

Participatory sport events: opportunities and challenges for sport governing bodies

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Aim of paper

Participatory sport events (PSEs) such as triathlons, marathons, and cyclo sportives, have burgeoned in popularity. An exploratory study was undertaken in the United Kingdom to examine who organizes PSEs and why. This paper employs the concept of 'partial industrialization' (Leiper, 2004) to discuss whether PSEs, which are often delivered by third party providers, represent an opportunity or threat to sport governing bodies and traditional sport governance structures.

Literature review

PSEs are typically positioned as fun challenges, open to amateur participants of many ages and levels of ability (Murphy, Lane, & Bauman, 2015). The individuals and organizations behind the delivery of PSEs warrant attention as these entities have arguably come to play a legitimate and influential role in the delivery of some sports. For example, Phillips and Newland (2014) described how "profit-driven event management companies" have come to play a "critical role" in delivering triathlon, effectively "rendering [sport] governing bodies irrelevant" (p. 107).

This paper will draw on the concept of "partial industrialization" from tourism literature (Leiper, 2004). Leiper (2004) described how no single entity could ever control all aspects of tourism and some organizations that contribute to tourism may not identify as part of the 'tourism industry'. Consequently, Leiper argued that in many circumstances, partial industrialization erodes managerial control of the tourism industry. Similar observations could be made of the sport industry, as exemplified by delivery of sport events by entrepreneurs and charities.

Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study entailed in-depth interviews with 26 PSE organizers, coupled with an analysis of PSE website (n= 39) and social media (n= 38) content. Data were analysed using a three-stage process whereby raw data were organized into emergent codes, which were then refined and grouped into major thematic categories.

Results

A range of individuals and entities, including private for-profit companies, charity organizations, community committees, and clubs, organize PSEs. Most PSEs are run to raise money (either for profit, a charity, cause, or club). Some event organizers actively sought to have their event/s officially 'sanctioned' by the sport's governing body. Sanctioning usually required payment of a fee to the governing body; the submission of a comprehensive event risk assessment; a commitment to comply with the governing body's rules and regulations; the presence of officials at the event; and in some cases the issuing of day race licenses (for insurance purposes) to participants who are not registered members of the

governing body. Organizers who ran 'sanctioned' events felt that having their event authorized by a governing body enhanced the event's legitimacy and promotional reach (e.g., via the governing body's annual race calendar).

In contrast, some PSE organizers actively avoided engaging with sport governing bodies. Some felt the cost of sanctioning events was excessive and produced negligible benefit. Further, some PSE organizers perceived sport-governing bodies as unduly exacerbating competition in an already crowded market. For example, one interviewee stated, "our national governing body actually for some reason organizes its own events... Why are they doing that? ...There are plenty of event organizers out there that can organize far better events than they can."

Discussion and implications

This research examined the perspectives of PSE organizers and suggests that PSEs present both an opportunity and challenge to traditional sport governance structures. PSE organizers variously viewed sport governing bodies as irrelevant, an inconvenience, or a helpful resource. Event organizers operated in a reasonably unregulated, and therefore partially industrialized space: virtually anyone can stage a PSE and the ability to read and quickly respond to consumer interests is paramount to success. Further, PSE organizers' approach to interacting with sport governing bodies was utilitarian and dictated by whether or not interaction was necessary and/or beneficial. Under these circumstances, it is arguably difficult for sport governing bodies to control or strategically manage the use of sport by entrepreneurs or charities. To retain some control and/or to accrue benefits, sport governing bodies must find ways to 'push' (i.e., to regulate) or 'pull' (i.e., to incentivise) PSE organizers to acknowledge the governing structures of the sports they use and to contribute to the sport's strategic development and financing.

References

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