

# LEVERAGING ELITE SPORT EVENTS FOR THE BENEFIT OF LOCAL SPORT CLUBS

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## Aim

Participation is the lifeline of non-elite sport clubs. The increasing popularity of casual participation threatens to undermine traditional membership-based clubs. Yet strategic documents from government sport agencies in New Zealand emphasise the importance of sport clubs as part of the community (Sport New Zealand, 2012). The aim of this research is to investigate how local sport clubs can leverage increased participation/membership from a high profile elite sport event in their local community. Rather than simply identify whether a sport event has impact, this study aims to identify what can be done to leverage from an event, that is intentionally create impact by utilising some aspect of the event for longer term benefit. The research question is explored within the context of two second-tier international tennis tournaments held in Auckland, New Zealand.

## Theoretical background

A review of sport event literature reveals a gap with regard to how sport events benefit the sport itself, in particular the potential link between high profile, elite events and participation at non-elite level.

Chalip (2006) and O'Brien and Chalip (2007) suggest that events can be used for social benefit. Chalip proposes that a sense of celebration and camaraderie contribute to a 'feel good' outcome during and following an event. This positive feeling becomes a leverageable resource. Event stakeholders need to identify ways in which "post-event euphoria can be used to foster social initiatives" (p.129). O'Brien and Chalip propose a framework whereby the 'feel good' factor creates an opportunity to develop a sense of community. This enables event stakeholders to target social issues and align the event with the issue/s. Participation in sport is widely documented as a social issue for New Zealand (Nicholson, Hoye & Houlihan, 2011; Sport New Zealand, 2012). With sport clubs being an integral part of the New Zealand community, the framework can identify ways of increasing participation in sport clubs.

## Methodology, research design and data analysis

A three-phase action research process underpins this study. Qualitative research methods were utilised. During the reconnaissance phase, data were collected from seven individual in-depth interviews and two focus groups with personnel from clubs, regional and national sport organisations. The researcher then assisted the participants to identify and implement an intervention. In the third phase 14 clubs took part in a structured evaluation with the results being discussed with five personnel from regional organisations and clubs. Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data.

## Results, discussion and conclusions

During the reconnaissance phase, participants demonstrated a strong sense of pride and affection for the tournaments. They unanimously acknowledged there was insufficient profile for tennis clubs at the events. They agreed this missed opportunity should be the basis for the intervention. The intervention comprised three initiatives: a club information stand at the tournaments; a promotional offer of a free tennis lesson at a tennis club for non-club members (new and lapsed players); and information in the tournament programmes to support these activities.

Each component of the intervention was evaluated with numeric data, where available, that was discussed in qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. Whilst there was mixed reaction about the outcome of the tennis lesson promotion, the perception was that the process used for the study has benefits. Stakeholders were surprised and pleased with the response to the promotional offer (450 entries). With higher than expected number of entries, additional clubs were recruited to offer lessons. The entries were passed to 23 clubs and one regional centre. Actual uptake of the offer (attendance at a club tennis lesson) varied from between one third to half the people entering the promotion. Operational issues (including time delay at some clubs offering the lesson) were identified as reducing the effectiveness of encouraging participation in the free tennis lesson. With the time delay, the season was coming to an end and so limited club membership was immediately evident. Consumer behaviour theory relating to the impact of priming from environmental cues, however, indicates some drop-off in interest after the tournaments was inevitable. To identify whether greater uptake of the promotion is possible, the study could be repeated with improved logistics and monitoring over a longer period of time. Qualitative data (especially from interviews with people manning the club stand at the tournament) demonstrated the reaction of visitors to the stand and the 'feel good' factor amongst spectators.

In conclusion, this study gives some support to O'Brien and Chalip's (2007) model which shows that the 'feel good' factor at a tournament is a leverageable resource. Clubs can benefit from sport events by developing a leveraging plan for a specific event using a process similar to the one in this study. Consideration of leveraging potential of events needs to become a stronger and automatic part of theory and practice of event planning and evaluation. In developing plans, local sport bodies can consider the broad principles behind the intervention in this case study of increasing a profile for

clubs at the sport event and providing a direct link between the event and clubs.

## References

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