Examining High-Performance Athletes Experiences within an Athlete Centered Games: Beyond the Podium

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For athletes and sport organizations alike, inherent to the pursuit of excellence is reaching the podium at a major sport event. For the property rights holder and the organizing committee, excellence is about producing the best Games possible for stakeholders (Kaplanidou & Karadakis, 2010). In this regard, accounting for the needs of the athlete stakeholder is critical for management since the athlete is both the producer and beneficiary of organizational activities (Chelladurai & Riemer, 1997).

High performance athletes function within a complex social and organizational environment (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996). Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) argued that there is a need to understand the role sport organizations play in creating a favorable environment for the athlete and suggested that there is a twilight zone which has enveloped the organizational culture in the high performance sport environment due to how it is managed and the lack of inclusion of athletes in defining it. Indeed, organizationally controlled factors such as the village environment, transportation, scheduling ceremonies, sport venues and security concerns have been demonstrated to negatively impact athlete performance (Gould et al., 2002; MacIntosh & Nicol, 2012). Consequently, there is a need for sport management research to continue to examine the Games environment experienced by the athlete to create a more favorable and athlete-centered system (MacIntosh & Nicol, 2012; Thibault, Kihl & Babiak, 2010).

The purpose of this research was to examine the athletes’ major multi-sport event Games experience to determine a) what controllable organizational activities contributed to the athlete satisfaction and b) whether or not the athletes’ perceived the Games to be athlete-centered. This research extends the work on high performance athletes’ experiences, satisfaction and opinions of the multi-sport event environment by providing a first-hand account of the 2015 Pan American and Para Pan American Games held in Toronto, Canada. The research also contributes to both able and para bodied athlete research.

Using a mixed survey methodology, this study collected primary data from competing athletes of the 2015 Games. Prior to the study, the organizing committee (TO2015) established an athlete advisory council (AAC) consisting of both able bodied and disabled athletes to address controllable service factors (e.g., transportation, village, communication, sport venues) “that would create the best possible ‘positive athlete experience’ based on athlete-centered principles” (TO2015, 2013, p. 12). Through consultation with the AAC, a survey was created which consisted of 34-items to measure six controllable service factors (1 = very poor, 5 = excellent). The survey included open ended questions to explore athlete perceptions and opinions on an athlete-centered experience. Due to the Games being multi-lingual, the survey was translated from English to Spanish and French (the official languages of the Games).

To analyze the data SPSS was used for the Likert type questions to determine the descriptive, frequency and reliability statistics. Further, a phenomenological approach (i.e., lived experiences of the athlete) was employed to identify the open-ended responses (Edwards & Corbett, 2015).

Overall, 823 athletes completed the survey. 538 (64.9%) respondents were able bodied and 273 (32.9%) were disabled athletes. 377 (45.5%) respondents were female and 434 (52.4%) were male. The sample was almost evenly split between English (n = 405, 48.9%) and Spanish respondents (n = 413, 49.8%), with only 11 (1.3%) selecting the French survey. All survey items loaded well on all their intended factors, all AVE constructs were in excess of .60, and all Cronbach alpha reliability measures were above the suggested .70 level (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

Findings showed that the competing athletes of 2015 Pan American and Para Pan American Games experienced high levels of satisfaction (M = 4.57, SD = .49). A one-way ANOVA was used to examine differences in able versus
disabled athletes and one significant difference was found according to the social aspects (F (2, 791) =3.69, p < .0). Tukeys post-hoc demonstrated that able bodied athletes reported a higher degree of social experience (M = 4.55, SD = .50) compared to disabled athletes (M = 4.44, SD = .51).

Additionally, the study determined that athlete experiences and performance in competition are influenced by several controllable environmental factors including meeting the competition needs of the athletes (e.g., training venues and equipment importance), having a variety of social and cultural aspects to experience (e.g., inside the housing complex, inside the village, outside the village, opening and welcoming ceremony) to both enjoy and remove athletes from competition stress. Athletes noted several important aspects of their housing complex that added to their comfort (e.g., beds, showers, and laundry service), the availability of WiFi and ease of communicating with their friends, coaches and staff, and finally, the memorable and special experiences of the ceremonies in ensuring that multi-sport events are in fact, athlete-centered.

Central to producing an athlete-centered Games is the inclusion of athletes within decision making and planning activities for example, defining the needs and goals and determining how to meet them (AthletesCAN, 1994). In this presentation, we outline the role of the ACC within the TO2015 organizing of the Games environment and what they felt would contribute to producing the best games possible for this stakeholder of sport events. We posit that considering the athlete experience through evaluative measures such as was done in this study has several implications for the property rights holder and the host organizing committee. Our results indicated that the athlete experience has implications on their actual competition performance. Performance, as measured by normative standards (i.e., medals) can and should also be measured by one’s personal best. Hence, we argue that providing favorable conditions within the Games environment is critical for event managers to help foster excellent athlete experiences and performance which in turn, should provide excitement and enjoyment for other stakeholders (e.g., fans, media).

This study furthers our understanding of factors associated with a positive major Games experience for athletes and what it means to have an athlete-centered Games. Additionally, it provides an understanding of the similarities and differences that exist in the experiences of able bodied and para athletes, an understudied area of sport management research.