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Pentathlon: Playing for keeps

Southwest Florida takes center stage Thursday as Olympic-level athletes converge to compete in the world cup final event of the Modern Pentathlon, the oldest sporting event in the history of The Games.

It is the first of three Modern Pentathlon events taking place in Sarasota-Bradenton over the next three years, a series international officials hope will draw interest to the sport and to this region as a more permanent U.S. hub for future events.

The women's event starts Friday at 7:30 a.m. The men's competition, Saturday at the same time. Sunday is the mixed event, which also starts at 7:30. "Hosting competitions here three years in a row was definitely intentional," said Tom Shepard, a board member of USA Pentathlon. "This is a lesserknown sport and we really want to change that."

Modern Pentathlon is one of several performance sports that have shown interest in having a presence in the area.

In 2017, the region will host the World Rowing Championships at Nathan Benderson Park -- bringing 42,000 international athletes and family members to Sarasota-Bradenton -- and a slew of other national



Aya Medany of Egypt shoots in the combined running and shooting stage of the women's modern pentathlon at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. (AP archive / Markus Schreiber)

and collegiate-level rowing events before and after that.

Last year, the Selby Aquatic Center hosted the Pan-American Masters Swimming Championships, which drew thousands to the region for two weeks of competition.

"The interest and support of Visit Sarasota County and the Bradenton Area Convention Center & Visitors Bureau had a tremendous impact on bringing the events here," said Katherine Harris, former U.S. representative and Florida secretary of state and the chairwoman of the organizing committee for the modern pentathlon events. In 2015, Sarasota-Bradenton will host a world cup event, and in 2016, a world cup final and the U.S. Olympic qualifying event for athletes aiming to compete in the 2016 Games in Brazil.

"Because this is a world cup final and elimination process, we're not going to see the big economic impact like we would for a big rowing event or a big soccer tournament," said Virginia Haley, president of Visit Sarasota County, the county's tourism agency. "It's more about the bragging rights of our region. We have this prestigious event here and we'll be able to fill hotel rooms in the coming years as the sport builds here."

U.S. back in the game

Modern Pentathlon includes five phases of competition: Running, shooting, fencing, swimming and equestrian show jumping. The

swimming and fencing components will take place at the Selby Aquatic Center at the start of the day, and the show jumping, running and shooting events will be held at the Sarasota Polo Club.

The awards ceremonies happen at 4:50 p.m. at the Polo Club. It will mark the first time in 40 years that an international pentathlon event has been held in the United States.



Katherine (Harris) Karris and Paul Blackketter, who head the local organizing committee for the Modern Pentathlon events, and John Amabile and James Hamill-Reeves, from US Pentathlon and Union of Internationale Pentathlon Moderne, the national and international governing bodies of the sport, announce the venues for the June world cup final at the Sarasota Polo Fields. Photo by Justine Griffin.

"I think the competition will draw a fairly well number of spectators because people are curious about it. It's such an unusual event," Haley said.

More than 25 million people in the U.S. are expected to watch the event, which is being broadcast by NBC Universal. Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne (UIPM) officials hope to air the competition overseas as well, with the potential for an audience of 125 million.

"There is a learning curve to understanding pentathlon," said Martin Dawe, a board member of UIPM. "By next year, hopefully there will be more interest and the community can rally behind the sport."

The athletes, family members and supporters will be able to take advantage of the Savor Sarasota dining program at restaurants in the area, and vacation at the destination's beaches.

"It is a busy weekend though," Haley said. The region is also hosting the Sunshine State Games, where pentathletes will share the pool at

Selby Aquatic Center with synchronized swimmers, and the seventh annual Prospect Wire Florida State Finals for youth baseball, at fields in all three counties.

"This weekend is a huge deal and will set the stage for the events to come," Haley said. "The impact is long term, and all about continuing to build our reputation as a place for international sports."



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