



Episode 223 – John David

Intro: This is Brand USA Talks Travel, elevating the conversation about international travel to the United States. Here's your host, Mark Lapidus.

Mark Lapidus [0:09]: So what was it like growing up with two first names? I mean, it could go either way with you.

John David [0:14]: Yeah, no doubt, Mark. I always told my dad, we were just one letter off and things would have been so much easier.

Mark Lapidus [0:20]: I have a son named David, so this may be a little confusing for me. Today we're joined by John David, President and CEO of the Sports Events and Tourism Association. Prior to joining Sports ETA - love the name, by the way - John was the Chief Strategy Officer of USA BMX, and he's also held roles at American Bicycle Association and the National Bicycle League. I'm seeing a trend here, John. Bicycles, bicycles, bicycles. By the way, I ride between ten and twelve miles a day, so I'm right there with you.

John David [0:46]: Well then you know the love, the passion.

Mark Lapidus [0:47]: Oh, I need a new bike though. Who doesn't need a new bike that rides a bike, right?

John David [0:51]: Exactly.

Mark Lapidus [0:52]: Welcome to Brand USA Talks Travel! It's exciting to have you here.

John David [0:54]: Honestly, it's an honor. I love the podcast, and just can't wait to have this conversation.

Mark Lapidus [0:58]: As my listeners already know, John, I'm bullish on sports tourism, so we are here today to discuss sports-related travel. But first, tell me and our listeners about Sports ETA. I'm sure not everybody in the world has heard of the organization.

John David [1:10]: Yeah, the Sports Events and Tourism Association was founded almost 33 years ago, actually originally as the National Association of Sports Commissions. There were twelve founding sports commissions across the United States that were working to bring sporting events in, to cultivate local sporting events and really support at-risk sports and athletes in their own community. They got together. They needed that peer-to-peer networking, they needed that education. So again, we're founded as the

National Association of Sports Commissions, and shortly thereafter, really a lot of CVB's started to really understand the opportunity within sports tourism. So we started to see our membership really transform, and it really blossomed into a lot of CVBs, traditional DMOs that were members of the Association. Then we opened up the doors to our event rights holders. Those are all of our sporting event planners, the top of the heap, from NCAA to, you know, a smaller mom-and-pop-type tournament operators and so forth. And the final membership category that we have is actually our industry partners. Those are all of our hotel chains, our third parties, our technology providers, registration platforms, and so forth. So we're this really unique trade association, renamed as Sports ETA, that covers all spectrums within that beautiful tent that is sports events and tourism.

Mark Lapidus [2:22]: Did it start with just you?

John David [2:24]: No, no, not at all. Actually, we had some really great founding members. Our original CEO, Don Schumacher out of Cincinnati, was really a pioneer in the space, and several others that really paved the way. And the beauty part about it is, too, so many of those original founders of the Association are still deeply involved and care about the mission still today.

Mark Lapidus [2:41]: Okay, so let's get into the sports travel conversation. Now that we've entered what the UNWTO calls the "era of sports tourism," how has the Association's mission evolved, or has it? Has it stayed the same, or does that give you more fuel on the fire?

John David [2:55]: I would say that it's amplified. You know, really, when you talk about sports tourism, there are two legs of it, certainly: we've got sports tourism that is generated by fans traveling to experience great sporting events, and then, of course, we've got that travel by participants and their families. And we had always traditionally been very, very focused on that participation-based youth and amateur sports travel. We're certainly now taking a much closer look at that overall fan travel experience, and a lot of our destinations are working very, very hard to bid on those mega events and really attract massive events like FIFA World cup and others. So definitely an amplified mission in a time that's the strongest it's ever been for this vertical.

Mark Lapidus [3:33]: How much of your work is domestic and how much is international?

John David [3:36]: It is primarily domestic, because our core membership is primarily domestic. But that's one of the things that we see over the next ten years, with this incredible slate of events that's coming, is the opportunity to really work hard at helping our destination members attract international world championship-caliber events, which actually happens on a quite frequent basis within our membership base. But that's really going to be amplified, you know, in the next decade.

Mark Lapidus [3:59]: You recently released Sports ETA's FY 24 annual report, and that revealed \$52.2 billion - I'm reading that correctly, aren't I? That's a big number.

John David [4:09]: You are.

Mark Lapidus [4:10]: That's in direct spending on sports related travel in 2023. What's the story behind that huge number, John?

