

BLIND FOOTBALL: SPECTATORS' EXPERIENCE OF THE FORGOTTEN WORLD CUP

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Abstract

Aims

As English football fans continued to mourn their national team's performance in the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the county of Herefordshire, nestled in the English countryside was preparing to host a football world cup that would show many fans a different side to the 'beautiful' game. The FA successfully bid to host the International Blind Sports Association (IBSA) 2010 World Blind Football Championships with the aim of developing a lasting impact on visually-impaired football in the West Midlands region and respective County Football Associations (Disability Football Strategy 2010-2012). The aim of the current study, supported by both the English Football Association (FA) and the Royal National College for the Blind (Hereford), was to review spectators' experience of the IBSA 2010 World Blind Football Championships, utilising the notions of social and cultural capital to draw comparisons to previous spectator research associated with disability sport.

Generally, most international games organised for athletes with disabilities have had low spectator numbers. Sherrill (1986) reported anecdotal comments from athletes of the 1984 International Games for the Disabled who expressed disappointment at the low attendance. The Paralympic Games held in Barcelona in 1992 and in Sydney in 2000 were characterised as the most successful Games (by commentators and athletes alike) partly due to the large number of spectators attending the events. Studies profiling spectators at disability sport events report that spectators mainly belong to three categories: athletes participating in the event (Sherrill, 1986), related individuals (e.g., family members, friends) to the participating athletes and unrelated individuals with

disabilities (Evaggelinou & Grekinis, 1998).

To collect empirical evidence, 285 spectators voluntarily completed questionnaires over the duration of the event which lasted 8 days and had an average daily attendance of 586 spectators. The questionnaire was designed to record the following information: general demographic data, the individuals' attendance at the event (particularly how many days and hours they attended), with whom they have attended and their reasons for attending. A further section inquired specifically about their attitudes towards blind football and whether the event might have changed their perception of blind football. The items in the final two sections focussed on attitudes towards the benefits of the event and towards the social issue of visually-impaired / disabled sports. The event benefits items were adapted from previous studies (Delamere, Wankel & Hinch, 2001). Given that no established measures of attitudes towards visually-impaired / disabled sports existed, new items were formulated. These eight items were developed using sport and social inclusion research literature and drew on prior qualitative studies (Sherry, Karg, and O'May, 2011).

Analysis of demographic data indicated a fairly even split between men (56%) and women (44%) and a wide age range of spectators from 12 years to over 50 years. Although 5% of respondents were visually impaired and 46% of respondents knew somebody who was visually impaired, for the vast majority of respondents (81%) this was the first time they had been a spectator at an event for athletes with disabilities. When asked if the event had changed their attitude towards visually-impaired / disabled individuals, 65% believe that it had and 36% reported that they were 'very likely' to attend a similar event in the future. Most of the spectators were attracted to the event due to it being local and their general interest in football (71%) (few spectators had prior knowledge of blind football, i.e., supported, participated, and/or socially related to an athlete). This suggests that many of the spectators were new to the concept of blind football and were genuinely interested in experiencing it for the first time and learning more about the sport.

This observation is not in line with previous research indicating high percentages of attendance of friends and/or family of participating athletes. On the contrary, this event attracted 'new' spectators, who, as a result of attending the event, were keen to learn more about blind football and would attend similar events in the future, pertaining to a potential for increasing social inclusion. The key factors associated with this 'new' spectator profile appear to be linked to locality, the 'community' feel of the event, which may indicate an intended 'renewal of social democracy', which in turn may raise the human capital of disabled athletes and the social capital of disability sport events. The increase of social capital, embedded in the dense network of norms of reciprocity, could enhance the 'productivity' of disability sports. This, we argue, will initially manifest itself locally, with the view to global extension.

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