

Williamsport without baseball: Community suffers without Little League World Series

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WILLIAMSPORT, Pa. _ Franco's Lounge, a little family-owned Italian joint on Fourth Street, has hosted the likes of Orel Hershiser, Alex Rodríguez and Jennifer Lopez.

But not in the coronavirus year of 2020. There are no ESPN crews, and no 12-year-old baseball players from Hawaii, or Italy, enjoying the menu and cozy atmosphere at Franco's.

The Little League World Series was canceled in April because of the COVID-19 pandemic and this quaint Pennsylvania city on the Susquehanna River, and its sister city _ South Williamsport, where Little League is actually headquartered _ won't be hosting the championship this Sunday as originally planned.

"We miss the whole situation," said Fred Daniele, the owner of Franco's. The LLWS "was a little overwhelming, but it was well worth it. It's a bummer."

Without the Little League World Series, Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce President Jason Fink said, the regional economy will take a loss between \$35 million and \$40 million. Hospitality businesses such as restaurants and hotels are among the hardest hit in the area by the pandemic.

Fink said that even retail stores, which receive additional business from thousands of out-of-state Little League fans during the tournament, thanks to Pennsylvania's lack of a sales tax on clothing, will face severe losses in an August that hardly compares to previous years.

"The businesses that derive the greatest benefits from the Little League World Series, they're the ones who are getting hardest hit from the onset of the pandemic," Fink said.

Little League International spokesman Kevin Fountain said via email the decision to cancel the postseason tournament was "incredibly difficult and heartbreaking," but he still felt confident it was the right call.

In a year when the world is gripped by a disease that spreads easily when people are in large groups, Little League has gotten little argument on that point. The tournament typically runs 10 days in August, bringing together eight teams from the United States and another eight from around the world. In 2019, an estimated 305,339 fans came to South Williamsport over the course of the 32-game event.

For the nearly century-old Genetti Hotel in downtown Williamsport, the LLWS cancelation meant the loss of a string of sellouts. August is frequently the most prosperous month for the Genetti, but total revenue in August this year is down 82% from the same month in 2019.

Usually the host site for the friends and family of four Little League teams, as well as some ESPN personnel, and many of the same fans who flock to Williamsport every year, the hotel's general manager Miranda Kujawa said it can feel like a ghost town some days.

With staffing cut down from 77 employees to 16, Kujawa said she longs for the moment in the future when annual guests, like the fans and family of team Australia, can return to her hotel.

"I miss the atmosphere, the excitement," Kujawa said. "I miss finding one team that you grow fond of and then there's that connection. Personally, I miss a lot."

Four blocks east on Fourth Street, Franco's Lounge closed its doors in March, then reopened in the beginning of June. A downtown establishment for 36 years, Franco's cut back its days of operation and hours to Wednesdays through Saturdays from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Daniele said that, like the Genetti, his restaurant's finances rely heavily on the annual return of Little League to central Pennsylvania.

"It would pull us out of our financial doldrums every year," Daniele said. "I mean, we do OK, and we pay our bills, pay ourselves and our staff and everyone. But August always helped us, boomed us and put us ahead of the game for the fall and winter."

Aside from having the Hawaiian and Italian teams at his restaurant as often as three to four times a week in recent years, Daniele said workers from ESPN's crews often come to Franco's multiple times during their stay in Williamsport.

"This is ESPN, ABC sports central when they're here," Daniele said. "They discovered [Franco's Lounge] probably 20 years ago, so when they're here it's their home away from home."

A tight, sit-down spot, Franco's has struggled to garner business due to Gov. Tom Wolf's 25% capacity limit on restaurants. Franco's has limited room for outdoor seating and can hold a maximum of 16 patrons inside at a given time, but Daniele is confident his restaurant will persevere.

"I was like 'I'm not going to let coronavirus take me down,'" Daniele said. "We've been doing this for 36 years and I'm not going out with this. I'm going to go out on a better level."

One local event that did survive the cancelation of the LLWS was an annual Little League pin trading convention put on by Infiniti Pins. This year's version was socially distanced, and took

place at South Williamsport's Community Park on Thursday and Friday, and at the Genetti Hotel on Saturday.

Rick Lombard, a Williamsport native known by collectors as the "pin doctor," has been going to the convention since 1998. For Lombard, he always enjoys the camaraderie of the event and was "bummed out" when he heard the LLWS was cancelled.

"This is my vacation," said Lombard about the LLWS. "People ask where I'm going on vacation and I say I'm going to South Williamsport."

Despite the loss of the Little League World Series, Lombard, Fink, Kujawa, and Daniele all agree Little League made the right decision to cancel the summertime spectacle. Businesses across the city of fewer than 30,000 people just want everybody to come back when the COVID-19 pandemic is finally over.

"It's free admission, free parking and if you want to stay at a hotel, there are shuttles that run you over to the complex regularly," Fink said. "It's a very inexpensive activity for families. To me, it's one of the great things about being able to come to an event that is world class — and you don't have to mortgage your future for it."

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