

Greater Cincinnati Sports Corp. booming

She shoots, she scores

Business Courier of Cincinnati - by [Steve Watkins](#) Staff Reporter

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That roar you might have heard emanating from downtown in mid-February wasn't your imagination. The city was filled with 2,500 girls and their families for a national dance competition.

But despite the noise and enthusiasm, a lot of local people probably weren't even aware it was going on. It certainly doesn't draw the attention an **NCAA** championship event would.

That's fine with Leslie Spencer, executive director of the Greater Cincinnati Sports Corporation. Her goal is to create the biggest economic impact, not the most attention. And events such as the JAMfest Super Dance National probably have as much or more impact than a major NCAA championship.

Spencer has been accomplishing that more often. When she took her role, the Sports Corp. had no events booked and \$30,000 in the bank. Now, it has a \$220,000 annual budget and brought in events last year that led to 30,000 hotel room night bookings. That had an economic impact of at least \$7.9 million. And those nights are a 29 percent jump from two years prior.

Spencer basically runs the show herself. She was a one-woman operation for several years before hiring a full-time employee about a year ago.

Spencer, a Cincinnati native, is no stranger to the sports world. Her father, George Spencer, ran **World Wide Basketball Inc.**, which brought foreign teams to the United States and took U.S. college teams overseas.

"At 16, my dad gave me the keys to drive the Yugoslavian national team around," Spencer said.

An athlete, Spencer earned a scholarship to Marshall University and competed in volleyball and track. She later came back home and was a program director at the **YWCA of Cincinnati** and one of two U.S. representatives to the U.S. Olympic Committee's International Olympic Academy in Greece. That led to her role at the Sports Corp. in 2001.

Corporate funding for the now-19-year-old Sports Corp. had dried up. It was on its last legs. So the nonprofit group became affiliated with the three local convention and visitors bureaus.

Spencer also made a key strategy shift. The group previously had gone after high-profile events, winning college hockey's Frozen Four championship and the women's NCAA Final Four in the 1990s. "But those are expensive," she said.

They also don't have as big of an economic impact as people might think. So she followed the "heads in beds" aim of the convention and visitors bureaus, shooting for youth national events that bring a lot of families to town for several nights.

It's worked. This year, in addition to JAMfest, 4,500 kids will be in town in December for the Sports Corp.'s own Cincinnati Winter Sports Festival. Huge youth baseball and basketball tournaments this summer will bring more visitors and more dollars.

It's not just youth events. The **Black American Softball Association World Series** will bring 200 adult teams and 4,500 room nights in September. And Spencer just finalized a deal Feb. 19 for the Action Sports World Tour. That October professional extreme sports event will bring national TV coverage and attention to the local market.

A relationship expert

Spencer's impact struck Jackie Reau, chief operating officer of Cincinnati-based sports marketing and consulting firm **Game Day Communications**, last year when Reau attended a sports convention with her.

"Everyone knows Leslie," Reau said. "She is a dynamo."

Spencer's leadership has been the key to the group's recent growth, Reau said. "She's very driven and very passionate," she said. "And Leslie's a relationship expert."

Susan Noonan, who chairs the Sports Corp.'s board of trustees, agrees that Spencer's leadership has been the driving force. She's developed a bid fund to go after events and expanded the budget enough to hire a second full-time person to help her.

"Everybody says we're especially good at providing hospitality," Noonan said. "Leslie is great at that. She's so well prepared, and she has such incredible knowledge."

Takes money to make money

The need for more corporate dollars is glaring, though. It takes money to bid on events, usually from \$5,000 to \$60,000. That's where Spencer's bid fund comes in.

But with a budget and staff far smaller than many comparable cities - Columbus and Cleveland both have sports commissions with budgets over \$700,000 - she can't go after events piecemeal. "I go after a two- or three-year commitment," she said. "It helps regulate the calendar, too."

But, she adds, Cincinnati has a lot to sell to events organizers who are looking for a site. Top sports venues, a central location, inexpensive hotel rooms and family attractions all make her sales pitch easier.

She's hoping to boost the budget to make an even bigger imprint on the economy.

"I'd love to have \$500,000 a year and at least two more staff," she said. "We're at the point where we could have a huge impact if we had more funding."

Spencer's main job is to develop bid packages for events and, once secured, make sure they're serviced properly. The latter is vital. "I've stolen a number of events from other cities because of a lack of service," she said.

That helped Aaron Flaker, president and co-owner of **JAM Brands Inc.**, decide to locate JAMfest in Cincinnati. The event, which brought about 6,500 total visitors to town last month, is booked annually at Duke Energy Center through at least 2010. He's added a cheerleading event - Live! - that also will be in Cincinnati each year.

"Good sports commissions go to bat for you when you need something," Flaker said. "With Leslie, it's easy. She can pick up the phone and get things done."

From lining up the venue and securing dates to arranging hotels and hospitality, the group helped Flaker at every step.

"There's no other sports commission in the U.S. that cares more about us and has done more for JAMfest than Cincinnati," Flaker said.