

The Spectator Experience and Game Environment in an NCAA Division II Athletic Conference

R Brian Crow, Slippery Rock University

Eric MacIntosh, University of Ottawa

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Sport spectator satisfaction has received considerable attention from researchers (e.g., Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002; Madrigal, 1995; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994). Research has demonstrated that spectator satisfaction with the event itself is an important predictor of repeat attendance at future events (Madrigal, 1995), a metric most important to the sport manager. Further, Ross (2006) noted that since the sport manager has no control over the outcome of the game, focus needs to be directed toward other aspects of the fan experience.

A number of issues have been raised related to spectator satisfaction such as the over-consumption of alcohol, crude spectator behavior, poor sportsmanship of athletes on the field and questionable coaching tactics (Weiner, 2008; Ammon & Unruh, 2007; Verni v. Stevens, 2006; Weiner, 2008). These issues and others have drawn attention from both professional sport leagues as well as leaders in American collegiate sport, who have recently entertained initiatives to help thwart negative game experiences for spectators (Mason, 2008; Muret, 2008). The central concern is that questionable behavior and poor conditions surrounding the fan experience and game environment may have an immediate and long term impact on spectator attendance and consumption ultimately impacting brand equity (Aaker, 1996). At present, little is known about how these issues influence the sport spectator's behavior at future events and what that might mean for the sport organization, league and brand itself. Thus, it is necessary to understand the impact of these issues by examining a number of different factors associated with satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the game environment.

The current study examines how spectators attending athletic events in a Division II athletic conference process the game environment experience. The study considers how spectators are affected by fan, athlete, and coach behavior and the impact of the overall game environment. The primary purpose was to assess the general game environment within NCAA II sport and determine which issues are present that may effect spectators enjoyment and repeat attendance at future games. The initial qualitative exploration focused on football to determine factors important in the game environment.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2003), whereby the researchers first collected qualitative data during the 2008 football season, from August 2008 to November 2008. Upon the completion of the first phase of research, the researchers developed an instrument to assess the game environment. This instrument will be utilized for the second phase of quantitative research to take place during the basketball season from November 2008 to March 2009. For the initial phase of data collection, a collective case study approach was used to detail the game environment (Creswell, 2003). Multiple sites were chosen for the study to help identify potential issues using a wider sample of schools in Division II. Each observer was provided a list of game environment issues to scrutinize, developed from the NCAA Division II Game Environment website (NCAA Division II, 2008). These included: (1) overall cleanliness, (2) congestion, (3) safety, (4) parking, (5) concourse, (6) concessions, (7) bathrooms, (8) seating and other stadium areas, (9) friendliness and helpfulness of game-day staff, and (10) delivery of the Public Service Announcement (PSA), which states, in part, that attendees are to respect the rights of others when enjoying the game.

A minimum of three researchers observed each game 1 hour prior to the gates opening, during the game, and 1 hour after the game had finished. Detailed field notes and observations were collected. A site by site analysis was conducted whereby the researchers discussed observations and compared notes for each game attended producing emergent categories. From here, a thematic or rather "cross-case" analysis (Creswell, 1998) was developed by the researchers that pooled the findings into a context specific study aimed at examining the game environment within NCAA II sport. The pooled findings helped to inform the survey developed to explore the game environment for the second phase of the sequential design. For this phase of the research, multiple items have been developed to measure factors found to influence the spectator experience. These items were tested for clarity and content validity with the assistance of the PSAC Commissioner, two athletic directors of Division II programs, and a panel of four academics with expertise in sport management.

Based on their feedback, items were refined and pilot tested during a basketball contest for overall flow and readability, after which minor adjustments were made to the survey. Results For phase one, the researchers attended 10 football games at 9 Division II sites so as to ensure some geographic and event variability. The following themes emerged as common issues related to the fan experience that may ultimately impact spectator satisfaction and intention to return to future games: (1) Parking, (2)

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Venue, (3) Security/Safety, (4) Fan Behavior, and (5) Staff Behavior. In phase two, the researchers will determine which of these themes impacts spectator satisfaction and intention to return.

Discussion

The preliminary qualitative results have shown that the game environment at Division II athletic events is generally positive, with opportunities for meaningful improvements on each campus. These findings, coupled with the quantitative results, will allow Division II athletic administrators to fine-tune their event offerings to ensure repeat attendance, high spectator satisfaction, fan loyalty, and enhanced brand equity. The presentation will discuss the study findings and focus on the factors most pertinent for sport managers to improve on spectator satisfaction and intention to return to future events.