

New Aurora Games put focus on women

By Ben Fischer

The startup Aurora Games are a bet that women's Olympic sports can thrive, not just survive, without the men at the same event.

Founded by former ProServ President and StarGames CEO Jerry Solomon, the six-day festival is set for the Times Union Center in Albany, N.Y., from Aug. 20-25. It will feature team competitions — the Americas versus the World — in tennis, gymnastics, basketball, figure skating, ice hockey and beach volleyball, with an exhibition in table tennis.

Solomon, the majority investor and event executive director, began developing the concept after the 2016 Rio Games, when he observed that, in his judgment, women still played second fiddle despite comprising a majority of Team USA (and winning a majority of the medals in three of the last four Games.)

"Maybe it's time for women's sports to get out from under the umbrella and shadows of the men and have its own stand-alone, international team competition, which sort of looks like an Olympics but is not the Olympics," Solomon recalls thinking.

A profit is not necessary in year one, but it is important to demonstrate viability and real demand from fans and corporate partners to reach the goal of becoming a regular biennial event, he said. Solomon declined to provide a total budget, but it includes six days of venue operations with different sports each day, payments to more than 100 athletes, and promotion and production costs.

ESPN announced May 8 at its espnW summit that it will air all six days of the event on ESPNU and ESPN3. A European distribution deal with Eurosport is in the works, Solomon said. Sponsorships have been sold to Women's Health magazine, TJ Maxx, State Farm, Carnival Cruise Lines, the state of New York and the (Albany) Times Union.

Upstate New York originally was not Solomon's intended market, but Bob Belber, general manager of the Times Union Center, made a compelling pitch. Albany city and New York state officials made a promotional and financial commitment, and Solomon has come around.

"There was a side of me that thought maybe it's good to bring it to a smaller market — not that it's a small market, but a smaller market," Solomon said. "In a big market, you're competing with so many different things, there's a potential to get lost."

Tickets went on sale in March and range from \$15 to \$129. Tickets include the experiential fan zone at the new Albany Capital Center convention center. About 55,000 tickets are available over the six days. Solomon said tickets are selling slower than he'd hoped, but promotional efforts have not yet seriously started. TJ Maxx, Women's Health, local governments and ESPN have all pledged to help promote.



Solomon is paying the 100 or more athletes who have committed to attend and has lined up Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Nadia Comaneci as honorary captains of the Americas and World teams.

Beach volleyball is one of the sports, along with Olympic standards such as gymnastics and figure skating, featured in the initial Aurora Games.