

**“AIMING FOR TOP SPEED” -
INVESTIGATING A WORLD LANDSPEED RECORD ATEMPT**

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All authors:
Harald Dolles (corresp), Mark Dibben

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Synopsis:

We illustrate the application of a longitudinal perspective and participant observation in world class sport event research through a case study of a successful sidecar motorcycle world land speed record attempt.

Abstract:

AIM OF ABSTRACT/PAPER - RESEARCH QUESTION

One area of world class motorsports in which the entrepreneurial, pioneering spirit of the creation and extraction of value from an environment (Anderson, 2007) can still be seen is in world land speed records (WLSRs). However besides popular motorsport and/or historical literature (e.g. Jackson, 1971) WLSR attempts have not been in the focus of academic research. We use an understanding derived from the ‘European school’ of entrepreneurship (Scott and Rosa, 1996), that entrepreneurs, individuals who have the ability to see opportunity, create the circumstances in which that opportunity can be enabled, and then generate the value from that opportunity for the benefit of themselves or others. Entrepreneurship can be found in the event industry, and helps to explain far more than the high profit, high growth venture. In particular, we apply Santomier’s (2002) three-segment (production, promotion, performance) classification of sports entrepreneur activity to the case of a WLSR project. We suggest that entrepreneurial driven sports events are ultimately about bringing together all three segments to one coordinated moment – the sporting event itself – and that that coordination and culmination of prior activity represents a unique opportunity for entrepreneurial creativity and innovative thinking to achieve success. The purpose of this research is therefore to highlight this entrepreneurial coordination and facilitation process of a motorsport event at the world elite level.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

The vast majority of sport and event management research uses questionnaires and interviews or relies on secondary data. Our research

however uses participant observation (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) as a legitimate method of engaging in sport management research. It does this by presenting and discussing a three-year participant observation case study of a WLSR attempt, in order to unpack the way in which innovation, trust, reputation effects, inter-firm collaboration, club membership and volunteerism can combine to provide the necessary sponsorship (both in-kind and monetary), technical expertise and infrastructure, all brought together – or not – by the entrepreneur to achieve sporting success.

Over the course of the 3-year project the workshop of the sport and event entrepreneur (Flying Kiwi Promotions Ltd.) in Christchurch (NZ) was visited on a regular basis. One of the authors also acted as an executive coach/mentor for the entrepreneur and became a member of the land speed record track team. He also organized five planning meetings to work up the concept of the one-off rally special stage event. On the day of the attempt, he was a member of the road team working the timing system and confirming the course was safe.

Adopting an ethnographic approach also allows us to address and discuss a range of methodological issues commonly associated with the approach. This is notwithstanding the limitations of sample size that are inevitably associated with the method. Another reason why participant observation hasn't made its way as a broadly accepted method into sport management research might be that the methodology of participant observation is sometimes considered epistemologically suspect, however the sorts of insights sought in the adoption of participant observation are wholly different to those feasible through more traditional methods.

Our insights arise from meticulous note-taking after each interaction with the team and the entrepreneur by the end of the study, many pages of hand-written material had been gathered. The key to analysing this type of data was not to analyse the material as the participant observation was ongoing; we kept the data separate from the analysis otherwise it would have been unclear whether the data has been adjusted in its write up to suit a pre-existing theory. It was only after the data has been gathered in its final stage that it was possible to consider what light it may shed on theoretical approaches towards the entrepreneurial role in driving sport events at world class level. We applied the methods of a qualitative content analysis as well as a critical path analysis for data analysis of the notes and research memos.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

What became obvious during data analysis was that the structure and organizational culture of Flying Kiwi Promotions was a critical success factor. These were essentially designed to achieve high levels of organisational learning and facilitated by a charismatic entrepreneur (arguably another critical success factor) who recognised the need to empower his 'staff' and let other people make decisions that would or could have a very drastic effect on the success or otherwise of his venture. With an all-volunteer workforce, and difficult financial and technical challenges to overcome, considerable personal and group learning needed to take place and be communicated throughout the organization, engendering trust between himself and the volunteers and acting

as a fulcrum for trust development among the volunteers themselves. This in turn generated a close-knit team identity and a clear goal that translated vision, communication, planning, feedback and learning. Ongoing evaluation of goal achievement was a significant aspect of organisational learning and thus strategy development in Flying Kiwi Promotions which 'morphed' successfully from a marketing organisation (to gain sponsorship) into a manufacturing organisation (to build the vehicle) and then an event management organisation (to actually run the attempt), all to deliver a unique and ultimately tangible 'product' of a world land speed record. This was possible precisely because of the coordinating ability of the individual entrepreneur; Santomier's thesis can be extended beyond his 3Ps.

Events, sport teams and projects exist precisely as a result of a camaraderie among the individuals that is not fully observable from the outside. Only participant observation, we argue in conclusion, can connect the academic researcher to the topic of study in a manner that allows an otherwise unavailable rich engagement with and insight into the nature of that value on a human level, and thus as a lived experience.

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