An Insider’s Perspective on the Creation of a Sense of Community through a Charity Sporting Event

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Researchers have focused mainly on large-scale sporting events with regards to building communities (Misener & Mason, 2006), or have centralized on annual charity events that are largely used as social marketing tools such as the work of Filo, Spence, and Sparvero's (2013) on the LIVESTRONG participants. However, Schlenkorf and Edwards (2012) have argued that small-scale sporting events have a greater potential to yield connections among community members. What is not exactly clear is how sport can be used effectively as an ‘engine’ of community development, particularly when the focus is not on broader commercial, social, or political targets (Levermore, 2009), but instead on charity events that take place throughout the year. Researchers still know very little about the social value of charity sporting events in the developing and building of community in general, and in the creation of a sense of community in particular - therefore my research focuses on that gap in the literature. I utilized a micro-ethnographic approach to examine recreational charity sporting events held on Jeju Island, South Korea.

Jeju Furey is a charity organization on Jeju Island, South Korea that aims to raise money for local disadvantaged families. It is an organization that I founded and ran for four years – and continue to be involved with ex-terra – therefore I have been able to provide an insider’s perspective. In addition to founding the organization, I lived and worked on Jeju Island among the expatriate and local communities for four years before and for four years after Jeju Furey’s inception.

In order to begin to understand the role that Jeju Furey events have played in building connections within the expatriate community on and off Jeju Island as well as between the expatriate and local communities, I focused on the Jeju Furey beach volleyball tournaments – Jeju Furey’s best attended events. Having participated in several of the beach volleyball events myself, and having seen the positive, emotionally-charged, reactions to them, these events seemed to be the most germane to illustrate MacMillan’s (1996) view of ‘sense of community’; namely, the sense of community understood as a spirit of belonging together that comes from shared experiences, as well as a feeling that there is a trusted authority structure, one in which ‘trade and mutual benefit’ come from being together. Whereas the term ‘community’ itself reflects logical, quantifiable, and even to some extent tangible connections among individuals, such as residing in the same geographical area, sharing a common language, or having another means of communicating, ‘sense of community’ reflects connections among individuals on an emotional level (Brown, 2001).

To acquire a better understanding of the effectiveness of sport in developing a sense of community, I examined a single case of charity sporting events held on Jeju Island, South Korea. In order to do so, I employed a micro-ethnographic approach for the case of Jeju Furey’s beach volleyball tournaments. To inform my understanding of how these charity sporting events created and developed a sense of community, I used participant observation and on-site interviews. This approach is a powerful tool not only for studying social practices in dynamic social systems but also for determining emotional connections of the participants involved. It is a formidable means of discovering, making visible, or getting at what is happening as it is happening. For this case, 43 participants, organizers, and volunteers of the 2013 beach volleyball tournaments were interviewed, a cross section which included both men and women, Koreans and expatriates, and individuals who lived in Jeju prior to the inception of Jeju Furey, as well as individuals who had only lived in Jeju after Jeju Furey had been initiated. This sampling technique was adopted to ensure a more complete picture of the role played by the events in the perceptions of a sense of community.

My insider’s perspective complemented the perspectives of other members of the community to provide a clearer understanding of the nature of the sense of community in Jeju, and addressed the following central research questions guiding my research process: (1) what role, if any, have Jeju Furey charity sporting events played in fostering a sense of community?; (2) what role, if any, has the charitable component in these events played in
fostering a sense of community?; and (3) what meaning, if any, do participants assign to Jeju Furey charity sporting events?

In this study, I present the results of interviews which examined and probed the value people assigned to their experiences with small-scale recreational participatory sporting events that occur intermittently throughout the year, and the roles sport seems to be playing in the building of a sense of community. The results demonstrated that interviewees felt the events offered a particularly overt sense of attachment, that the Jeju Furey beach volleyball tournaments, in particular, were the “definitive” engine in creating a sense of community on the island, previously lacking, and changed the “culture” by inspiring a number of charitable endeavours, not all under the auspices of Jeju Furey. Further, the participants attested that while previously isolated “enclaves” of individuals was the norm on this island, in particular with respect to the expatriate community, the Jeju Furey events fostered an emotional attachment to the community and a sense of connection among the previously isolated community members. Despite the generally positive sense of community fostered through the events, there have also been particular challenges and constraints connected with organizing these events, which can also lead to the fracturing of this newly developed sense of community. Thus, I also discuss the management implications of organizing this type of event, and how the learnings from this case could help to enhance opportunities to develop elsewhere events focused on charity, with the potentially fortuitous effect of enhancing a sense of community similar to that in the Jeju experience.

References


