

Jimmy Johnson's Atlantic City fishing tourney will return, says NFL Hall of Famer

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Dan Gallagher of the Atlantic City Sports Commission

Photo: Matthew Strabuk

ATLANTIC CITY — After having a strong turnout for three straight years, Hall of Fame football coach Jimmy Johnson intends to bring his Quest for the Ring fishing tournament back to the resort next year.

“It has taken on a real positive experience,” Johnson said Friday from The Deck at Golden Nugget Atlantic City. “When you see 700 out-of-towners come here for the hotel rooms and for the restaurants and for everything else, it’s a real boost for the Atlantic City economy.”

The tournament, officially named Jimmy Johnson’s Atlantic City Quest for the Ring Championship Fishing Week, was stationed at Sen. Frank S. Farley State Marina, beside the casino hotel, throughout the week. Tents were set up for vendors to greet guests and spectators, and a weigh-in station gave people an up-close view of each day’s catches, some of which included marlin and yellowfin tuna.

The tournament, which ends Sunday, features a \$1 million-plus guaranteed purse and a week full of hospitality for 100 teams.

About 80 boats were out miles in the ocean late Friday afternoon, leaving a section of the marina empty while a gradually building crowd anticipated their return.

Quest for the Ring is expected to generate about \$2 million in revenue for the city, said Dan Gallagher, director of sports sales with the Atlantic City Sports Commission, a nonprofit that operates under Visit AC.

“This event is 100% a staple here in Atlantic City,” Gallagher said before Friday’s weigh-in. “This is a high-caliber event, and we think we’re a high-caliber destination, so to have this event here in our destination is invaluable to us.”

The Atlantic City tournament isn’t the only one Johnson hosts. He hosts a similar annual event in southern Florida, in partnership with Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino.

That partnership with Hard Rock led to the idea of bringing the event here.

Johnson is known best as a former NFL football coach who led the Dallas Cowboys to a pair of Super Bowl championships in 1993 and 1994. He would go on to lead the Miami Dolphins before retiring from coaching. He’s worked for years as a studio analyst for Fox Sports.

Johnson said the tournaments have helped him learn more about the resort, having had only minimal experience in the city, such as when he attended a fight between Mike Tyson and Michael Spinks in 1988 at what is now called Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall.

“I think Atlantic City and this area is a perfect place for it (the tournament),” Johnson said. “We’ve got the water here, and we got great fishing. I think last year we had a 659-pound blue marlin win the tournament.”

The coach’s fishing tournaments have doled out about \$14 million in prize money, he said. Past tournaments have included appearances by NBA legend Michael Jordan.

“The fishermen around the country, they want to be in this tournament,” Johnson said. “I think, mostly, the fishermen have said they’ve been in tournaments before all throughout the country, but they’ve never been in a tournament that has the experience that we have.”

The event also gives back to the city’s people.

As part of a community initiative, it is hosting a filet station at the weigh-ins nightly. Teams can donate their catches to be fileted on the spot and donated to the Boys & Girls Club of Atlantic City. In years past, thousands of pounds of fish were donated to feed the community.

Johnson’s interest in fishing has grown since he retired from coaching, he said.

“I’ve always lived on the water,” Johnson said. “I’m originally from Port Arthur, Texas, so I fished as a kid, and then, of course, living on the water in the Florida Keys, I do a lot of fishing.”

Atlantic City has increasingly tried to diversify its tourism offerings beyond gambling and entertainment. Events like Johnson’s give visitors more to choose from when coming into town, Gallagher said.

Those efforts have been part of the Sports Commission’s intentions since it was founded in 2015, he said. Bringing a range of sporting events into town is one of the commission’s priorities.

“Having a fishing tournament of this level in this destination is a big part of us trying to do that,”
Gallagher said.