



Sports ETA
SPORTS EVENTS & TOURISM ASSOCIATION

Accessibility in Sports Tourism

Designing Events & Destinations
for Every Athlete

Presented by

Fort Wayne
INDIANA
DESTINATION SPORTS



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Executive Summary

Sports tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments in the travel industry, bringing millions of athletes and families to destinations each year. However, as participation expands, so too does the responsibility to ensure that events and facilities are accessible to all athletes, regardless of physical, cognitive, or sensory ability.

Accessibility is no longer just a compliance requirement. It is a competitive advantage, an economic driver, and a community differentiator.

Destinations that prioritize accessibility:

- Unlock new participant markets
- Attract national and international events
- Improve community quality of life
- Strengthen brand perception among rights holders and families



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1

The Growing Importance of Accessibility in Youth Sports



Youth sports participation is strongly linked to improved long-term physical and mental health outcomes (arxiv.org). Yet, access to sports opportunities is not evenly distributed, particularly for athletes with disabilities.



KEY INDUSTRY SHIFTS

- Growth of adaptive sports programs nationwide
- Increased expectations from families and event owners for inclusive environments
- Expansion of governing bodies and tournaments with adaptive divisions
- Rising demand for destinations that can host integrated competitions

Accessibility is no longer niche. It is becoming standard practice in event design.

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2

Defining Accessibility in Sports Tourism

Accessibility in sports tourism extends far beyond ADA compliance or basic physical accommodations. True accessibility is about creating environments where every athlete, coach, and family member can fully participate, compete, and engage in the experience from start to finish

It requires a holistic approach that considers the full journey, from registration and travel planning to competition and post-event engagement.

Visit Fort Wayne is taking this opportunity to establish itself as a leader in the accessible travel space—highlighting the principles of Universal Design within the destination, taking on advocacy for changes to support Universal Design, and educating the local tourism industry on Universal Design.



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1. PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

Physical accessibility is the most visible component, but it is often where gaps still exist. Facilities must be designed or retrofitted with usability in mind, not just compliance.

Key Considerations:

- Step-free access to all competition and spectator areas
- Wide pathways and entrances for mobility devices
- Accessible locker rooms, restrooms, and athlete prep spaces
- Adjustable seating options for athletes and spectators
- Field of play adaptations where appropriate (surface types, spacing, equipment)

It is important to move beyond a checklist mentality. A facility may meet ADA standards but still create friction for athletes if layouts are inefficient or difficult to navigate.



2. PROGRAMMATIC ACCESSIBILITY

Programmatic accessibility ensures that athletes with disabilities are not just present, but actively competing.

This includes:

- Offering adaptive divisions within existing tournaments rather than siloed events
- Providing classification systems or guidance for fair competition
- Adjusting rules or formats where needed to ensure inclusivity
- Ensuring equal access to awards, recognition, and visibility

The most successful events integrate adaptive athletes into the broader event structure, reinforcing inclusion rather than separation.

3. EXPERIENTIAL ACCESSIBILITY

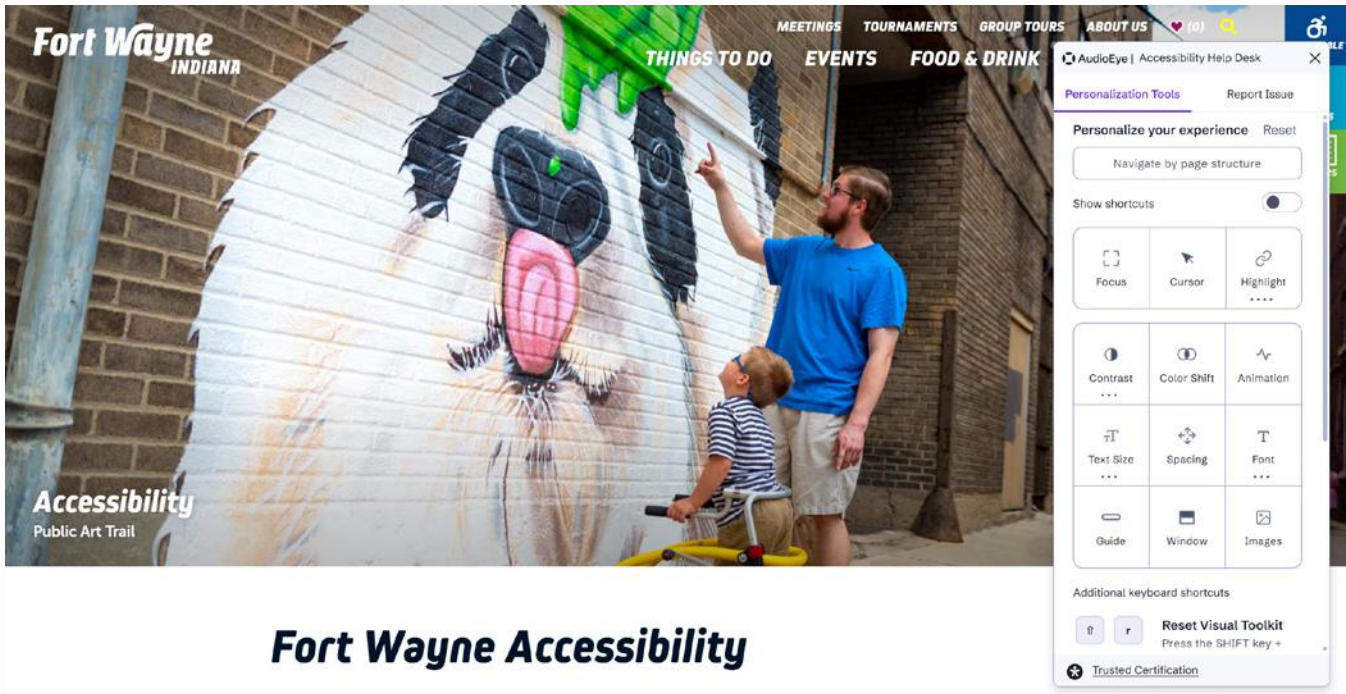
The event experience extends well beyond the field of play. For many families, the biggest barriers are logistical.

