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## COLORADO SPRINGS IS AN APEX OF SPORTS MARKETING GOLD



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Steeped in the eastern foothills of Pikes Peak, Colorado Springs is an apex of sports marketing gold.

Some of the Springs's natural aesthetics include quaint neighboring towns like Manitou Springs, natural wonders like the Garden of the Gods and 300 days of sunshine per year amidst the backdrop of the Front Range of the southern Rocky Mountains.

Long known for its sports infrastructure, 24 national governing bodies including the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) are headquartered in Colorado Springs, which has since further enhanced its sports prowess the last decade. In 2013, plans were unveiled for the near-complete City for Champions Initiative, a quartet of projects marked by five iconic venues, including the acclaimed United States Olympic & Paralympic Museum (USOPM). A year later, Colorado Springs joined forces with the Ragain family, Visit Colorado Springs and many other partners in bringing a United Soccer League professional soccer team, the Colorado Switchbacks, to the city.

Moreover in 2015, Colorado Springs received support from the USOPC to use "Olympic City USA" as its municipal marketing tagline, a destination-defining moment that resonates proudly.

"People know us now as a sports performance destination and all of these people who are performing on the global stage for sports are coming here for competitions, like the marathon up Pikes Peak," said Alexea Veneracion, communications manager at Visit Colorado Springs. "Only the elite athletes can do that—it's extremely difficult—so they're coming here for those very specific purposes where they can showcase their athleticism, but they and their families really want to experience all there is to do here."

Debuting in 2020, the Pikes Peak Apex is a four-day mountain bike challenge with a vision of making

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A Q&A with  
Andy Hansen,  
Chief Marketing  
Officer, Triple  
Crown Sports

## TRENDING IN SPORTS

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Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak Region an internationally recognized endurance destination. Thirteen partner organizations support the Apex, a fundraiser for trail stewardship and sustainability and effort that is directed by a former events executive at Colorado Springs-based USA Cycling.

"We have one of the largest purses in North America—last year, we had the largest purse for a mountain biking event in the United States," said Cheryl McCullough, senior director of sports and events at Visit Colorado Springs. "That event was bred from another event that did not happen. Another organization was looking at us for the North American Mountain Biking Championships, but it didn't work out and we decided we are going to do our own."

In a place where you can climb a mountain and eat lunch with an Olympian within minutes of each other, experiences are everywhere for residents and visitors, something that Fort Collins, Colorado-based Triple Crown Sports knows firsthand.

Since 2007, McCullough has worked with Triple Crown Sports on the Challenge at Pikes Peak, an acclaimed youth baseball tournament that uses nine venues throughout the region. For Triple Crown Sports, destinations like Colorado Springs are ideal places to promote events.

"We focus on finding great destinations that either have a lot to offer or is tied into another event. The College World Series in Omaha or the Women's College World Series in Oklahoma City are good examples of where we've tied in with another event and created this destination spot for teams to come in, play ball and enjoy some of the other things that are going on," said Andy Hansen, chief marketing officer at Triple Crown Sports. "Same thing with some of these destinations like Colorado Springs, Park City, Myrtle Beach, where it's almost like a vacation spot for teams."

Take Two: There are Many Positive Signs about the Health of Sports

## GREATNESS FOR EVERYONE

For five years, the Olympic City USA campaign has been dedicated to amplifying messaging about Colorado Springs as a natural training ground for elite sports performance thanks to its high concentration of headquarter national governing bodies and event owners, continual facilities investments and mainstay venues like the USOPC Training Center. Still, the pandemic provided a reset button for tourism and event marketers, as data showed a rise in a preference to travel regionally, to be outdoors, and to experience local.

"We're really capitalizing what we've deemed as nerd recreationists\_\_people who are looking to experience and learn and nerd out on the things that they are passionate about or interested in, and getting them to do that with a taste through a local's perspective," said Melissa Williams, director of marketing at Visit Colorado Springs. "There's a lot to balance to make sure that's sustainable as well, so making sure we're targeting through our advertising efforts for the right people to come for longer, rather than just screaming to the masses to all come at the same time."

While you can still pick up a souvenir, the City for Champions venues are built for the immersive experience and target marketing. The program's five venues include the Hybl Sports Medicine and Performance Center, Gateway Visitor Center at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), Colorado Sports and Event Center (Robson Arena and Weldner Field), and the USOPM\_\_where the interactive badge each individual wears coupled with the way he or she traverses the museum's halls shapes a customized experience that, according to McCullough, can move you to tears.

At the Hybl Sports Medicine and Performance Center, you may see Paralympic track athletes training or one of 12,000 visiting patients in town for a knee replacement. Robson Arena, home of Colorado College men's hockey,

and Weidner Field, home of the USL's Colorado Switchbacks, both opened in 2021 as multi-purpose complexes that better connect and brand downtown Colorado Springs. The USAFA Gateway Visitor Center, projected to draw more than 800,000 visitors annually, is scheduled for completion in 2022 and will feature flexible indoor and open-air event spaces including a 250-seat theater and an iFly indoor skydiving center available to USAFA trainees and visitors.

