

## The Fanatics: National Identity and the Traveling Fan

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**2:30 PM - 2:55 PM**

In the United States, sport is one of the larger industries accounting for approximately 1% of the gross domestic product (GDP). Gratton and Taylor (2000) suggest that sport related travel accounts for 7% of total expenditure on sport. Although a small percentage of the total, this nonetheless represents a substantial aggregate expenditure. In 2001, the Travel Industry Association of America, estimated that event sport tourism in the United States generates \$27 billion a year (Travel Industry Association of America, 2001). Recent research notes that sport fans can take on the role of tourist by traveling to watch their team play (e.g., Fairley, 2003; Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; 2003). This work has examined the behaviors of fans who travel to watch college sport (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002, 2003; Irwin & Sandler, 1998), and fans who travel domestically to watch professional team sport (Fairley, 2003). These studies have noted the central role that group affiliation plays in the sport tourism experience. Interestingly, recent research by Fairley (2003) suggests that sport tourism is not simply about an "experience of sport" or an "experience of place" as previously thought. Instead, much of the appeal of sport tourism, especially for repeat participants is in the unique social experience that it provides. In particular, the sport tourism experience generated what Turner (1974) refers to as a liminoid state of *communitas*. That is, the process by which individuals momentarily neglect their differences, accept each other as social equals, and come to behave as a unitary group.

Studies of group travel have emphasized the emergence of a group, and the various comforts afforded by a shared travel experience (Gorman, 1979; Lett, 1983; Schmidt, 1979). These studies highlight how the evident distinctions and segregation between in-group (those on the trip), and relevant out-groups influence behavior. Those who travel to a sport event, especially those at foreign venues will almost definitely come into contact with distinct out-groups at the destination, or at least at the event itself (e.g., supporters of other participants in the event or non-supporters). Thus, it is likely that intergroup processes play a significant role in this type of event sport tourism. An understanding of both intragroup and intergroup processes surrounding event sport tourism will provide valuable insight to marketers and managers who seek to understand and influence consumer behavior, especially as much of consumption is believed to be collective behavior influenced by subculture (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Further, the insights can inform much more than just our understanding of event tourism. From a marketing standpoint, understanding the behaviors of sport fans and the consumption communities which they form is integral to the financial success and viability of sport events and the economy of cities and towns which host them. Additionally, understanding fans who travel to attend sport events has wider social application. In particular, as traveling to a sport event is essentially done in one's discretionary time, understanding the associated behaviors and experiences provides insight into how individuals construct, and interact within their leisure time.

While people can and do participate in and observe sporting activities while traveling, the purpose of this research is to begin to understand the phenomenon of fan travel by examining the intragroup and intergroup behaviors of those who travel to attend an international sport event - a form of event sport tourism. Specifically, this study examines the motives and experiences of a group known as "The Fanatics," a group of predominantly Australian fans who travel the world to attend sport events. Data were collected through participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and casual conversation with key informants during the Fanatics trips to the US Open (Tennis) in New York City in 2005 (23 participants) and 2006 (46 participants). Field notes were recorded and entered into the NVivo qualitative software program. Core themes and categories were systematically derived from the data through the use of open, axial, and selective coding (Cresswell, 1998).

Results suggest that the sport event itself was not the sole attraction for many tour participants. In fact, many of the individuals that traveled with the Fanatics had never been to a tennis match before participating on the Fanatics tour. Identification with the social group and national identity played a large role in the sport tourism experience. The Fanatics, a small but particularly visible and vocal group, used travel to a sport event to join together and socialize with other expatriots to parade and celebrate the shared group and national identity. In particular, the group uses pieces of the Australian national culture and tradition (including songs, clothing and mannerisms) to somewhat humorously support Australian participants in international sporting events. Additionally, the social activities that occurred during the travel experienced allowed for newcomers to be socialized into the social group. Implications for sport marketers are discussed.