

Perceptions of Service Quality, Satisfaction and Intent to Return Among Tourists Attending a Sporting Event

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The sport industry has witnessed tremendous growth over the last decade. By the end of the 1990's the industry had grown to \$213 billion, exceeding the growth predicted at the beginning of the decade by more than \$90 billion (Mahoney & Howard, 2001). A large factor contributing to this growth derives from leisure-based travel for the purposes of either watching or participating in sport. During this time, sport-related travel accounted for 20% of the total sport industry, calling attention to the emergence of a specialized field of study labeled sport tourism (Chelladurai, 2001). Sport is now regarded by many to be the world's biggest social phenomenon (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003) and tourism its largest economic sector (McCannell, 2002). McGehee, Yoon and Cardenas (2003) report that sport tourism is a \$27 billion per year industry in the United States. Hudson (2003) claims that 38 percent or 75.3 million adults in the United States travel to attend sporting events.

Within the service sector, tourism has become a significant economic activity for many regions (Eugenio-Martin, 2003) and travel related to sport and physical activity one of the fastest growing sectors (Gibson, 1998). Sport and tourism are believed to be among the world's most popular leisure experiences (Ritchie & Adair, 2004). Two important factors can be attributed to the growth in sport tourism over the last two decades. First, a general growth in discretionary income has provided consumers with greater choices concerning their leisure and recreational activities (Thwaites, 1999). Second, cities turned to sporting facilities in the early 1980's as a way to assist downtown development and draw attention to their central localities (Turner & Rosentraub, 2002).

The economic, environmental and social impacts of sport and tourism have helped to spur the interest of these two areas of activity within local, state and national governments (Standeven & DeKnop, 1999). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, local administrators have used sport as a way to achieve economic and social development by creating a variety of sport-related organizations and services within urbanized communities (Bradish, 2003). In the United States, a considerable amount of attention has been focused at the local level where "sports commissions" have been established, often under the umbrella of a city's Convention and Visitors Bureau (Weed, 2003). The primary purpose of a sports commission is to attract major events to a city. Therefore, most cities welcome their existence claiming that sporting events have a positive impact on the local economy (Pennell, 1990).

More than 270 cities across the country currently have a sports commission or a similar type of entity focused on attracting sporting events (National Association of Sports Commissions, 2005). The enormous growth in the number of sports commissions is evident when considering that in 1993 there were only thirty such organizations in existence (Kelly, 2000). As the number of sports commissions has increased, so has the competition to attract new guests to one destination over another alternative. For many cities, entering into this highly competitive market makes survival even more stringent (Pennell, 1990). One way that many sports commissions could differentiate themselves is on the basis of providing a high quality of service. One could argue that it is the only way to gain a competitive advantage over competing sports commissions.

Providing the visitor with a superior experience is based upon the sports commission's ability to help coordinate or provide a bundle of high quality services that meet or exceed the expectations of the guests visiting the city. Particularly salient "touch points" for many sports commissions are hotels, event venues and nodes of transportation (Logan, 2004). These "touch points" can be converted into a consumer benefit package comprised of a sporting event, hotel accommodation, and a host of other peripheral services. Collier (1994) describes a consumer benefit package as a "clearly defined set of tangible (goods-content) and intangible (service-content) attributes the customer recognizes, pays for, uses or experiences" (p. 63). The focus of the current study is the quality of the service encounters experienced by the sport tourist. The theoretical framework for the study derives from the service quality literature.

The primary purposes of this study were to: a) propose a comprehensive set of dimensions of quality in sport tourism services; and b) propose and test a model where perceived quality in selected dimensions is said to lead to client Satisfaction with the experience which, in turn, is said to influence the intent of the tourist to return to the event in the future. A secondary purpose of the study was to develop a scale to measure service quality in selected dimensions, client Satisfaction and Intent to Return.

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The model was tested using data collected from spectators traveling to a major league All-Star sporting event in the United States. All tourists responding to the questionnaire were from a residence 50 miles or more away from the stadium. The data from the 215 usable cases was analyzed using structural equation modeling. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the CFA Measurement Model was an acceptable fit (CMIN/DF=1.828, RMSEA=.067, NFI =.802, GFI = .840, TLI = .872, CFI =.897). The structural model was a good fit for the data (CMIN/DF= 2.394, RMSEA=.081, NFI =.932, GFI = .950, TLI = .932, CFI =.959).

The findings from this study point to support for a multi-dimensional model of service quality in sport tourism. The most important dimension was found to be the quality of the contest itself. The results suggested that there is an overall perception of sport tourism quality (ST Quality) which significantly contributes to a tourist's perceptions of satisfaction. Moreover, Satisfaction was found to significantly contribute to a tourist's decision to return to a sporting event and/or to a particular destination. The scale developed in this study offers a good starting point for exploring services in sport tourism. A discussion of results is provided along with implications for sport managers and recommendations for future research.