

The Impact of the Legalization of Mixed Martial Arts on a Canadian Border City: A Delphi Study

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Governance
Abstract 2013-206

Saturday, June 1, 2013
9:20 AM

Poster
(Ballroom)

Although the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA) is one of the fastest growing sports in the United States, the acceptability and legitimacy of the sport in Canada remains relatively unknown (Vered, 2009). MMA was considered illegal in Ontario until August 14, 2010. Prior to this date, boxing and kickboxing were the only sanctioned types of prizefights in the province. It was estimated that MMA events would generate \$6 million a year and events would have significant economic benefits for the host city (Ontario, 2010). Other provinces have also legalized MMA and several metropolises (Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto) have successfully held major MMA events promoted by the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). In addition to the UFC there are smaller MMA promoters and these organizations host events in smaller cities. One such city that has been targeted by smaller MMA promoters is the border city of Windsor, Ontario. It is unknown what impact the growth of MMA will have on smaller cities, such as Windsor. In this study, we examine the implications of the legalization of MMA, the emergence of MMA events in Windsor, and the potential impact this may have on the city. To achieve this a Delphi study has been initiated with community leaders and stakeholders in Windsor.

Windsor is an ideal city to investigate because of its size (population is approximately 200,000) and its location as the most southern city in Canada. Windsor is a border city with Detroit, Michigan, where both professional and amateur MMA are legal but not regulated by a state boxing or athletic commission (MMA, 2012). As a smaller city Windsor may not be an attractive market for large promoters such as the UFC. However, it is attractive for smaller and more regional promoters. The city has the capacity to host MMA events with two medium size venues (The Colosseum at Caesars, capacity 5,000; the Windsor Family Credit Union (WFCU) Centre, capacity 6,5000). In the last six months the Bellator Fighting Championship, a national MMA promoter, has held two MMA events in Windsor. Considering these circumstances, Windsor is potentially an attractive market for MMA promoters outside of the UFC. The city can capitalize on these events in terms of increased tourism from out of country visitors, specifically Michiganders. While these events may increase tourism, the legalization of MMA in Ontario may have other implications for the community. By considering these implications, community and business leaders potentially benefit by discovering ways in which to take advantage of the emergence of this sport.

Twenty-five prospective community leaders and stakeholders are currently being solicited to participate in this Delphi study. This includes four executive members of the Windsor Sport Council, four senior event managers (Caesars Windsor and the WFCU Centre), two Windsor Sport Tourism representatives, one media writer from the leading regional newspaper, one leading local politician, two academic researchers in Sport Management from a local university, two medical practitioners, two athletic therapists, three strength and conditioning coaches, and four MMA amateur fighters.

Stakeholders outside of government, such as the individuals in this study, can have a significant influence on the direction of the policy decision-making process, in particular the business groups or organizations being directly discussed in the policy discourse (Berg & Chalip, 2012). Durning (1993) suggests the analysis of policy discourse and the inclusion of varied stakeholder perspectives improve process and the product of policymaking. MMA, and in larger part the UFC, have had to capture the attention of policymakers in order to enable legislation to be proposed and eliminate the barriers of each individual state or province legislature.

The inclusion of community leaders assisting in the policy development at the federal level can offer valuable insight for improving the product of policymaking. These types of individuals, including politicians, practitioners and venue managers are often afforded the opportunity to assist in policy change at the federal and provincial level. It would be of great benefit to include these individuals, along with other stakeholders of MMA, when implementing the policy at

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

a municipal level. The inclusion of such individuals in this study will assist in forecasting the future implications of the legalization of MMA in smaller cities, such as Windsor, by using a wider range of perspectives.

With a Delphi study participants are asked to respond to an anonymous questionnaire, the results to which are collated and then shared with the panel. Participants complete successive rounds of questionnaires where they can respond to previous results and are asked to address additional questions. This process continues until consensus is reached or no further discussion generated. The method is often used as a tool to develop forecasts as experts reflect upon the implications of an event. A Delphi study takes advantage of the group communication process (e.g., pooling of knowledge, idea generation), and circumvents the disadvantages (e.g., group think, promotion of one's own agenda, censorship) through the provision of a forum that is anonymous (Matino, 1983). This method is appropriate for the current investigation as a goal of the study is to forecast the implications of the growth of MMA has for the city of Windsor.

In this study the first round of the questionnaire has been designed to explore the following themes: the impact and implications of the legalization of MMA on the city of Windsor and how the legislation can be leveraged to positively impact Windsor, youth participation and forecasting the role of MMA in Windsor over the next five years. Round one will commence shortly and rounds two and three (if needed) scheduled to be completed by December 2012. The results will be analyzed using an open coding procedure (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to identify issues and trends from responses. The goal of the data analysis will be to determine the implications of the growth of MMA in Windsor and to identify the panel's predictions for the future. The results from this study are potentially significant for sport management because they increase our understanding of the implications of the emergence of new sports in small sized cities and the impact this has on community members.