“It’s just Soaked in History”: Sport Tourism and Nostalgia at the Tour De France

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Nostalgia, the yearning to relive a past period or experience (Havlena & Holak, 1991; Holbrook, 1993), has been shown to play a considerable role in sport tourism (Fairley, 2003; Fairley & Gammon, 2005; Gibson, 1998). Gibson first conceptualized nostalgia sport tourism as travel to visit sport museums, halls of fame, stadia, or those who participated in cruises (Gibson, 1998), thus focusing on the cultural heritage of sport. Sport stadia and sites hold meaning and can be thought of as “sacred places” (Gaffney & Bale, 2004) which may act as iconic symbols of place (John, 2002). Nostalgic recollections may not just be attached to the place itself, but to the events that have taken place within the event (Gaffney & Bale, 2004; Gammon & Fear, 2005).

In addition to the research on nostalgia or heritage sport tourism (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005), other studies have found that nostalgia’s role in sport tourism is multidimensional (Fairley, 2003; Fairley & Gammon, 2003; Mason, Duquette, & Scherrer, 2005). Nostalgia has been shown to relate to sport and place, but it can also relate to nostalgia for social experience (Fairley, 2003; Mason et al, 2005). Fairley’s (2003) examination of a fan group traveling to follow a professional sporting team identified five dimensions of nostalgia: nostalgia as motive, norms and rituals as objects of nostalgia, best experience as objects of nostalgia, nostalgia as the basis for trip suggestions, and nostalgia through socialization. Fairley suggested that the social experience had during active and event sport tourism may engender memories resulting in subsequent nostalgic recollections, and thus repeat visitation. However, we know little about the multiple manifestations of nostalgia in sport tourism experiences to hallmark events carrying significant cultural heritage. Further, we know little about nostalgia’s role in a tourism experience that involves both sport participation and viewing.

This study examined manifestations of nostalgia via an ethnography undertaken on a commercially organized cycling and viewing tour of the 2011 Tour de France. The tour predominately took in stages through the French Alps, as well as the final stage ending in Paris. Participants were encouraged to bring their bicycle to participate in guided rides to key points along the race route or towns hosting a stage finish. Participants were able to enjoy the Tour de France festivities and also see the professional cyclists (the peloton) pass by, before being transported by coach back to the base hotel. Data collection incorporated a range of ethnographic methods including participant observation (with one of the authors positioning himself as an insider in the group), photographic and video, and in-depth interviews with eleven tour members and two tour guides (Creswell, 2007). Data were transcribed and subject to an analysis procedure of open, axial, and selective coding (Neuman, 2006).

Results indicate multiple manifestations of nostalgia. Of key importance was the Tour de France’s history and highlights, dating back to 1903. Respondents alluded to some aspect of Le Tour’s history as a primary reason for their attendance, from which the theme Nostalgia for Event and Sport Heritage emerged. This theme reflected tour members’ yearning to engage with the Tour de France sportscape and connect with an interrelated web of place and feats by actors from the past. However, simply witnessing the heritage sites of the Tour de France was insufficient; kinesthetic connection was of utmost importance. Hence much emphasis was placed on the individuals actually enacting the key rides; that is, cycling the same roads where Tour heroes had gone before.

Deliberate Makings of Nostalgia reflected actions and desires among the tour members that would invoke memories into the future. In this sense, tour members were ‘thinking ahead’, being sure to collect objects as souvenirs, such as branded novelty items thrown from the caravane publicitaire preceding the peloton. Photographs with iconic Tour de France identities and markers constituted a further strategy for enhancing the nostalgic value of this experience.

Lastly, amongst those who had visited France and/or the Tour de France previously, many went about applying their accrued experience to enhance their enjoyment this time around, giving rise to the theme Informed Choice from
Nostalgia. These more experienced travelers tended to behave differently to first-time visitors, placing more emphasis on connecting with the sportscape than viewing the Tour de France peloton and entourage.

The outcomes of this preliminary study are significant for a number of reasons. It is among the first to explore manifestations of nostalgia in sport tourism experiences which integrate both active and passive participation elements. Indeed, the data exposed sport tourists adopting multiple, reflexive roles in an attempt to maximize and enrich the nostalgic value derived through visiting this hallmark sporting event. Indeed, the data indicate that nostalgia is “in the eye of the beholder”. Hence this heterogeneity in responses indicate that sport tour operators must strike a delicate balance between constructing a tour framework ensuring sufficient nostalgic content, while not constraining tour members’ ability to experience nostalgia in their own unique way.