Managing Sport at the Olympic Games: The Case of Sydney 2000

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Management/leadership Thursday, May 24, 2012 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Municipal)

Abstract 2012-024 10:50 AM

The organisation of a mega-sport event such as the Olympic Games is a complex task involving a range of individuals and stakeholder groups (Toohey & Veal, 2007). In 2000, Australia’s largest city, Sydney, staged the Summer Olympic Games. The agency given primary responsibility for these Games was the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG). Two additional organisations also played a large role in the Games organisation: the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) and the New South Wales (NSW) Government (Gordon, 2003). The purpose of this research was to explore the part played by the host national Olympic committee (NOC) as a key Olympic stakeholder in the organisation of the Olympic Games. To date in the sport management literature the role of the host NOC in the organisation of an Olympic Games has been largely ignored (Frawley & Toohey, 2009). The study attempted to address this gap in the sport management knowledge base.

In particular, the research examined the AOC’s involvement in the establishment of an independent Olympic agency that was called the SOCOG Sports Commission (SSC). The impact of the SSC on the organisation of the Olympic sport competition, which was managed by a SOCOG functional area called the SOCOG Sport Program, was explored. The research investigated whether the organisational power relations maintained by the AOC, through the formation of the SSC, influenced and shaped the management of the SOCOG Sport Program, and whether as a result of this involvement sport received a high priority within SOCOG.

The analysis of organisational power relations was a central feature of the study. The interdependent and fluid organisational network, involving SOCOG, the AOC, and the NSW Government (as the financial underwriter of the Games) and the resultant formation of the SSC, is analysed using Norbert Elias’s concept of human figurations (Elias, 1994). Rather than considering organisational situations and developments in static terms, Eliasian process sociology argues that the place of organisations cannot be separated from the broader social and historical contexts in which they operate (Newton & Smith, 2002; Dopson, 2005). From an Eliasian perspective, the organisation of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games was the result not only of recent developments but also of countless social and organisational figurations that developed over many years prior to Sydney winning the bid to stage the Games. In this regard, the organisation of the Sydney Games was the result of both planned and the unplanned consequences of Olympic organising over which no one individual had total control.

In attempting to address the specific research questions, a multi-methodological approach was employed. This approach involved collecting and analysing data from three main sources. The analysis was informed by organisational practices that were observed by the researcher, as a SOCOG Sport Program employee, from October 1998 to December 2000. Data were also collected from both internal SOCOG documents and related external documents. In addition, 35 interviews were conducted with former SOCOG officials and managers, who had responsibility for organising and managing the SOCOG Sport Program.

The findings from this research suggest that the AOC played a critical role in the organisation of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. The involvement of the AOC in the organisation of the SOCOG Sport Program was shaped by two key dimensions: firstly, the organisational knowledge and networks of the AOC; and secondly, the organisational power of the AOC. The sport experience and Olympic networks of the AOC influenced the SOCOG strategy of organising the ‘athletes’ Games’. The organisational power relations maintained by the AOC throughout the Olympic planning process placed it in a position where it was able to establish an autonomous decision-making authority within SOCOG known as the SSC, which had carriage of all sport-related and sport-specific decisions for the Sydney Games. However, even with the considerable power the AOC maintained within SOCOG, it was still interdependent on key Olympic stakeholders, such as the NSW Government, in order to deliver the ‘athletes’ Games’.
In conclusion, the researcher conducted a study that makes a contribution to the sport management body of knowledge, specifically as it relates to the body of knowledge for staging mega-sport events, such as the Olympic Games. The research has management implications for the IOC and for future host NOCs, particularly in relation to OCOG organisational design and governance. In the past, little empirical research has been conducted on the role of the host NOC in the staging of the Olympic Games. This study has started to fill this gap.