable. Such plans are traditionally criticized by economists, with the prevailing view being that these proposals benefit the team and the sports league much more than the city and its tax base.

Building a city through sports is an approach that Fort Worth leaders have passed on for years.

The completion of Dickies Arena, a lovely facility, but

in today's sports landscape is seen as being too small to attract an NBA or NHL club, and now the prospect of building a soccer venue in north Fort Worth, says the city is trying to use sports as at least a complement to build up the city rather than a centerpiece.

Fort Worth built it, now, will you come? The evaluation process starts now.

On March 17 and 19, Fort Worth and Dickies Arena will host a total of six first- and second-round games in this year's NCAA men's basketball tournament.

The city actually won this bid when the contractors broke on the arena in 2017. The arena has hosted other sporting events before this tournament, but COVID-19 was a ratchet into everything. COVID made it nearly impossible to evaluate whether this plan is "working."

"We had so much momentum and it was basically two years ago that this all shut down during the [American Athletic Conference] tournament," said Matt Homan, the

president and GM of Multipurpose Arena Fort Worth, the company that operates Dickies Arena. "Through COVID, this market responded well, and the market is supporting the facility. We are going after the marquee events."

As much as schools and health care should be the reasons businesses relocate from one city to another, ultimately the real influencers on those big decisions are often the "toys," like the presence of a sports team.

(Oh, and tax incentives.)

When an owner of a company considers moving, invariably one of the reasons they relocate is "Things To Do" in that community.

Despite efforts by Fort Worth city leaders to recruit new companies to town, the larger portion of the business growth in north Texas remains in the eastern portion of DFW.

It's not a coincidence there are more "things to do" in places such as Dallas, Frisco, etc. And a sports team, or an event, qualifies as a "thing to do."

Dickies Arena has hosted a handful of regular season, non-conference college basketball games featuring the likes of TCU, Texas A&M, USC, Gonzaga and Virginia. The attendance figures of those games have been blah.

Attendance for the U.S. Olympic wrestling trials in April of 2021 was good. Attendance for the U.S. Gymnastics championships in June, which featured star Simone Biles, was so bad it was almost awkward.

The venue was the centerpiece to lure the Professional Bull Riders' World Finals away from Las Vegas to Fort Worth as its permanent home.

It's an event, a thing to do, but the rodeo remains the niche of the niche. The same now is beginning to be true of auto sports.

The NASCAR and IndyCar races at Texas Motor Speedway in north Fort Worth no longer attract the crowds the sport once did 20 years ago.

For years the city was reluctant to give TMS much of anything, much to the frustration of the track's

administrators. There was no real relationship between the two.

The Panther City lacrosse team is in its first season at Dickies Arena, and these ventures take at least a decade before anyone knows whether they've worked.

Next up for Fort Worth is the prospect of the city helping to build a soccer complex in the north part of the city. The venue could potentially be the home to the former Austin Bold FC of the United Soccer League Championship League.

A new venue could also be the home to a franchise in the USL Super League, America's latest attempt at supporting a pro women's soccer league.

In the next year or so expect Dickies Arena to host some Dallas Stars and Dallas Mavericks preseason games.

For the first time, Fort Worth is around all of this.

Whether it works, and leads to more, that evaluation process starts now.

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Osaka taunted at Indian Wells

By Helene Elliott

Los Angeles Times

Naomi Osaka, distraught and in tears after a spectator yelled, "Naomi, you suck," after she had lost the first game of her second-round match against Veronika Kudermetova at the BNP Paribas Open on Saturday night, said the taunt had shaken her because it reminded her of racially charged insults that were directed at Serena and Venus Williams at the same tournament in 2001.

Osaka, a four-time Grand Slam singles champion who has been

open about her mental health struggles and took a break from competition last year, never recovered her poise Saturday at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden. Kudermetova won the match, 6-0, 6-4.

Venus and Serena Williams and their father, Richard, were jeered here in 2001 after Venus scheduled semifinal matchup at the last minute because of a knee injury. The crowd booed Serena when she took the court for the final against Kim Clijsters and booed Venus and Richard when they went to their seats to watch

Serena contest the final. Serena didn't play here again until 2015. Venus returned in 2016.

After hearing the shout from a suite in Stadium 1 on Saturday, Osaka asked the chair umpire to be given the microphone to address the crowd. That request was denied. She also spoke to a tournament supervisor after the first set.

Osaka was allowed to speak after the match. When she did, she paused several times to gather her thoughts.

"I just wanted to say thank you. I feel like I've cried enough on camera,"

said Osaka, whose father is Black and mother is Japanese.

"To be honest, I've gotten heckled before. It didn't really bother me, but it's like, heckled here. I've watched a video of Venus and Serena getting heckled here and if you've never watched it, you should watch it. And I don't know why, but it went into my head and it got replayed a lot.

"I'm trying not to cry. I just want to say thank you and congratulations [to Kudermetova]. Just thank you."

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Naomi Osaka of Japan addresses the crowd after losing to Veronika Kudermetova of Russia during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on March 12 in Indian Wells, California.