An Action Research Approach to Leveraging Events for Sport Participation through Community Sport Clubs

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Sport events are temporal and can trigger a variety of short- or long-term, positive and negative impacts. To date, most research on sport events has focused on the economic and tourism impacts of mega sport events (e.g., Maennig & Zimbalist, 2012; Preuss, 2007). This is problematic as events have impacts beyond tourism and the economy, which clearly focus on the commercial aspects. There has been increased attention on optimizing desired social outcomes from events (Chalip, 2004, 2006). Further, the focus on impacts fails to recognize the importance of proactively developing strategies and tactics to achieve desired outcomes. This evolving attention on event leverage recognizes that the outcomes from events depend not on the mere fact that an event has taken place, but rather on the ways that events are used to render desired effects. Non-mega sport events occur more frequently than mega-events, and are accessible to a wider variety of host cities and towns. As a result of this accessibility, they have broader potential to create durable benefits for host communities, including community sport (e.g., Taks, 2013; Taks, Misener, Green, & Chalip, 2013). The ubiquity and relatively low cost of small and medium-sized events makes them an attractive option for social development objectives, particularly building sport participation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to report on the third stage of a multi-year research project identifying and implementing strategies and tactics in community sport organizations to leverage an event for sport participation outcomes.

Previous studies (e.g., Weed et al., 2009), including our own study of two medium-sized sport events (Authors, 2013), suggest that active strategies and tactics are required to obtain added participation benefits. Thus, the final phase of our research project used action research (cf. Reason & Bradbury, 2006) to determine the factors that facilitate and hinder effective leveraging of events for sport development, and to consider the potential sustainability of the outcomes that are generated through event leverage. Action research creates a symbiotic relationship between researchers and participants where both parties educate each other, and contribute to the research process through the sharing of ideas and information, effectively opening a channel for the transfer of knowledge (e.g., Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997). This creates better “research flow” and greater success probability for the desired outcomes as both parties are invested and involved in the research process.

It was decided to select an event that was similar in size and scope to those studied in Phase one of this project (evaluating sport participation impacts), namely a spectator event (as opposed to a participatory event), small-to-medium in size (as opposed to a mega-event) that is sufficiently significant (e.g., media attention, role models, spectators) but also sufficiently familiar that it offered a feasible context through which sport participation could be increased. The 2013 International Children’s Games (ICG), hosted from August 14 to 18, 2013 in Windsor, Ontario, met these criteria well. Thus, the ICG was selected as the event to leverage for participation. We then chose to work with local sport organizations and/or sport communities related to one of the eight sports involved in the event, we settled on two sports (athletics and gymnastics) that were responsive to developing and implementing sport development leveraging tactics. The rationale for choosing athletics was twofold: (1) there was room for growth; and (2) they were able to articulate clear goals, such as targeting grade school children and increasing the membership in this age group. There was only one local club offering athletics in the community, which simplified the implementation of a plan to increase sport participation in athletics. The second sport was gymnastics, which counts multiple clubs in the city, and therefore allowed us to test the feasibility of promoting participation in a sport rather than in a specific club through leveraging. Like athletics, gymnastics demonstrated a level of readiness and willingness to proceed with the project from the outset.
Collaboration with key stakeholders from the sports under investigation (e.g., board members and coaches of local sport clubs) started six months prior to the event with a one-day workshop facilitated by the research team. The workshop consisted of three parts: (1) Scoping, as a positive point of departure for discussion of capacity, member recruitment and retention, organizational structure, media relations, ICG issues, and moulding the sport’s future; (2) Brainstorming specific strategies for leveraging that could be implemented pre, during, and post event; and (3) Development of an action plan by identifying relevant strategies and tactics, timing, purpose, available resources, and resources needed for implementation. At the end of the workshop, each club was asked to identify committee members to work on formulation and implementation of the leveraging plan. Subsequently, the research team took on the role of expert consultants and facilitators as required by the local organization’s planning team pre, during and post event. During the event itself, the research team undertook observations at all venues as a means of identifying opportunities, examining constraints, and obtaining a general sense of the ways in which such an event can be leveraged. Each member of the research team took field notes and these were compared and discussed in a series of research team meetings.

The results demonstrate that while the sports organizations involved in the study were initially extremely enthusiastic about the possibility, it became clear throughout the research process that they were unable to implement leveraging strategies and tactics because they lacked the necessary physical and/or human resources, and because they were impeded by entrenched standard operating procedures for athlete recruitment. Consequently, they were unable to generate meaningful outcomes. As a final stage in the research design, we held a workshop 6-weeks post-event to discuss the constraints, challenges, and opportunities to leverage they were able to see as a result of their experience of the ICG. Clearly, the event itself emerged as having particular constraining factors which seemed to limit the sport organizations’ abilities to implement strategies and tactics. However, the research team’s observations indicated numerous missed opportunities to take advantage of the event and related celebratory activities to market the clubs and sports for sport development outcomes.

Clearly, this research has demonstrated that local sport organizations often lack the capacity even to run basic programs (e.g., Casey et al., 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2009), let alone take on additional strategies and tactics such as leveraging events. Thus, future research needs to address the capacity needs of local sport organizations to effectively market their club to build participation, as well as to incorporate event leverage into their overall marketing strategies and tactics.