

(SP) RECRUITING AND KEEPING SPORTS FANS – A CASE STUDY OF BIATHLON AND CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

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Introduction

The *uncertainty of outcome* is a core element in sport competitions, and has received substantial attention from sports economists (Quirk & Fort, 1992; Sandy, Sloane & Rosentraub, 2004). Although empirical articles mainly have concentrated on team sports, the phenomenon also applies to individual sports. Its rationale is based on fears that fans who enjoy a “close race” will find sports that are dominated by some few athletes or teams to be less attractive. However, any efforts aiming to make the contest more exciting are ineffective unless the competition aspect is visible. It does not help staging a close race, if spectators and TV viewers are unable to keep themselves updated on the development. This represents a challenge for organisers of sporting events, particularly for competitions staged outside arenas.

Cross-country skiing and *biathlon* are sports that attract the interest from the same group of fans (Solberg & Hammervold, 2006). In recent years, they both have put substantial efforts on increasing their popularity, which also includes the introduction of new competitions. This paper will compare internal procedures during these processes and to some degree analyse the effects from the efforts. Historically, both sports were dominated by the Nordic countries, and later on supplemented by the former Soviet Union. The inaugural World Championship in skiing was organised in 1924² and the 1962 Championship was the first time ever an athlete from outside Norway, Sweden, Finland or Soviet Union won a medal in an international championship³. For several years, the ski-festivals in Holmenkollen (Norway), Lahti (Finland) and Falun (Sweden) were the major international competitions, along with the World Championships and the Olympics. An official World Cup was introduced in 1982, with races in nine countries during the first season⁴. This was the start of a new era - with cross-country finally being an international (European) sport. The concept of Modern Winter Biathlon was introduced in 1955⁵. The first World Championship was hosted in 1958; it became an Olympic sport in 1960, while an official World Cup was launched in 1978. Both sports only had individual start procedures during the first years. In recent years, however, new competitions have been introduced. The 2006 Olympics contained 12 cross-country competitions while the 1924 championship only had one. This included mass-start and pursuit-start⁶ (later replaced by duathlon⁷). Sprint, with competitions based on knock-out

² Later it was also given the status of Olympic Games

³ The Italian skier Giulio de Florian won bronze medal in the 30 kilometre in Zakopane 1962. Retrieved from: <http://www.fis-ski.com/uk/disciplines/cross-country/fiswscmedals.html?category=§or=CC&season=1962&nbr=4&search=Search>

⁴ An unofficial World Cup was introduced in 1973/74.

⁵ http://www.biathlonworld.com/eng/history/page_000085.htm

⁶ This was first a competition over two days, where the winner of the first competition started first and was pursued by the athletes in the second-day race.

⁷ This is also a two-stage competition. The first part is mass-start, while in the second part the athletes change skies and style (from classical style to free technique.)

procedures, is the latest newcomer. A sprint relay was introduced in the 2005 World Championship. A similar pattern characterises Biathlon's development. The number of Olympic competitions has increased from one in 1960, to ten in 2006. Relay was introduced in the 1966 World Championship, and sprint in the 1980 Olympics. Pursuit competition and mass-start has become very popular, and the International Biathlon Union (IBU) has also adjusted shooting-procedures in order to improve the spectators' ability to keep themselves updated on the development during the race. This latter aspect has also been emphasised in cross-country skiing, mainly due to aims of enhancing the sport geographically. Sverre Seeberg, chairman of the Norwegian Ski Association and member of the Council of the International Ski Federation (FIS), illustrates some cultural differences between spectators in the Nordic nations and other nations without any cross-country traditions:

“Waiting has been a part of the charm of cross-country skiing. One has waited for the athlete to appear out of the forest and pass by a certain point while the clock has been ticking. This gives great excitement and a special experience. On the other hand, it is easy to understand that people unfamiliar with this culture from childhood, not are able to enjoy it.”

