

SPORTS



SIDELINES

ANDY HALL

TDC provides needed help for big events

The Bassmasters are here. So are 80-some top-flight athletes from 16 states – some from as far away as Massachusetts and California – for the Iron Horse Endurance Runs based in Florahome. So, too, are nationally renowned junior college baseball programs for the Capital City Bank Classic at St. Johns River State College.

Busy weekend.

Hundreds of competitors, not to mention family, friends, fans and officials – all needing places to sleep, eat, buy gas and all manner of incidentals. Volunteers are needed to help the organizers. In some cases, financial help is needed, too.

Into the breach, on weekends like these, steps the Putnam County Tourist Development Council, an agency of the Putnam County Commission administered by the chamber of commerce.

It is not just a busy weekend. It has been a busy week. Last fall, when the county played host to about 350 competitors in a two-day FLW bass tournament, the average stay was seven days with some headquartered here for as many as a dozen days, according to chamber president Dana Jones.

She's been getting calls this week about places to stay.

"Between the BASS Elite, the baseball tournament and the Iron Horse Triathlon, we're almost at capacity," she said Wednesday. "We contacted hotels around the county and they'd say, 'We might have one or two rooms.'"

Volunteers are up as early as 3 a.m. to help out the Bassmasters with everything from parking, to welcoming and various setup duties including making sure boat marshals are down at the docks in time to leave bright and early with the anglers. Putnam Blueways and Trails workers set up watering stations and rest stops for the Iron Horse event, Jones said.

The level of activity on this, the first weekend of February, is a far cry from just 10 years ago, when the TDC was seldom called upon for sporting events aside from a handful of golf and fishing tournaments, mostly confined to the springtime.

"Ten years ago, we were looking at attracting events at times besides March. Now we have things year-round between the FLW, the Jarvis Williams (high school basketball tournament) over the holidays, PAL boxing, softball tournaments, baseball and golf," Jones said.

The three baseball tournaments this month at SJR State are not labor-intensive for the Tourist Development Council, but its financial support is critical and Jones said the TDC is happy to oblige.

"The TDC has a grants program where they award grants to events that place significant heads in beds. If you're helping people that are going to put people in hotels for three days, that's a win-win proposition," Jones said.

The TDC came to the rescue in more ways than one in the case of the Kevin Miller Classic last weekend, at SJR State.

The traditional host, Gulf Coast State College in Panama City, sustained millions of dollars in damage from Hurricane Michael last fall and its tradition-rich baseball program was in a struggle for survival, never mind staging an event named in memory of one of its former players and involving five teams from three states.

"The school was closed for a month. They lost six weeks of practice. They lost their uniforms, their batting cages – basically, they're starting over. The housing situation has been a real problem. They've got six and seven guys staying in an apartment and sleeping on air mattresses," said SJR State baseball coach and athletic director Ross Jones, a friend of Gulf Coast coach Mike Kandler.

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Jones, his baseball players and Marti Littlefield's St. Johns softball players were assisting at a baseball-softball clinic hosted by the college and staged by the city of Palatka back in December when Kandler called Jones wondering if the Vikings might be able to host the Kevin Miller Classic for 2019.

"We wanted to help them, but putting on a tournament there's a lot of cost in baseballs and umpires alone," Jones said. "(Palatka Mayor) Terrill Hill was listening to the conversation and he said, 'How much do you need?' He took his cell phone and called Dana Jones and told him what and told her what was going on and how these teams were coming in. He hung up and said, 'You tell them we'll get it done.'"

The application process was sped up, the grant secured, the tournament came to town and

just for good measure, the Vikings went 4-0.

"We couldn't have done it without Terrill and the help the TDC gave us. We put five teams here and fans and parents on a weekend there wasn't anything going on in Palatka," said Ross Jones, no relation to the chamber executive.

He wasn't the only one who was grateful.

"I've been on Twitter and seen where former Gulf Coast players who played with Kevin Miller expressed their appreciation for keeping the thing going," Ross Jones said.

By the way, the Gulf Coast baseball team is back here this weekend for the Capital City Bank Classic along with Miami Dade, Broward, Northwest Florida State and Florence-Darlington Tech of South Carolina. That's a lot of heads in beds.

Putnam County and the Tourist Development Council welcome them, one and all.

Andy Hall is sports editor of the Palatka Daily News.