John David [4:16]: You know, we were so thrilled to get this report. We do the report every two years, and we've done it for several years. We knew in the industry that the numbers were strong. You know,

we had a high watermark of \$45 billion in 2019. Of course, then the pandemic comes. Now, that was the great story about what happened in sports tourism, and so many people in the industry know this. Our dip was 50%. We did not drop 100% in 2020. And families made the commitment, like, "Listen, we will sacrifice everything, but the one thing we're not going to sacrifice is our children participating in sport, and our children traveling and enjoying that competitive atmosphere. Because we know that, for the core of our family, that that's an important aspect." And because of that, this ultra bright light has been shone on this vertical, and that growth has been phenomenal. So when we're preparing for that report - we do it every two years, as I mentioned - we knew the numbers were great, Mark. We just didn't know how great they were. And we had a 22% increase from '21 to '22, then 11% increase from '22 to '23, which is just fabulous to get us to that \$52.2 billion. A couple of numbers that I'll tell you that we love in that report, too, is we asked some very unique questions, and some things that we were hearing on the road. We kept hearing community after community, DMO after DMO, I would ask that question, "Hey, in your destination, of the recordable room nights that you guys are bidding on and winning, what's leading the way?" And every time I asked it, they kept saying "sports tourism." So within that survey we asked that, 63% of the respondents came back and said in their destination that sports tourism was leading the way. And that's a number that we're extremely proud of. Again, we felt it, but the study with Tourism Economics, proudly sponsored by our friends at North Star Media Group, it confirmed it.

Mark Lapidus [5:53]: You know, John, Brand USA's mission is international, and one of the things wondering about is, it seems to me like when you live domestically in the United States, you would travel directly for sports, but if you're traveling internationally, it may just be one of the things you do. Do I have that right or wrong?

John David [6:09]: I mean, I will tell you this, and from my previous background within sport, you know, with where I used to be at USA BMX, I mean, our athletes and our families there, I mean, they love that international travel. I mean, you want to go and you want to compete at the world championship level, you're committed to it, at that level, you're going. I mean, that's a part of a yearly commitment, and you're going to make it happen. And that's what we saw year after year, which makes me even more bullish in terms of what our opportunity is over the next ten years. And that's the storyline that we're telling our destinations: is the time to go and attract international major events is right now. You go get a great world championship of various events, I just mentioned BMX, that's a great example of one; table tennis, there's so many sports that have these phenomenal world championship events, and right now they want to come to the United States. There's an energy, there's a passion, there's an excitement, and that international sports traveler, they want to be here. And it's our job to go out and find great partners to make that happen.

Mark Lapidus [7:03]: Well, as we've discussed before on this very podcast, the US is set to face a mega-decade of sports, with FIFA World Cup in 2026, the 2028 Summer Olympics, Men's Rugby World Cup in 2031, followed by the Women's Rugby World Cup in 2033, and of course, the Winter Games in Salt Lake City in 2034. That's a lot of events for international tourists.

John David [7:25]: Oh, it's incredible. And keep in mind, too, that FIFA just announced their World Club Cups that are happening across the US. And one of our great destinations and partners, Orlando, has two of them at two of their stadiums. So this slate of events is unlike anything we've ever seen. Now, Mark, the joke that I always tell anytime I have a presentation, the one that I love to tell is that for those of us that have ever hosted a world championship event, your emotional cycle goes like this. You know, you have that pre-event build up to it, you're so excited, you're going to welcome the world to your destination or to your sport. You're running the event, it's incredible, but it's massive and it's challenging.

You get to that Sunday or that final day, you take that collective sigh of relief with your team, you look up and you say, "We're never doing that again." That's the joke. Well, that normally lasts about eight years. That's how it happened with us. I mean, you're sitting around, you're like, "Hey, what about that world championship?" You got some new people around you, people want to do it, and then all of a sudden you want to go and tackle that thing again. Well, we're in that up cycle right now. We're in that up cycle where so many destinations and so many of our rights holders that have that ability to host international events are fired up and ready to go. So now is the time for great international events.

Mark Lapidus [8:32]: I was very impressed with your website as I was preparing for this interview. It really gave me a lot of insight into the world in which you operate. Tell me about the Event Impact Calculator there.