Internal Disagreements

The processes, with new competitions being introduced, have uncovered major differences between the two sports. Although the members of the “Cross-country family” have shared the goal of enhancing the sport, almost every attempt to alter the competition programme has met resistance from the athletes and their coaches. This conflict has caused severe tension between FIS-executives and athletes. Pursuit start was tested in 1987 and 1988, but many athletes disliked it. One reason for this was that snowing weather on the second day represents a disadvantage for the winner of the first-day's race. In 1989, the athletes managed to stop a World Cup race due to FIS's plans of introducing a new “wave-start” system with five skiers starting together. The following season a similar incident occurred when the athletes forced FIS to cancel plans of introducing pursuit start in the World Championship.

Vegard Ulvang, triple Olympic gold medallist, and one of the most active athletes in the fight against FIS officials, today claims: *“It was a reaction towards competition procedures which we disliked, but first and foremost we reacted towards the way they were introduced. FIS's cross-country committee made their decisions without communicating with the athletes.”*

In Biathlon, the athletes were involved in the preparations before pursuit-start and mass-start were introduced in championships. Hence, they were also more positive to the new competitions. Coaches, journalists and other key figures were also involved in these processes. Therefore, these groups also adopted an ownership to the competitions. Furthermore, new competitions were tested in unofficial smaller events before being adopted in World Championships, World Cups and Olympic Games.

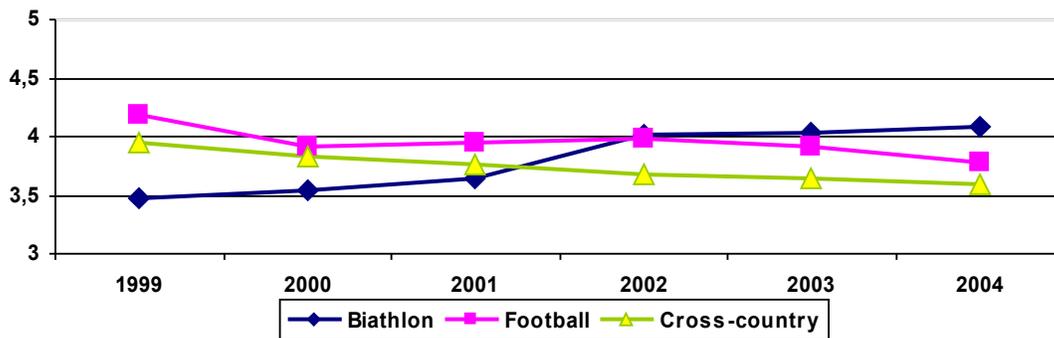
World Cup

The World Cup is regarded as very important promotion instrument. Hence it is also important that the best athletes participate as often as possible. Nevertheless, different attitudes characterise the athletes' attitudes towards the World Cup. During the 2005/06 season, both sports had 24 World Cup events. In Biathlon, the top-ten male athletes on average participated in 21 competitions, while the top-ten male cross-country skiers only participated in 11. One reason for this is that cross-country skiers are specialists, with some athletes only participating in sprint, and others mainly in longer distances. In addition, many athletes avoided World Cup events for other reasons. As a consequence of this, its prestige has been reduced. FIS is aware of the problem and works hard to solve it. As Vegard Ulvang claims: *If we are unable to create an attractive World Cup, cross country skiing will continue being a great sport – but not an interesting TV sport.*

Conclusion

Cross-country skiing and Biathlon have expanded their geographical territories in recent years – regarding athletes and spectators. In Biathlon, the number of medal winning nations increased from 3 in 1991, to 9 in 2005, and for Cross-country skiing from 5 to 9. However, indications of the internal differences influencing the effects of the promotion efforts also exist. Biathlon has become a very popular TV sport, and in 2002, it was the most watched winter sport in Europe⁸. In Norway, several surveys have confirmed its number one position (Solberg & Hammervold, 2006). Fig. 1 presents the results from one of them, which is an annual survey, and illustrates Biathlon having leapfrogged football (and cross-country) on the popularity ladder from 1999 to 2004⁹.

Fig. 1: The popularity of Norwegian TV sports



References:

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⁸ Retrieved 29.04.2006. from: <http://sports.espn.go.com/oly/winter02/xcountry/feature?id=1303976>

⁹ These results are from annual surveys conducted by MMI, a Norwegian media research institute. The respondents graded their interest for various sports by means of a scale from 1 to 6

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