

Halting Economy can't slow the pace of amateur athletics !

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

Long-distance runners don't seem to be sweating the recession. This weekend's ING Miami Marathon has been reporting record registration numbers, along with growth in runners traveling long distances for the grueling race.

Young sailors and their families didn't let the outgoing financial tide swamp their plans for the holiday Orange Bowl International Youth Regatta. The boat race saw more boats than ever -- nearly 700 of them, with skippers as young as 8 at the helm -- despite predictions of a dip, thanks to pocketbook worries.

And softball players aren't balking at spending money on travel in a global economic downturn. The Rising Stars fast-pitch tournament held three weeks ago in Davie drew high school teams from as far as Canada and Washington state, with more than 2,000 players.

"I don't think there's really been a drop at all," Rising Stars director Cyd Weiner. ``People will spend money on their kids."

Repeating a trend from the post-9/11 travel collapse, amateur athletes are shaking off financial fatigue and heading to South Florida to compete.

While tournament organizers are losing sponsorship dollars and seeing athletes trim their accommodation budgets, they're not suffering the kind of declines hitting hotels and attractions suffering through one of the worst travel markets of the decade.

The resilience highlights the gulf between amateur and professional sports. This week PricewaterhouseCoopers predicted a 20 percent decline in spending for the upcoming Super Bowl in Tampa, as fans and corporations opt not to splurge on the country's most popular sports event.

And while South Florida's various pro sporting events -- from spring training in Fort Lauderdale to Miami's share of college basketball's March Madness -- draw travelers, tourism officials say they can't compete with the cumulative effect of hundreds of tournaments most people don't know exist.

"Amateur sports are a better generator of tourism than professional sports," said Mike Sophia, executive director of the Miami-Dade Sports Commission, a tax-funded group that subsidizes some tournaments. ``The Dolphins have a huge following, but a large part of the fan base is right here. Certainly, it's the same thing with baseball."



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***Halting Economy Can't Slow the pace of our
Amateur Athletics !***

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The marathon begins at 6:05 a.m. Sunday in downtown Miami and winds from South Beach to Coconut Grove and back again. While updated figures weren't available Friday afternoon, organizers recently reported a 10 percent increase in registered runners -- with about 70 percent traveling from outside Miami-Dade County. And runners from other countries are growing slightly, spokesman Danny Efenbein said.

For the Orange Bowl International Youth Regatta, organizers braced themselves for a lean race late last year. Registration didn't open until November, well into the banking meltdown and stock-market collapse that began earlier in the fall. But by the time the week of racing started Dec. 26, co-chair Wendy Kamilar said the \$200 registration fees were coming in well ahead of budget.

"California had a team with 25 kids, with their two coaches," Kamilar said. ``There were 160 trailers at Dinner Key marina."

A big draw for the high school sailors competing for coveted slots on college teams: the 25 coaches from campuses across the country there to tout their programs and eye potential team members. Some parents hire local coaches to improve their child's performance in the races, while hundreds rent skiffs to watch the races on Biscayne Bay.

"It's extremely competitive," Kamilar said. ``How you do in it [helps determine] whether or not you're invited to national competitions."

It's that drive to further a child's athletic career that organizers say motivates parents to spend on tournament travel despite the economy.

At the Rising Stars tournament, a player's family may spend \$3,000 or more by the time it's over. But especially in lean times, parents are willing to risk the money in pursuit of a larger financial reward.

"For a few thousand dollars," Weiner said, ``it could be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarship money."

