

**Mud, Sweat and Fear: An Exploration of the Participant Motivations in Obstacle Racing**

*Sonja Lilienthal, San Jose State University*

*Heidi Grappendorf, North Carolina State University*

**Marketing**

**Thursday, May 30, 2013**

**20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)**

**Abstract 2013-073**

**4:15 PM**

**(Room 408)**

Obstacle courses have been used for sport and military purposes since ancient times. The Greek writer, Lucian even describes the use of mud as an enhancement to training (Lucian in Mullins, 2012). At present, “obstacle courses are the new gyms, and mud is the new sweat” (Hand, 2012, p. 20). The obstacle racing market is large and growing; at least 1.5 million participants in more than 150 separate events, with estimated revenue of \$250 million in 2012, dominated by four startup companies (Keneally, 2012). Obstacle racing is the most recent major trend in the sport and event management world, with major implications and consequences for all areas of sports and fitness management (legal, financial, and marketing). This novel, mutating and fast growing industry exemplifies modern high risk sport consumption and is the newest arrival to the renegade anti-gym movement of the 21st century.

Participant motivation has been studied in the sport management literature (Tokuyama, Greenwell, 2011; Filo, Funk & O'Brien, 2010; James & Ross, 2004; McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002; Madrigal, 2006) and specifically in action/extreme sports literature (Slanger & Rudestam, 1997; McDonald et al, 2002; May & Langer, 2000; and Yong, Yu, & Valacich, 2010). There are multiple websites, newspaper, and magazine articles that have related the dramatic obstacles, the battlefield atmosphere and the post event festivities, however there is a gap in the academic literature related to the modern obstacle racing phenomenon.

The purpose of this study was to begin to examine motivational factors that influence an individual's participation in obstacle racing, following the sociocultural approach used by Celsi, Rose and Leigh (1993) to explore voluntary high-risk sport consumption. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen participants to examine the subtleties of individuals' motives, risk perceptions, and benefit/cost outcomes of participation in obstacle racing. Following inductive analysis, three major general categories emerged. Major categories included pre-race anticipation, during race drama, bedlam, chaos and war-like exhilaration, and post-performance rituals including revelry and shared experience. Minor categories included risk and sensation seeking, the drama of anticipated dangerous obstacles such as barbed wire, underground trenches and electro-shocks, Monday-morning bragging, nostalgia for lost youth, and shared survival of a war-like experience.

As McDonald et al (2002) noted, it is essential for sports marketers to identify the desires of sports consumers because motivation is a significant determinant of sports participation, understanding motivations are critical for sports marketers to understand the reasons consumers participate in certain sports and the benefits they receive from participation (Shank, 1999). The sport management implications of this exploratory study include; greater understanding of participant motivations to participate in high risk activities, one-time low commitment events, and parallel cause related marketing. Further implications are economic impact to cities and towns hosting these events, increased sponsorship as the obstacle races are attracting consumer-product sponsors including Under Armour, Columbia, Merrell, Subaru and Dial for Men, and potential to contribute to increased physical activity in children as some races are expanding to child participants, as young as six years old.