John David [8:42]: Yeah, we've got a great partnership with Destinations International and Tourism Economics. You know, our destinations need that great resource to be able to plug in the information post-event, and even pre-event, to bid on one and to have an understanding of what its impact is. And through the science and data mastery that is Tourism Economics, they go in and spit out some great reporting. That's just a fabulous resource. And the other one that we've recently created for our industry is Earned Media. You know, Mark, destination after destination we were talking to, we've had so many great events that occur that might not be this massive, you know, heads in beds play, but they're on ESPN. You could have a 200-athlete event, but it's got great television coverage. A lot of our destinations are challenged in, "Hey, how do I invest in that? How do I know the value of that? Is that a really good marketing play?" So we actually created the Sports ETA Earned Media Calculator to where we can, post-event, go in and we audit all the earned media impressions, it spits out a report that tells those destinations, "Hey, this is the value had you paid for this amount of impressions." And that's been another great resource for the industry as well.

Mark Lapidus [9:43]: Looking on your Education tab, I see something called the Sports Events Entertainment Network. What is that?

John David [9:49]: Yeah, SEEN is where we house, you know, all of our podcasts. We've got a great podcast series that we drop every Saturday, just like you all at Brand USA, just with great subject matter experts and really things that are trending within the industry, and then also any type of information that we have and find throughout the industry that we really want the membership to see. So it's a great repository and a great opportunity for people to see great information.

Mark Lapidus [10:09]: I also see your industry reports. What would I find in those?

John David [10:12]: You know, the industry reports, that's that state of the industry report that we referenced earlier, that has all of that massive data. Now, the real story behind - we love that \$52.2 billion, but the real story are in the profiles. Let's say that you're wanting to establish a sports commission in your destination, and you need to find out, you know, what are the average budget size? What are the average staffing size? That data is all there. I'll give you another great factoid that's really fascinating that's within our profiles under "Destinations" in the state of the industry report. In there you're also going to see the increase in bid fee pool, in bid fees that are paid out for hosting events. that increased from \$200,000 two years ago to \$400,000, according to those that were surveyed. So it is loaded with data; we've got information in that same report, too, that tells you how rights holders make decisions, so that's one side of the coin. The other side of the resource gap that we're filling in on that Education tab, what we call our Sports Tourism Learning Institute and Research Institute, is great topical

white papers. I was blessed to take this opportunity July 1, 2023, and one of my biggest roles is going out there and finding the resource gap. What information isn't there? When I got into the sports tourism industry, one of my tasks was to figure this thing out, and one of the things that I quickly learned is that as a rights holder, you have to have a sound housing plan. Where do I go to find out how to do that? I just fumbled through it, and was probably silly enough just to ask anybody that would answer a question. Just kept asking until I learned it. Well, we've actually solved that problem, and we've got some great resource gaps there that are being filled. So we've got great topical white papers, a four-part white paper series on housing that teaches a rights holder just basic nomenclature: cancelation, attrition, those type of things, then deep dives into an assessment. Do you want to go with a third party housing company? What about a technology platform? What are my options? So that's so much of what the mission of the Association is, is to be that educational entity that's out there promoting and helping and supporting our members of all of those three categories that I described earlier.

Mark Lapidus [12:12]: Talk to me about membership.

John David [12:13]: We're so proud to talk about those numbers. As we sit today, for this calendar year, we have 105 new members to the Association. That puts us at a membership Association of over 775 member organizations, again made up of DMOs, our sports commissions, all of our industry partners, and our rights holders. So membership has just been explosive in growth, and it's really come in two ways. We have great destinations, very, very large destinations that historically didn't focus on sports tourism, that were probably under-resourced, that have stepped in and said, 'We've got to do this, we've got to double down and invest in sports tourism, and Sports ETA is that distribution and that pipeline for that education.' And on the other side of it, we've had our small and our mid markets have outstanding growth, where we've really showcased, through our advocacy efforts, that ability to engage in sports tourism despite the size of your town. We could have a great, beautiful small town and really be successful in sports tourism while also enhancing our community through the construction of great facilities that not only service our park and recreation needs, but also can host great events. So great growth from a membership perspective, and we couldn't be more proud of those efforts. Our team has just done such a great job there.

Mark Lapidus [13:26]: I know that Sports ETA does a lot of live events. Tell us about those, John.

