



Proxy Stadium (2020) by Chris Boyd Taylor.

The World Games in context

Reflecting on the biggest sporting event in Alabama history

Storytelling is foundational to the humanities. And here in Alabama, sports keep our storytellers well supplied. This summer promises a wealth of new material, as The World Games come to Birmingham and Central Alabama, delivering more than 3,600 athletes from 100 countries — not to mention up to half a million visitors.

“We’ve never seen anything like The World Games,” says Kevin Scarbinsky, a longtime Alabama sports journalist. “Imagine the College Football Playoff, the men’s and women’s Final Four, and the men’s and women’s College World Series all going down around town at the same time. And then some. Olympic soccer in 1996 at Legion Field was huge, but that was one sport at one stadium. We’re about to welcome more of the world at one time than ever before. We’re about to witness history.”

Alabamians know about making sports history, especially in national and international competition. From Jesse Owens to Suni Lee, at least 88 Alabama athletes have won Olympic and Paralympic medals. And there are no fewer than 53 Alabamians in professional halls of fame nationwide; our state’s own Sports Hall of Fame boasts 385 members.

“Here in Alabama, sports are a defining part of who we are,” says Gov. Kay Ivey. “Athletics, while entertaining to watch and exciting to play, also bring together our communities, regardless of differences. Sports are in our state’s DNA and rooted in our traditions.”

Steve Murray, director of the Alabama Department of Archives & History, says the Games also give Alabama a chance to reflect on “the importance of athletics in advancing equality along racial and gender lines.” Indeed, Oakville’s Jesse Owens and LaFayette’s Joe Louis defied Nazi ideology. Tuskegee’s Alice Coachman became the first Black woman anywhere to win an Olympic medal. Selma’s Mia Hamm inspired a generation of young people to play soccer. “Each of these Alabamians, and many more, demonstrate that perseverance enables us to transcend boundaries on the field of competition and throughout society.”

That’s a sentiment Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin echoes: “Having The World Games come to Birmingham is a full-circle moment.” “Our city is home to courageous citizens who helped to break the back of segregation and herald civil and human rights for all. It is thrilling that our great city will soon cast open arms to welcome the world.”

Time will tell what cultural imprint The World Games leave on Alabama. But the potential is powerful.

“There are rare moments where a state can harness its entire population and resources in a very positive way for the world to see,” says Nick Sellers, CEO of Birmingham’s World Games. “The World Games 2022 is one of those moments as it will be watched by millions around the world. It will provide an opportunity for all of us in Alabama to elevate our collective sights and show the world that our best days are ahead.”

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-Nick Sellers. The World Games