Areas to address:

- Accessible transportation between hotels, venues, and event activities
- Hotel partners with verified accessibility standards, not just self-reported claims
- Clear and consistent wayfinding signage throughout venues
- Quiet or sensory-friendly spaces for athletes who may need them
- Food and beverage options that account for dietary and accessibility needs

A seamless experience is often what differentiates a good event from a great one, especially for families navigating accessibility needs.





Fort Wayne Accessibility

4. DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

Digital touchpoints are often the first interaction participants have with an event, and they can either enable or block participation.

Best practices include:

- Registration platforms that are screen-reader compatible
- Clear, simple navigation on event websites
- Accessible PDF documents and schedules
- Captioned videos and inclusive visual content
- Transparent communication about available accommodations

Providing this information upfront builds trust and reduces uncertainty for participants and families.

5. HUMAN-CENTERED ACCESSIBILITY

One of the most overlooked elements is the human component.

Accessibility should also include:

- Staff and volunteers trained to assist without overstepping
- Clear processes for requesting accommodations
- On-site support teams or accessibility coordinators
- A culture of inclusion that is communicated and reinforced throughout the event

At its core, accessibility is about people, not just infrastructure.



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3

Case Study: Fort Wayne, Indiana. A Model for Inclusive Sports Tourism

Visit Fort Wayne has built accessibility into the foundation of its tourism and sports strategy.

1. Strategic Commitment To Accessibility

Fort Wayne's 10-year tourism master plan identifies accessibility and universal design as core priorities. This ensures long-term alignment across stakeholders (visitfortwayne.com).

2. National Recognition And Event Attraction

- Named an Emerging Sports Destination for Accessibility at the 2026 Compete Sports For All Petey Awards
 - Hosted national and international adaptive events including:
 - World ParaVolley Sitting Volleyball World Cup
 - National Wheelchair Basketball Association Military & Women's Championships
 - USA Boccia National Championships
 - USA Curling Wheelchair Mixed Doubles Paralympic Pre-Trials
- (visitfortwayne.com)

3. Facility Investment: Turnstone Center And Beyond

Fort Wayne's ecosystem is anchored by facilities like Turnstone, where adaptive sports programming runs year-round and attracts national competitions. Adaptive sports such as wheelchair basketball and goalball are regularly hosted, demonstrating sustained demand (visitfortwayne.com).





4. Future-Focused Infrastructure

The planned North River Fieldhouse district is designed as a modern, accessible, world-class sports facility. This reinforces the city's long-term commitment to inclusive sports tourism (engage.cityoffortwayne.org).

Lawn Bowls is a very inclusive sport that can be played by people of any ability. The Fort Wayne Lawn Bowls club that is projected to be completed Summer 2026, is committed to making the sport available to all, regardless of ability (fortwaynelawnbowls.com/).

5. Industry Leadership And Knowledge Sharing

Fort Wayne is hosting the inaugural 2026 Adaptive Sports Summit in partnership with Compete Sports Network. This event brings together rights holders, destinations, and partners to advance accessibility across the industry (visitfortwayne.com).

