

# **AN INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SPORT ORGANISATION AND A PRIVATE SPORT TOUR OPERATOR**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This study uses stakeholder theory to examine the evolution, logistics, benefits and pitfalls of the relationship between an Australian national sport organisation (NSO) and a privately owned Australian sport tour company, Fanatics Sports and Party Tours (FSPT). FSPT offers travel, accommodation and event ticketing packages for national and international fixtures in a variety of sports. Companies like FSPT are conceptualised as intermediaries between sport organisations and those fans who choose organised group travel to sporting fixtures (Getz, 1998). This function is particularly relevant to what Gibson (2004) describes as event sport tourism.

While focusing on sport tourism and sport tour operators, this investigation takes into consideration the array of other stakeholders that national sport organisations interact with. In recent decades some sport organisations, such as the NSO examined in this research, have come to generate substantial income through the sale of broadcast rights and merchandise, and through lucrative sponsorship deals. While these revenue streams have diluted the financial contribution of gate takings, live sport spectators are viewed as an important ingredient in the success of sport events. As Vamplew, Coyle, Heath and Naysmith (1998, p.66) note “an empty stadium makes no noise”; an unappealing prospect for broadcasters, sponsors, sport organisations and event hosts alike. Event sport tourism may only represent a small source of income for some NSOs. However, through interaction with sport tour operators, NSOs may be able to harness the ability of sport to generate “significant and heterogeneous travel flows” (Higham, 2005, p. 1) to help fill stadiums and make events appealing to larger stakeholders like broadcasters, host cities and sponsors.

For over a decade the NSO examined has been interacting with private sport tour operators like FSPT for both national and international fixtures. While FSPT originally focused on providing budget sport tours with extensive party itineraries for 18-30 year old travellers, their interaction with the NSO has led them to cater for a different, up-market clientele with different expectations.

## **METHODS**

This study involved two qualitative methodologies: a document analysis and in-depth interviews. The document analysis focused on official documents, such as the Annual Reports and strategic documents of the NSO, as well as the NSO and travel operator websites, tour package advertising material and general media sources such as newspaper and magazine articles, radio transcripts, ‘sport blogs’ and relevant sport ‘fan sites’. Textual analysis was conducted and used to inform the development, interpretation and verification of in-depth interview material. Interviews were conducted with current and past staff of both organisations. Relevant respondents were selected using key informant sampling and ‘snowballing’. Interviews were transcribed, manually coded and further analysed using NVIVO software.

## **RESULTS**

A number of themes emerged from the interviews, falling into two broad categories: benefits and costs. Key NSO staff noted that an organisational relationship was maintained with FSPT because of the direct and indirect benefits accrued. Engaging FSPT provided the NSO with direct financial benefits predominately linked to ticket

premiums and the sale of NSO merchandise to tour group members. In addition, staff members highlighted the importance of engaging sport tour operators to provide opportunities for those fans who preferred organised travel to support their team. This was seen as an ‘obligation’ that the NSO could not fulfil without appropriate travel operator licenses. However, it was suggested that the indirect benefits of this relationship were the most important to the NSO. In particular, the sale of sport tour packages assists the NSO in quantifying the number of tourists their events attracted. This assists them in lucrative attracting cities to host their events.

However, it was clear that for the NSO this relationship was not without its risks and pitfalls. In particular, NSO staff observed that there was divergence in the objectives of national sport organisations and private sport tourism entrepreneurs. Further, the NSO wished to distance itself from the budget sport and party tours that FSPT offers 18-30 year old travellers. The NSO expressed concern that they would suffer ‘guilt by association’ and would be left to manage any complaints of disgruntled clients of FSPT tours.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current strategic documents of the case study NSO do not mention sport tourism as a focus area for development. While sport tour operators may not be the most salient of NSO stakeholders, the NSO currently considers its relationship with FSPT to be important. The results indicate that this collaborative stakeholder relationship produces numerous benefits for both parties. However, maintaining the relationship requires constant efforts to align the sometimes conflicting agendas of the two organisations. Will these inherent problems lead NSOs to consider using other models to cater for travelling sport fans?

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