John David [13:30]: Mark, we love the live events. Anytime you take passionate sports tourism professionals and you put it in one room, it's as fun as it gets, I gotta tell you that. We're gonna be kicking it off very quickly here in November with what's called our Four S Summit where we focus on strategy, services, sales and sponsorship. In November, that's in Chattanooga. Great event. It's our industry's only education-only event. So it's outstanding for anybody who's newer to sports tourism, or a seasoned veteran that wants to come in and hone their skills. And we've got a lot of great subject matter experts. We actually have Jerry Caldwell coming in as one of our keynotes. Now, Jerry is the GM of Bristol Motor Speedway, and fun sport fact for you, the location of the largest attendance of any collegiate football game is Bristol Motor Speedway, where they decided it would be a great idea to host Virginia Tech in Tennessee in the middle of a NASCAR track. So that's one of our great events. We also host our Chief Executive Summit this year, that's going to be in Fort Worth, Texas. Fabulous event for our CEO's, our executive directors in sports tourism and our VPs, to really come in and deep dive in. Very, very high level educational opportunity for there. The other one that we're really passionate about is our Women's Summit. That's an event that we work hand in hand with, we pair the Women's Final Four annually. That's going to be in Tampa this year. Fabulous event. If you want to talk about an event where you can feel the empowerment, it's at that event, and it's one of our most popular events. And then

finally our biggest is our Annual Convention. It's a symposium. This year we're going to be in Tulsa, Oklahoma. We anticipate over 1,200 sports tourism professionals to be the largest gathering of sports tourism professionals in the world. Last year in Portland, Oregon - get this, Mark - we coordinated 14,000 appointments, where we did matchmaking for great destinations and great industry partners looking to meet with our destination rights holders. So we've got a fabulous slate of events to elevate and provide great professional development for anyone who loves sports tourism.

Mark Lapidus [15:21]: One of the other things I noticed on your website, it's worth mentioning, is that you have career opportunities, and I don't think they're just limited to your organization - it's sports across tourism, right?

John David [15:30]: Yeah, exactly. So one, we certainly have a great job board where we're proud to share any opening jobs within the sports events and tourism industry. So if this podcast gets you excited, go to SportsETA.org and you can see that job board and access that information. But internally, for us, we had a fabulous year last year with great growth, and one of the strongest financial performances that we've ever had. That's given us the opportunity to budget in additional support staff from an administrative level, and also to be hiring a Director of Education and Research, which we're in the process. And Mark, we're thrilled about this opportunity. We have some very strong candidates that have applied. We know that they're going to be a great resource for our industry, and we're really going to take that new staff member and jump in and dive deep to make sure that we're continuing to provide the best education possible for this incredible industry, and make sure that we're giving our members, you know, what they both want and what they need.

Mark Lapidus [16:18]: John, I gotta tell you that your enthusiasm on this topic comes through loud and clear, and I'm wondering if you're available for speaking opportunities throughout the tourism industry.

John David [16:27]: Absolutely. And it's actually one of the things that I enjoy the most. I had the pleasure this year of being one of the keynotes at the Pure Michigan Governor's Conference. I've ran educational sessions at several other governor's conference and state tours. Just had a great educational session at Cal. Travel. Advocacy is one of our four pillars within the Association, so we're always willing, if I've got the time slot open, I'm there. And I'd love to share the passion that we have for the industry. And really, we hope to close it with great case studies, you know, great case studies on how this industry is transforming communities, because that's the great thing about sports tourism. And I love to always tell that story: we're planting seeds. When you bring families in to participate in sports, or you bring a fan in to come and see a great sporting event, you're planting the seed for future tourism, for future economic development, and often for relocation. Because today it's sporting events is where the opportunity is given for people to see a great city and say, "You know what, I'd love to vacation here more frequently," or "I'd love to move here."

Mark Lapidus [17:25]: John, it certainly has been a pleasure getting to know you on this podcast, and I have a feeling this is going to be the first of several conversations on this topic, because it is very broad.

John David [17:33]: I hope so, my friend. It's a great time for sports tourism, and we encourage destinations to dive in, and Sports ETA can help you out every step of the way.

Mark Lapidus [17:40]: The website, again, is SportsETA.org if you want to find out more. That's it for Brand USA Talks Travel. I'm Mark Lapidus, thanks for listening.

Outro [17:49]: Your feedback is welcome! Email us at podcast@thebrandusa.com or call 202-793-6256. Brand USA Talks Travel is produced by Asher Meerovich, who also composes music and sound. Media producer, Nthanze Kariuki, with assistance from Casey D'Ambra. Engineering, Brian Watkins, Kat Pommer, and Antonio Tyler. Art by Mimi Jung. Please share this podcast with your friends in the travel industry. You may also enjoy many of our archived episodes, which you can find on your favorite podcast platform. Safe travels!