

Experiences of Executive Level Special Event Volunteers as Serious Leisure

Jennifer Bent Richard, University of New Brunswick
Shirley Cleave, University of New Brunswick

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Hosting special events are an integral component of the sporting experience. Most, if not all, are heavily dependent on volunteers for both planning and implementation. From the thousands of individuals required for major multi-sport events like the Olympics to the few parents that are needed for school sport days, volunteers make it possible for organizations to host special events. Enhancing our understanding the volunteer experience has both theoretical and practical outcomes.

The roles, responsibilities, time commitments, and qualifications of special event volunteers vary widely from position to position. Some volunteers, often known as event time volunteers (ETV), carry out specific tasks or help in a particular venue during the actual event (e.g., scorekeeper). Others, often called planning volunteers (PV), begin their involvement in the months or years leading up to the event and contribute significant time and effort in planning and then conducting the event (e.g., member of hospitality committee). While a number of researchers have examined special event volunteers (e.g., Johnston, Twynam, & Farrell, 2000; Ralston, Downward, & Lumsden, 2004), it is only recently that researchers have distinguished ETVs and PVs as separate categories of special event volunteers and examined the differences in the nature of their volunteer experiences (e.g., Doherty, 2003; Elstad, 2003). While creating two categories of special event volunteers has enhanced our understanding of special event volunteers, it is possible to identify a sub category of volunteers within special event PVs. These are the people who assume major leadership roles and who are accountable for the overall planning and implementation of the event. They are often involved for several years leading up to an event and spend many hours per week fulfilling their responsibilities. For the purposes of this study, individuals in this sub category have been labeled Executive Level Planning Volunteers (ELPV).

Despite the critical roles ELPVs play in hosting special events, no researchers have specifically studied them. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Executive Level Planning Volunteers involved with a multi sport special event, the Canada Winter Games held in Campbellton-Bathurst, NB. Beginning in 1967, Canada Games have been held every two years, alternating winter and summer, in various communities across Canada. They are a premiere multi-sport event for young athletes and often serve as a stepping stone for future Canadian Olympians. Over the years, approximately 45,000 athletes have participated and over 67,000 individuals have volunteered in the Games (canadagames.ca, 2003).

Participants in this study were volunteers who served as Vice Presidents on the Host Society Board of Management for the Canada Winter Games in Campbellton-Bathurst. Each vice president had responsibility for a particular aspect of the Games, such as Athletes' Village, Finance, or Media & Communications. Individually and collectively, they were responsible for the successful hosting of the Games. Of the 14 vice-presidents, eight were comfortable being interviewed in English and were invited to participate. Seven accepted the invitation, five men and 2 women. In general, the participants were between 35 and 54 years of age, married, professionally employed, had completed formal education beyond high school, and resided in a rural town.

A qualitative approach using in depth semi-structured interviews was used in this study. Open-ended questions were posed and each interview began with inviting the participant to talk about their experiences. As the conversation evolved, questions were asked to gather an understanding of each individual's experiences as a Games volunteer, the costs and benefits, the positive and frustrating aspects, previous volunteer experience, and previous sport involvement. The interviews which lasted approximately two hours were tape recorded, and supplementary field notes were taken. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and N-VIVO, a data management software program, was used to help organize the data. Data analysis was begun after the first interview and continued throughout the data collection phase to ensure emerging concepts and issues were identified and explored. Transcripts were coded individually and then analyzed together to identify general patterns and overall themes.

Although volunteering has traditionally being considered as work-like, a number of researchers (e.g., Green & Chalip, 1998) have noted that it can also be understood as a leisure activity. Aria (1997) has suggested that the concept of serious leisure, developed by Stebbins (1992), may be helpful in establishing the relationship among volunteering, leisure and work. She noted that serious leisure is " most effectively viewed as an intermediary form of activity falling between work and casual leisure" (p. 20). Stebbins (1992) defined serious leisure "as the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting in nature for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special

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skills, knowledge and experience" (p. 3). Since volunteering is one of the forms of serious leisure identified by Stebbins, serious leisure was used as the conceptual framework for the current study.

From the analysis of the data from this study, four themes emerged which encapsulated the experiences of the ELPVs. Contributing to the community was the primary reason for participants' initial interest and leaving a lasting legacy was the outcome that provided them with the most pride. Participants described both cooperative and conflictual relationships; cooperation coming from families, friends, and employers and conflict arising as the vice-presidents strove to carry out their sometimes interdependent responsibilities. Sacrifices included less time spent with family or on jobs, financial expenses and fewer leisure opportunities. Participants experienced a sense of Perseverance both as they rose to the challenges inherent in hosting the Games and as they struggled to overcome the doubts of others.

These four themes will be discussed in light of the six characteristics of serious leisure identified by Stebbins: need to persevere, finding a career, personal effort & special skills, durable benefits, unique ethos, and identifying strongly with pursuit. For example, Stebbins' concept of durable benefits includes feelings of accomplishment and self-enrichment which maps on to the sense of pride the ELPVs experienced because of the contributions they were able to make to their community. Implications for practice and areas for future research will also be discussed.