

Benderson Park Readies to Host Largest Modern Pentathlon in U.S.

More than 230 pentathletes from 40 countries will be in the area to compete in Modern Pentathlon World Cup I

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UNIVERSITY PARK -- When the 2015 Modern Pentathlon World Cup I begins Tuesday, the Bradenton and Sarasota community will have the opportunity to see Olympians in the making.

More than 230 pentathletes from 40 countries will arrive in the area to compete in the 2015 Modern Pentathlon World Cup I, which is the first step in securing a spot on their nation's Olympic team for the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

"With last year's success (hosting the 2014 World Cup Final), it elevated the modern pentathlon in the Olympics," said Katherine Harris, chairwoman of the Sarasota Bradenton Modern Pentathlon Organizing Committee. "More importantly for us, it elevated the image of Sarasota and Bradenton as a world-class Olympic location. ... Our community has a chance to meet these athletes. It is an unique opportunity. There is something for everyone at the games."

A modern pentathlon, modeled after the original, consists of five events: fencing, swimming, horse-riding and a combined running and shooting event. In addition to Nathan Benderson Park, some of the events will be held at Selby Aquatic Center in south Sarasota.

On Tuesday night, the pentathlon festivities will begin when the pentathletes walk into the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art wearing their country's colors and flag.

"Its been so exciting preparing for opening night at the Ringling Museum," Harris said. "When you see the parade of athletes from 40 nations, there is not a more magnificent sight."

The modern pentathlon continues on Wednesday with the women's qualifying rounds followed by the men's qualifying rounds on Thursday. The Nathan Benderson Park Festival begins Friday when the women's final also takes place. The men's final is Saturday and the mixed relay -- both men and women -- events are on Sunday along with the closing ceremony.

"This weekend is going to be full of amazing opportunities," Harris said. "The whole experience is magical to me. The thing I am most looking forward to is people coming to enjoy the games."

Sarasota and Bradenton beat out Budapest, Rome and Cairo to win the bid to host the event, Harris said, adding that it was "quite the achievement for our community."

Prepping the venue

The horse stables arrived at Benderson Park this past Tuesday, which is the first time the park will have horse jumping, said Paul Blacketter, president of Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates, the nonprofit that runs the park. With the final preparations wrapping up this weekend, the park is being transformed into a modern pentathlon arena.

"As soon as we knew it was coming here, we started measuring the size of our fields," he said. "We immediately had the horse and equestrian people come evaluate the dirt and the soil and the grass. ... We put a lot of effort to get it up to speed for the event."



Jianli Guo of China smiles after winning a round in the men's fencing ladder event during the Modern Pentathlon 2014 World Cup Final at the Sarasota Polo Club.

Grant Jefferies/Bradenton Herald File

For Blacketter, the biggest challenge of hosting the event is the horse jumping, since it is a first for the park and SANCA staff.

"We had to have experts come in and evaluate the field because that is not our speciality," he said. "Having five sports is somewhat complex, but when it boils down to it, it is just like any other event. You have to well-plan it, think it through, and then implement it."

When Benderson Park's Regatta Island was designed, Blacketter said it was done in such a way to host multiple types of sports.

"It is not just a rowing center. It is a true multipurpose center and it truly can provide the return of the investment that the public has put into it," he said.

Regional economic impact

More than 5,000 people attended the 2014 World Cup, which was held in the summer during the area's off-season. With more athletes expected to participate at this year's pentathlon, making it the largest ever to be held in the United States, and because it is during season, Harris said she is expecting even more spectators to attend.

"This year, World Cup I will be the largest World Cup pentathlon event in U.S. history," Harris said. "Nathan Benderson Park is so central to Sarasota and Manatee counties and I-75."

The 2015 Modern Pentathlon World Cup I event is the second of four modern pentathlon events to be held in the Sarasota-Bradenton area between 2014-16. The 2016 U.S. Olympic Team Trials will be held in March 2016, followed by the 2016 World Cup Final in 2016. The first and last qualifying events for the modern pentathlon in Rio will be held in Sarasota.

As people -- both athletes and spectators -- travel into the region for the event, Virginia Haley, president of Visit Sarasota County, said she hopes the locals attend as well.

"People spend thousands and thousands of dollars to travel to international Olympics," she said. "I just urge people in Sarasota and Manatee counties to go to some of the competition. it is in our back yard. It is thrilling. ... I think the people in our region are going to be blown away by what the modern pentathlon is."