Visit Fort Wayne continues to elevate and support the inclusion of adaptive sports at the forefront of industry conversations and presentations. Senior Sports Development Manager, Jazmín Zavala, has participated in panel discussions and forums hosted by Sports Events & Tourism Association, Northstar Travel Group, All In Sport Consulting, and Indiana Tourism Association.



The Fort Wayne Lawn Bowls club that is projected to be completed Summer 2026, is committed to making the sport available to all, regardless of ability.

4 | Why Accessibility Drives Economic Impact

Accessible sports tourism is not just a social initiative. It is a revenue opportunity.



EXPANDED MARKET REACH

- Athletes with disabilities represent a significant and growing participant base
- Families and support networks increase travel party size
- Inclusive events drive higher retention and repeat visitation

INCREASED EVENT ATTRACTION

Destinations that can accommodate adaptive sports:

- Win bids for specialized national events
- Become preferred hosts for governing bodies
- Differentiate in a crowded marketplace

Industry Example: National Wheelchair Basketball Association National Championships

A strong example of accessibility influencing site selection can be seen with the National Wheelchair Basketball Association National Championships, which have repeatedly selected Fort Wayne, Indiana as a host destination.

The decision was driven by several accessibility-focused advantages:

- Purpose-built and adaptable facilities capable of hosting wheelchair competition at scale
- Proven operational experience supporting adaptive athletes and teams
- A strong local ecosystem, including organizations like Turnstone, that provide year-round programming and expertise
- A destination-wide commitment to accessibility across hotels, transportation, and venues

The result:

- Hundreds of athletes traveling with extended family and support staff
- Multi-day stays that significantly increase hotel nights and local spending
- Repeat hosting opportunities driven by positive athlete and organizer experience

This is a clear example of how accessibility is not just a feature. It is a deciding factor in event placement and a driver of sustained economic impact.

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Industry Example: USA Wheelchair Softball International World Series

The **USA Wheelchair Softball World Series** has consistently selected destinations like Kansas City Sports Commission due in large part to their accessible venue infrastructure.

Key factors influencing site selection include:

- Wheelchair-accessible diamonds and dugouts
- Smooth, navigable surfaces throughout competition areas
- Centralized lodging and transportation options

Impact highlights:

- National and international team participation
- Strong spectator attendance from local and visiting families
- Repeat hosting relationships due to consistent delivery of accessible experiences

This reinforces a broader trend. Accessibility is not just enabling participation. It is creating long-term partnerships between rights holders and destinations.

Community and Long-Term Value

- Enhances local infrastructure for residents
- Improves public perception and civic pride
- Supports workforce and volunteer engagement

In both examples, a consistent pattern emerges. Destinations that invest in accessibility are not only expanding opportunity. They are securing repeat business, longer stays, and stronger relationships with event owners.

Accessibility is becoming a defining factor in where events go, not just how they operate.



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5

How to Integrate Accessibility into Your Events

Integrating accessibility into sports events does not require a complete overhaul overnight. The most successful organizations take a phased, intentional approach that builds over time while delivering immediate impact.

1. Start with an Accessibility Audit

Before making changes, understand your current state.

Key steps:

- Conduct walkthroughs of venues with accessibility in mind
- Engage athletes, families, or local advocacy groups for real-world feedback
- Identify friction points across the full participant journey
- Document both compliance gaps and experiential gaps

This process often reveals opportunities that are not obvious from a purely operational perspective.

2. Prioritize High-Impact Improvements

Not all improvements need to be large capital investments. Many of the most meaningful changes are operational.

Examples include:

- Improving signage and wayfinding
- Adjusting scheduling to allow additional transition time between games
- Providing clear accessibility guides in advance of the event
- Creating designated drop-off and pickup zones

Quick wins build momentum and demonstrate commitment.

3. Design Inclusive Competition Structures

Accessibility should be built into the event format itself.

Consider:

- Adding adaptive divisions within existing tournaments
- Creating unified competition formats where athletes of different abilities compete together
- Partnering with governing bodies to ensure proper classification and rule alignment
- Scheduling adaptive competitions in prime-time slots, not off-peak hours

Integration, not separation, should be the goal wherever possible.



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4. Train and Empower Your Team

Even the best-designed event can fall short without the right people in place.



Focus on:

- Training staff and volunteers on accessibility awareness and etiquette
- Providing clear escalation paths for handling issues or requests
- Assigning dedicated accessibility leads or coordinators
- Equipping teams with simple tools and FAQs to support participants

Confidence and preparedness among staff significantly improve the participant experience.

**The strongest
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5. Build Local Partnerships

You do not have to do this alone. In fact, the strongest accessibility programs are built through collaboration.

