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Planning for Spontaneity: Achieving Communitas at a Sport-for-Development Event

Jon Welty Peachey, Texas A&M University

John Borland, Springfield College

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(including questions)**

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In the early 2000s, the United Nations (UN) declared that sport could be utilized at the individual, community, national, and global levels as a mechanism to achieve solutions to social problems, such as poverty, gender inequality, lack of access to education, and battling epidemic diseases (Beutler, 2008). Once the UN incorporated sport-for-development (SFD) a part of its Millennium Development Goals, more global attention was given to creating SFD programs and special events. These initiatives have the power to lift up socially excluded groups and give structure to their lives. Given that sport has been identified as an avenue to address social exclusion and anti-social behavior (Coaffee, 2008), organizations can manage sport as a remedy to cure social ills. In particular, one-time or annual events can be leveraged for social purposes. However, this social leveraging requires foresight in planning and careful attention to event flow and structure before, during, and after events (Chalip, 2006). Chalip (2006) reasoned that this purposeful structure could lead to communitas – the creation of a sacred (liminoid) space that allows participants to experience excitement, enthusiasm, and community cohesion through spontaneous celebration. While Turner's (1969) original conceptualization of communitas emerged from tribal rituals, communitas has also been studied in both leisure and sport (McCabe, 2006; Sharpe, 2005), including fantasy baseball camps (Brandmeyer & Alexander, 1986) and whitewater rafting trips (Arnould & Price, 1993). The conditions created by bringing together groups with common interests engendered feelings of equality, belonging, and group devotion to a goal that transcended individual lives of the participants (Arnould & Price, 1993). This transcendence and community inclusion could be important to socially excluded groups in that it fosters social capital and can strengthen the social fabric (Chalip, 2006). Sports participation, in short, can reduce social isolation (Bailey, 2005).

The current project involves the examination of a SFD event called the Street Soccer USA (SSUSA) Cup, which is organized for teams of homeless athletes from 22 cities in the U.S. who play a modified form of soccer called street soccer. We examined the structure of the event based on a five-pronged framework introduced by Chalip (2006). Chalip reasoned that events could foster celebration and camaraderie – and be leveraged for social impacts – through five event-management strategies: (a) enabling sociability among event visitors; (b) creating event-related social events; (c) facilitating informal social opportunities; (d) producing ancillary events (e.g., cultural activities that complement the sport event); and (e) theming widely (consistent symbols, decorations, and observed values). We used these strategies as a lens to assess the structure and management of the 2010 and 2011 SSUSA Cups and the resulting liminoid spaces that were created. Thus, the purpose of this study is to provide additional theoretical grounding that helps build a framework that can be used for studying the social utility of SFD events for marginalized populations. We believe, as Chalip (2006) reasoned, such a framework can assist event managers in consciously planning events that can be leveraged socially. The current project is relevant to sport management because it promotes an important future direction for research – the use of sport to manage and enhance the human development of a marginalized group largely overlooked by researchers in our field. Furthermore, Chalip (2006) called for more research on social leverage of events; “there is not yet a theoretical framework for studying the social utility of events. Such a framework would foster practical research that can inform event planning” (pp. 109-110). As such, the current project can serve as a trigger for the development of new organizational theories that explain how sport event planning can go beyond its mostly economic purpose and leverage itself for social benefit.

Using qualitative methodology, this study took place at the 2010 and 2011 Cups. Purposive sampling was used to select study participants (N = 40) to take part in focus groups (6 total). Participants consisted of SSUSA volunteers, administrators, coaches, and players. We included players from six different cities to capture a wide range of experiences. Furthermore, coaches, administrators, and volunteers came from four different cities. We chose to interview a broad sample to ensure data dependability. Direct observations were conducted at both events, including matches, practices, social activities, and informal gatherings. The data analysis process consisted of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We examined transcripts, field notes, and memos to identify emerging

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thoughts and concepts pertaining to Chalip's (2006) event-management strategies. Intercoder reliability was established through numerous meetings between the researchers until consensus was reached on coding and interpretations. Quotations from the transcripts and notes from observations that best represented evidence of event structure were then drawn forth to represent the themes.

We found evidence at the Cups for many of the five strategies recommended by Chalip (2006), although not all strategies were utilized to the same degree. To enable sociability, all players and coaches stayed together in a hostel close to the event site, creating networking and bonding opportunities. With regard to creating event-related social events, the Cups included opening and closing ceremonies; other than that, there was little planned during the tournament. It is possible that Cup organizers were so focused on the management of the tournament that the extra burden of planning social events was overwhelming. However, the event was successful in facilitating informal social opportunities. While matches were being played and some teams were idle, there was ample common space for athletes to get to know one another. Also, there were areas where concessions and merchandise could be purchased. These areas were accessible to spectators, volunteers, and players. This environment appeared to create social opportunities and allow the non-homeless to get to know homeless athletes. In other words, understanding about different social conditions was created in these common spaces. Chalip's fourth suggestion – the creation of ancillary events surrounding art and culture that match the nature of the sporting event – was not utilized by Cup organizers. Again, it is possible that the constraints faced by a not-for-profit organization in administering a large-scale event with limited staff precludes it from looking beyond the intricacies of the actual event. Finally, theming widely was not observed at the Cups. There was evidence of narrow theming in banners, repetitive music, and narratives created by organizers and explicated during the opening and closing ceremonies. However, the theming was inconsistent and lacked coherent structure. At times, theming did “signal and enhance the celebratory atmosphere” (p. 118) of the event (Chalip, 2006), but the efforts by organizers were not part of a coherent strategy.

From a theoretical standpoint, results provide support for Chalip's structural suggestions for events to create *communitas*. SSUSA Cup organizers would have benefited from utilizing all of the strategies, but they may have been limited in their vision and resources. Showing how Chalip's framework “fits” a SFD event allows researchers and practitioners to promote specific structural elements for future events that can support the mission of an organization. Our work can be a foundation to enable organizations to embark on special events that can be leveraged socially to facilitate conditions for social change. In particular, these findings can guide SSUSA in making changes in the future so that *communitas* can be achieved more readily. Several intriguing directions for future research will also be discussed.