

# Armstrong: March Madness in DeKalb County boosts local economy

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Feb. 26, 2018

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March Madness is here ... or our version of it. There will be basketball and wrestling at the Northern Illinois University Convocation Center throughout the month.

On March 6, the IHSA Class 1A and 2A boys basketball supersectional games will be played there with the Class 3A and 4A supersectionals set for March 13. Thousands of visitors will pack the house to cheer on their teams and enjoy March Madness in DeKalb County. Fans can walk up and purchase tickets at the Convocation Center from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and during and before events.

The 2018 Illinois Elementary School Association state wrestling meet will take place at the Convocation Center March 9 and 10. We are eager to welcome back the IESA, the state title contenders and the more than 5,000 visitors who will make DeKalb County their destination for the weekend. This is the 20th year that the event has been hosted at Northern Illinois University.

We've already booked more than 400 hotel rooms for these guests with an estimated economic impact of more than \$300,000 on an annual basis, depending on final attendance numbers.

The estimated economic impact from the event is based on the data we gather and estimates that the Illinois Office of Tourism provides to help gauge the economic impact of sporting events. That includes direct and

indirect spending on hotels, food, gas, facility rental, shopping and other services used by people taking part in or attending the event.

Doors open at 2:30 p.m. March 9 and 8 a.m. March 10. Daily admission fees for K-8 students and seniors are \$5 and adults are \$10. Advance ticket sales will be available through Ticketmaster beginning March 5.

More than 150 DeKalb High School wrestling volunteers and the events staff from the Convocation Center will assist IESA Executive Director Steve Endsley and his officials with the state championships.

The IESA is honoring three Grand Marshals this year, including Earl Brooks, Steve DeNeut and DeKalb's Paul Vittone. Before Vittone retired in 2010, he coached wrestling and football at both the middle and high school levels in DeKalb. This is Vittone's 30th year of officiating and he says his defining moment was when he officiated the IESA state finals in DeKalb for the 2010 and 2011 seasons. Throughout his life he has been dedicated to his teaching, coaching, officiating and family life. Vittone will be retiring from officiating at the end of this wrestling season. The IESA is honoring him for his legacy of service to the schools and wrestlers of Illinois.

In October, the IESA Board of Directors voted to open this championship event up for competitive bidding. Since then, the NIU Convocation Center, DeKalb High School Wrestling Club officers and the DeKalb County CVB have been meeting to discuss how to meet the new bid requirements, raise sponsorship dollars for the event and provide the local volunteers needed to submit a competitive and, hopefully, winning bid. It will be submitted by the Convocation Center the first week of March.

Endsley recently updated us on another important development. The IESA Board voted to increase the number of wrestlers who will be able to

compete in the finals from 456 to 608 beginning in 2019. That means more hotel room nights, more visitors who will dine, shop and purchase gas, extended hours for the event and an even greater economic impact for the host community.

We will be up against fierce competition in this open bidding process, just as we were for the open bidding to host the IHSA state football championships. Like us, these communities recognize the economic impact events like this have.

The IESA Board of Directors will vote and award the bid April 6. The length of the contract will be from March 2019 to March 2023. Our hope is that we will have the honor and privilege of continuing to host the IESA state wrestling championships in DeKalb County at Northern Illinois University.

There are many other attractions and events in DeKalb County that boost our local economy. We just don't have the space to cover all of them in one column.

For a comprehensive list of events and attractions, visit [www.dekalbcountycvb.com](http://www.dekalbcountycvb.com).

Until next time, safe travels.

- Debbie Armstrong is executive director of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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