Potential partners include:

- Adaptive sports organizations
- Local disability advocacy groups
- Healthcare providers and rehabilitation centers
- Schools and community programs

These partners can provide expertise, volunteers, and even athlete pipelines.

6. Align with Destination Resources

Work closely with your destination partners, especially DMOs to ensure alignment across the full experience.

This includes:

- Vetting hotel partners for true accessibility standards
- Coordinating transportation solutions
- Aligning on messaging and marketing
- Leveraging existing accessible facilities and infrastructure

Destinations that prioritize accessibility can significantly elevate your event.

7. Communicate Clearly and Early

One of the most important steps is simply providing clear, proactive communication.

Participants should know:

- What accommodations are available
- How to request additional support
- What to expect upon arrival
- Who to contact with questions

Clarity reduces stress and increases participation.

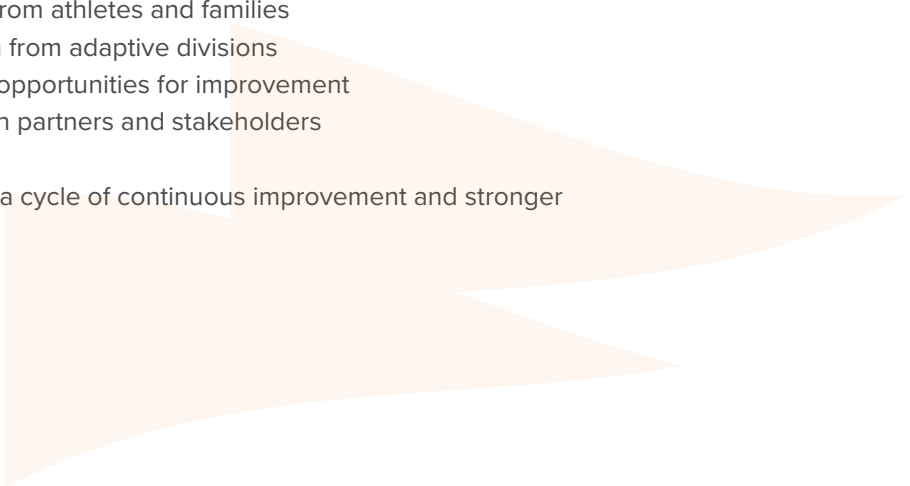
8. Measure, Learn, and Improve

Accessibility is an ongoing process, not a one-time initiative.

Post-event actions should include:

- Gathering feedback from athletes and families
- Tracking participation from adaptive divisions
- Identifying gaps and opportunities for improvement
- Sharing learnings with partners and stakeholders

Over time, this creates a cycle of continuous improvement and stronger event performance.



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5

The Future of Sports Tourism is Inclusive

Accessibility is not a trend. It is the future of sports tourism.

Destinations that act now will:

- Lead in event attraction
- Build stronger communities
- Create meaningful experiences for all athletes



Sources

- Visit Fort Wayne. "Visit Fort Wayne Continues Wins in Adaptive Sports Categories." (visitfortwayne.com)
- Visit Fort Wayne. "Adaptive Sports in Fort Wayne, Indiana." (visitfortwayne.com)
- City of Fort Wayne. North River Fieldhouse Project Overview. (engage.cityoffortwayne.org)
- Victus Advisors. Fort Wayne Sports and Events Center Study. ([link](#))
- Academic research on youth sports participation and health outcomes (arxiv.org)

ABOUT US



Sports ETA

As the non-profit 501(c)3 trade association for the sports events and tourism industry in the United States, Sports ETA is the most essential resource for sports commissions, sports destinations, sports event owners, and industry partners. We believe sports tourism and the events that our members own and host have the power to transform society for the better. Our passion is to help sports events and tourism professionals achieve previously unimaginable levels of performance. We do this by nurturing a community of smart, creative, and interesting people: our members.

Visit SportsETA.org.



Our Sponsor

Fort Wayne, the second largest city in Indiana, is one of the top Midwest destinations for sports tournaments and events. With a wide selection of premier sports venues, first-rate hotels, family-friendly entertainment, and restaurants, Fort Wayne excels in hosting tournaments of all sizes and skill levels. And, getting to Fort Wayne couldn't be easier. With easy access to major highways and connectivity through the Fort Wayne International Airport in Allen County, Indiana. Fort Wayne is located within half of the U.S. population for central access. As a leader in adaptive sports, Fort Wayne is home to Turnstone Center, an Olympic and Paralympic Training Center known for hosting sporting events for all abilities. To learn more about Fort Wayne, Indiana, go to [Visit Fort Wayne, Indiana | Hotels, Restaurants & Events](#) or call (260) 424-3700.

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