
THE IMPACT OF THE LONDON 2012 OLYMPIC GAMES ON GRASS-ROOT PARTICIPATION: A CASE STUDY APPROACH LOOKING AT NATIONAL FENCING AND JUDO PARTICIPATION.

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Abstract

AIM OF PAPER

The aim of this research paper is to investigate the impact that hosting the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOPG) had on grass root sports participation for the host nation. This paper will focus on two non-traditional UK sports, Fencing and Judo to identify changes in community level participation pre and post London 2012.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Green (2007) suggests that sport is a particularly malleable and high-profile policy instrument for countries including the United Kingdom (UK). The UK's reoccurring shift in policy priorities, for example the move from elite sport in 1995, 'Raising the Game,' to mass participation in 1997, 'A Sporting Future for All', highlights the changes in policy implementation and its effects. As this divergence in priorities lead to fragmentation and disharmony between the various bodies involved i.e. the organisational, voluntarily and administrative, causing tension and strain between organisations (Green, 2007). Grix and Carmichael (2011) in their effort to address the complex relationship between elite and mass sport participation coined the concept of a 'virtuous cycle' in which 'elite success on the international stage creates prestige and contributes to a collective sense of identity. This leads to an increase in mass sports participation, ensuring a healthier populace and in turn, provides a bigger pool of talent from which to choose the elite stars of the future. The process then starts over again' (p. 76). In fact, Grix and Carminchael (2011) expressed their scepticism in regards to the validity and trasferability of this East European model of sport success, to the specificities and the cultural context of the UK.

The hosting of the LOPG brought with it detailed sports policy and legacy plans, which aimed to 'Inspire a Generation'. Frawley and Cush (2011, p. 65) suggest that a commonly used and predominantly unjustified

rationale as to why large investments were made by the government, is the idea that the event will encourage the population to be more physically active. To date, the execution of this recommendation by previous hosts of mega sporting events has been inconclusive, largely due to the lack of empirical evidence. Weed et al. (2009) undertook an extensive analysis of previous sport legacy literature and concluded that current evidence on the success of mega events has been poor, as former Olympic and Paralympic Games hosts have used generic measures of social impacts, which resulted in incomprehensible evidence regarding changes to health and physical activity levels. Therefore, this research provides an opportunity for initial, unambiguous quantitative data to materialise, alongside detailed qualitative findings.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study used a mixed methods approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data to effectively answer the research question. Similarly, to Frawley and Cush's (2011) research, this investigation follows a case study method and utilised registered membership data from the National Governing Body (NGB) of each sport. In this case the British Judo Association (BJA) and the British Fencing Association (BFA). The membership data collected only includes participation based memberships, not coaching or volunteering memberships, to ensure the closest representative of sports participation figures that was possible. Many apprehensions of over or under recording have been raised, regarding the reliability of participation data, which in many cases is self-reported. Thus respondents may adapt their responses to meet to social norms and desirability, these issues must be considered. Nevertheless, specifically focusing on the Judo and Fencing statistics, this study uses the registered membership data which is rich, empirical data specifically from the NGB's database. Yet, Frawley, Toohey and Veal (2013, p.72) highlighted that membership data 'does not indicate the frequency of participation, only the number of people registered to a sport'. As individuals may be registered with a NGB, but not actually participate, for multiple reasons, such as altering personal conditions or injury. The Active People Survey (APS) was considered as a data source due to the high proportion of individuals that undertake sport in a non-organised setting. Yet there are many limitations, such as data collection via telephone, limiting the sample and target group through extraneous variables such as individuals with no home telephone line, a demographic group that is predominantly at home, the highly vulnerable, or individuals had are not old enough to participate without parental consent. Additionally, the survey is non-longitudinal, as fresh participants are contacted and questioned annually, thus individuals may interpret the questions differently (Carmichael, Grix and Marqués, 2013). Furthermore, regarding Judo the APS data highlighted 'No Change' in participation between 2005-2013, due to the participation figures, year on year, not being statistically significant. Moreover, in Fencing the data set was incomplete, due to an insufficient sample size for 'once a week' participation, limiting the possibility of using the APS as a data source.

The limitations of the two possible data sets have been highlighted above and for the context of this research sports participation and its associated legacy was defined as organised participation determined through the NGB's membership figures. 15 face to face interviews were conducted with a range of head coaches from around the Kent area, in the respective sports and with one professional working for each NGB. Interviews were constructed around a semi-structured model, to ensure question expansion was possible. The qualitative interviews focused on individual's experiences and attitudes towards the LOPG and the impact this had on their sport. Additionally, questions relating to specific participation-based programmes that were put in place by the NGB's to increase participation at a grass-root level such as 'Go Fence' and 'Enjoy Judo' were included to investigate clubs involvement with the specific mechanisms. Comprehensive thematic analysis of individuals' views were examined, as Greetham (2009, p.181) states that qualitative data 'describes attitudes, feelings, opinions and beliefs', providing an acute examination into coaches and professionals perceptions and beliefs. As these are the individuals on the front line delivering the grass root participation to the nation; hence the findings are valuable and advantageous.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings highlight an overall increase in participation in both Judo and Fencing between the periods of 2007-2013. The interviewees were instrumental in determining the relationship, if any, between the changes in sports participation and the LOPG, as without this qualitative understanding and explanation the causal relationship between those two factors would be unknown. Significance by interviewees was placed on the local, community, grass-root programmes and these were suggested to be the most effective way to increase participation rather than the reliance, solely on the inspiration effect from hosting of the LOPG themselves. Finally, the study highlighted the importance of NGB's in promoting and capitalising on the LOPG, to ensure they had exploited the global sporting phenomenon on the UK's door step. This study provides initial results relating to changes in memberships, after a mega sporting event for the host population of London 2012, in two non-traditional UK sports, Judo and Fencing.

Specifically, focusing on Judo and Fencing there is a lack of preceding research and predominantly previous studies have focused on physiological elements (Kujala et al, 1995). Thus, this research will provide some of the first findings from the 2012 games that consider lower prevalence sports participation rates, which prior to the London 2012 Games, only had a handful of elite successes. This research has enhanced the current body of Olympic and Mega Sporting Event literature regarding legacies and grass-root participation and provides the opportunity for future, additional studies to build on these preliminary results. Future research, into similar sports would allow a picture to emerge of LOPG's legacy achievements.

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