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Disney's Wide World of Sports

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The Sporting News named Michael Eisner the fifth most powerful figure in sports this past year a position that seems a little low to me, but then Disney is still a novice in SportsWorld. The Disney Sports Empire is growing, and one of the newest parts of that empire is located here in Orlando at Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex.

The facilities are first class and the atmosphere is polished and clean as befits a Disney operation. In fact at the few places where one can find dirt, on the infields of the baseball and softball complexes, the dirt looks clean.

During a visit about a week ago I was able to see competition at three of the venues, and practices at several others, involving boys and girls ranging in age from about thirteen to eighteen under the flag of the AAU.

We started at the field house where the AAU Boys National Invitational Basketball Tournament was underway on three separate courts. The facility can also be used for handball, fencing, wrestling and gymnastics with maximum seating for about 6,000 to 8,000 spectators.

From here we went on to the track and field complex where the AAU National Club Championship was underway. This is a beautiful 200 meter track with field facilities in the center, and stands for spectators along one side.

Between the Field House and Track there is a very large grassy area in which four fields can be set up for such sports as soccer, football, lacrosse, rugby, archery, cricket, and ultimate frisbee. This extremely well-groomed area is cut tightly and feels like a soft carpet. Adjacent to this is the Beach Sports Venue located a good seventy miles from either the Gulf or the Atlantic.

The baseball and softball complex have four diamonds each. These are well manicured and receive considerable use. Several participants in the AAU baseball tournament were practicing that day in the complex. Over at the main baseball stadium, the spring training home of the Atlanta Braves, there was a game in progress in what looked to be the sixteen and under division. This is a wonderful facility with room for about 10,000 fans in the double-deck stadium, as well as more on the grass down the

left field line. The Braves will move all of their spring training operations to Disney next spring, and make use of all the diamonds in the complex.

Disney will no doubt benefit greatly from this connection as many people will come for both the Braves and the Mouse, visiting many of the parks, hotels and restaurants. The concession stand prices are big league, and for the one Brave game inaugurating the stadium last spring the prices were at big league regular season levels. People who go and stay at Disney expect to pay premium prices, and when they get there they accept the prices as inevitable.

For those of us in the Orlando area who are more interested in spring training than the Disney experience, the price structure will determine whether or not we need to get excited about the Braves coming to Central Florida.

A tennis complex occupies the area out beyond the right field fence. There are ten outside courts with one stadium court which appears to seat a maximum of 1500, and at this point most of the seats are marked off as the property of corporations. Major events at this venue will be largely for the entertainment of the well-healed in the community.

Overall this is an impressive set up, and one at which most young people would love to be invited to compete. The facilities are excellent, and of course it comes with an opportunity to go to Disney World and live in a nice hotel for a few days. The level of excitement was best exemplified for me when I went into the restroom and two young boys around the age of ten were standing at the washbasin inserting and pulling back their hands. One kept telling the other that it was magic, as the electric eye triggered the faucets on and off.

Disney's venture into the world of amateur sport raises other issues about power and control and the infusion of the Disney philosophy into sportsworld. Vertical integration is leading towards a Disney dominance from youth sport up through the professional ranks. Horizontal growth through media control, ABC and ESPN, and sports marketing and merchandising raises other issues of both control and exploitation.

Disney is a major player in sport and elsewhere, and for those who worry about such power in Disney's hands, the note on the back of the admission ticket may give some pause. Among other things it says that "the bearer grants irrevocable permission to

Disney's Wide World of Sports and its assignees to utilize the bearer's voice, image and likeness in connection with any broadcast or other recording of events without compensation." Well, at least they don't claim your soul.

Yet.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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