"We're really touting the things you can do that inspire greatness that don't have to be Olympic related, but really make us feel like we can own that moniker in a sense," Williams said. "Welcome to Olympic City USA where greatness is in everyone, whether it's pushing yourself to the limits on the (Manitou) Incline or just enjoying yourself on a leisurely hike in the scenic beauty that is literally around every corner."

## BE THERE, BE TARGETED AND STAY WHILE LONGER

Triple Crown Sports hosted its first slow-pitch softball tournament in 1982, and has since diversified into a sports event brand operating more than 200 annual events from the youth to the college ranks. In addition to its premium destination events, Triple Crown Sports' business model includes its own lodging platform, a sports network and a full-service public relations and marketing department.

"Since we've had a focused effort on our digital brand, we've had more outside brands reach out to us because the youth sports industry doesn't have that," Hansen says. "There are only a few groups that have the platforms and following that we have, because we are focused on it. Other groups have wanted to be a part of that because they recognize it. The youth sports industry is such a fast-growing industry that larger brands want to be a part of it."

The Triple Crown Sports brand has continued to be there, front and center, including when live events came

to a halt last year. Hansen and the team—which grew from Hansen solely to a staff of full-time content writers, producers, photographers and videographers—leveraged virtual chats with Triple Crown Sports’ founder Dave King to help keep the company’s presence intact. As the U.S. reopened for events, TCS has also been able to get back to a marketing mix of email targeting and engaging across social and digital channels.

“We focus still heavily on email campaigns that tie in graphics, photos and video to showcase the destination and different experiences these teams will have,” says Hansen. “After that, it’s the social/digital side which we use not only to market. What we’ve found is people don’t want to be marketed to about a brand. They want to engage with the brand, have a reason to follow it, so we try to focus our posts on engaging with the customer, telling stories, highlighting customers.”

Seeking high levels of engagement also shapes the Visit Colorado Springs marketing strategy, especially as people have stayed closer to home since 2020, during which time destinations became conduits to the attractions and events within a few miles or steps of your front door. And with sustainability at top of mind in the Springs, leveraging local tour guides to support leisure travel has become a natural complement to the Visit Colorado Springs group targeting process, which prioritizes the right fit and longer stay.

“We have a lot more attractions and restaurants and things that have opened, even through the pandemic, which has been really impressive for our destination,” Veneracion said. According to McCullough, the Triple Crown Sports team is that right fit because it is turnkey and responsible, where “they come in, they run their event, they keep the diamonds and complexes in the condition that they were in when they arrived, often times in better condition.”

“That was something that was born out of 2018 (destination strategic planning) — we were really looking at focusing on sustainable tourism, not becoming this overpopulated, over-tourist destination where we can actually protect and maintain our natural assets and keep our community members happy,” Williams adds. “Focusing less on inviting more and focusing more on inviting the right people for longer amounts of time was really what started that conversation. And as COVID started, it just kind of solidified that for us. It’s really important to be sustainable in how we’re advertising and be responsible that way as well.”



U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Museum in Colorado Springs

## MARKETING FOR PERFORMANCE

From number of events booked and room nights to average advertising value and media mentions to the number of teams registered, there are ample marketing metrics to measure.

But what really moves the buying decision process from consideration to consumer?

“With our business, it can take six, seven, eight different touchpoints before a team makes a decision,” said Hansen. “For us to go, hey it was the email, it was the

social post, the phone call, it was this, it's hard. For some of these events, it's a 30, 40 thousand dollar decision for the team once you factor in travel, lodging, food and other activities."

While Triple Crown Sports tracks email opens and attempts to be everywhere in marketing, it attributes longstanding success to running high-quality events, word of mouth and relationships.

"Our event directors are almost like mini marketers themselves. They run the event, but they are also responsible for marketing their events," Hansen said. "Their focus on marketing is the relationship building, through text message, email, phone calls or in-person meetings. That's their world and they're dedicated 100 percent to that style."

Flush with amenities, Visit Colorado Springs leverages its marketing platforms by focusing first on what its consumers can do only in Colorado Springs, which helps sustain McCullough's sales efforts.

"When you look at the little seeds that you drop, there's future tourism with every event that you bring into your area," McCullough says. "With every baseball event, soccer event, Olympic Team Trials, it doesn't matter, with our destination."

there is always a future tourism piece to that. When you're looking at sports tourism, our destination really fits that model."

From America's Mountain to Olympic City USA—the only place where Team USA short-track gold medalist Apolo Anton Ohno might cruise past you while ascending the Manitou Incline, a fond memory for Williams—the Colorado Springs sports marketing reality has become one of dreams lived.

"It was naturally such a good fit for the organizations that are based here, and it really aligned with the City



for Champions project as well, which came about a little before that and gave an increase in Colorado Springs as a sports performance destination," says Williams. "It's something that we feel really fortunate to be able to call ourselves. There's a lot of local brand recognition that a lot of the community recognizes themselves as Olympic City USA, and we're starting to get that regional and national recognition as well."

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By Nick Povalitis, Plus Seven Company

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