To Play in the University Stadium or To Play in the City Dome? Examining Spectator Satisfactions with Event Operations of Intercollegiate Football Games

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As an American tradition, a football game event is often viewed and promoted as a community festivity (Bowling, 1999; Leone, 1997). Football also plays a critical role in the financial well-being and overall achievement of intercollegiate athletic programs. Successfully operating football events is essential to attract event attendees, satisfy their needs and expectations, and enhance their re-patronage. Numerous researchers have explained that provision of high service quality is critical to the profitability of a sport organization because it enhances customer event experience and satisfaction and, in turn, promotes customer loyalty (Zhang et al., 2007). In many ways, event operations are a form of customer service that focuses on game support programs. Zhang, Smith, Pease, and Lam (1998) defined game support programs as controllable service attributes that are related to game operations, such as ticket services, stadium services, game amenities, and facility accessibility, all of which are to support the provision and enjoyment of a sport event. The quality of these event operation activities can usually be controlled by team management and marketers before, during, and after the event. Various researchers (e.g., Brooks, 1994; Buell, 1984; Stotlar, 1989) explained that sport games are the core product function of a professional sport team; the coaching staff, athletes, and referees are primarily responsible for producing the core product. When operating game events, team management usually has little involvement in this process of core product. Instead, the team management primarily works on other product functions related to game support programs, such as ticket service and stadium quality. The quality of support programs often affects the overall operational effectiveness of an event, and even promotes the consumption levels of consumers. According to Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2007) and Murray and Howat (2002), due to the uncontrollability and unpredictability of competition results, focusing on controllable event operation variables is apparently more realistic and effective during the game event for the team management in order to enhance the game experience of spectators.

Given the importance of event operations, athletic administrators often seek various means to enhance the experience and satisfaction level of event attendees. For many universities located within or near a major metropolitan vicinity, one common dilemma of their athletic administrators is whether hosting the football game event in the stadium on campus or in the city dome if available. Each option has its own merits. For instance, playing on campus is likely to be more convenient for students living on campus. In the meantime, the university athletic department has better supervisions in such operational areas as facility preparation and the event management crew. Conversely, hosting the event in a city facility, which is usually an indoor stadium, would have better temperature control and be more convenient for the metropolitan residents; however, the university seldom has no direct supervision and control of the facility that is usually contracted with an event management company. Understanding consumer perspectives of event operation quality in both settings would provide athletic administrators with needed information to make informed decisions in choosing a facility site to host a football event.

The purpose of this study was to compare spectator satisfaction toward event operation programs in two facility settings, namely university stadium vs. city dome. Based on a comprehensive review of literature (e.g., Murray & Howat, 2002; Zhang et al., 1998, 2004), interviewing with athletic administrators, and a test of content validity by a panel of experts, a questionnaire was developed that contained the following sections applicable to both facility settings: (a) spectator satisfaction toward event operations, which had 25 items under five factors (Satisfaction toward Event Amenities, Satisfaction toward Concession Services, Satisfaction toward Staff Professionalism, Satisfaction toward Audio Visuals, and Satisfaction toward Facility Accessibility), (b) facility preference between university stadium and city dome, and (c) sociodemographic variables, including gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, household size, household income, education level, occupation, and university affiliation. The spectator satisfaction items were primarily derived from related scales developed by Zhang et al. (1998, 2004, 2007). With the items being phrased in a Likert 5-point scale for both facility settings, they were arranged in a random order.
Inclusion of the sociodemographic variables was for the purpose of sample description purpose. To control for inter-team variability, a within-group research design was executed for data collection, where an university football program that played one half of its home games in the university stadium and the other half of its home games in the city dome within the same competition season was chosen for the study. The questionnaire was administered at six home games of the university football team, including three games in the university stadium and three games in the city dome. A total of 506 event attendees completed the questionnaire. A majority of them were male (86%) and married (75%), ranged in age between 30 and 65 years old (75%), and were affiliated with the university as an alumnus (85%).

A repeated measure MANOVA comparing spectator satisfaction scores over two facility settings revealed that the mean vector satisfaction factor scores were significantly ($\Lambda = .191; p = .000$) different over the two facility settings, where event attendees at the university stadium setting were more satisfied with Event Amenities, Concession Service, and Staff Professionalism; conversely, event attendees at the city dome setting were more satisfied with Audio Visuals and Facility Accessibility. Moreover, 90% of the respondents preferred the game to be held in the university stadium; whereas, the remaining 10% preferred the city dome. Findings of discriminant function analyses further indicated that for those preferring the university stadium, they rated the on-campus events higher in all five satisfaction factors than those preferring the city dome, and vice versa. However, even those preferring the university stadium were more satisfied toward Audio Visuals and Facility Accessibility offered at the city dome setting than those offered at the university stadium setting. Considering the fact that a majority of event attendees preferred football game event to be held in the university stadium, it would be necessary for athletic administrators to ensure and improve the provision and quality of Audio Visuals and Facility Accessibility of the university stadium in an effort to satisfy the expectations of consumers. On the contrary, for those intercollegiate football programs choosing to host football game events in a city dome, efforts need to be made to improve Event Amenities, Concession Service, and Staff Professionalism. Discussions are further made in the context of theoretical and practical implications.