

THE RISE OF LIGHT COMMUNITIES IN SPORT: THE CASE OF RUNNING

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a larger study project in Flanders (Belgium) about the evolution of the market of running and its marketing consequences for traditional athletics clubs and associations. At present, running is popular among participants, spectators, organisers as well as sponsors (Bezold, 2006). Once an activity mainly performed by upper-middle class men, recreational running has now become an almost democratised pastime (Scheerder et al., 2002). Over the last four decades running has evolved from a mere competition between athletes in the late 70s over a solitary activity for fitness freaks in the 80s to an extremely popular leisure pursuit featured by massive participation in road races. In the literature this contemporary development is identified as a 'second wave of running' (Van Bottenburg, 2006). Along with these expansion and changes in the market of running, new providers have entered this market. In this paper it is attempted to analyse the market for running in Flanders. It will be examined whether an expansion has occurred in this market and, if so, which factors generated this growth. Possible position and marketing strategies of the traditional athletics clubs and associations are discussed.

MATERIAL

In the present study participation data about running are examined and completed with data on running events. The participation data are collected over a time span of about thirty five years, by means of a standardised survey. The questionnaire used consisted of two major sections: a section on sports participation, and a section on the socio-economic background of the respondents. In this way, long-term trends can be analysed and compared to data available from other datasets.

RESULTS

The popularity of a specific sport is usually indicated by participation rates. At the end of the 70s only 4% of the sports participants in Flanders took part in running (Figure 1). At that time, only one out of four runners were female. During the three following decades, the number of runners strongly increased up to more than 14%. In 2006, running appeared in the top-five preferred sport activities among males as well as females, the latter making up 40% of the running participants. Along with the growing participation in running, the number of running events also increased. In the mid eighties, about 100 running events were organised in Flanders (Figure 2). More than twenty years later, the number of events equals about 600. No longer can running be seen as a uniform activity. In stead, it is now characterised by a diversity of participants and providers. These data confirm that in Flanders, as in many other countries, a new wave of running takes place. This second wave of running is the result of a growing interest in aspects of health and fitness. Moreover, it is clear that the impact of the traditional athletics clubs and associations has decreased. At the end of the 70s the Flemish Athletics Association had a market share of 7% of the market for participation in running sports, whereas in 2006 this market share was declined to 3%. This means that more and more runners enter the running market without being a member of a traditional athletics club. Furthermore, the number of traditional athletics clubs is also diminishing in Flanders.

Figure 1: Number of Adult Runners in Flanders, 1979-2006, Percentage of Sports Participants Population.

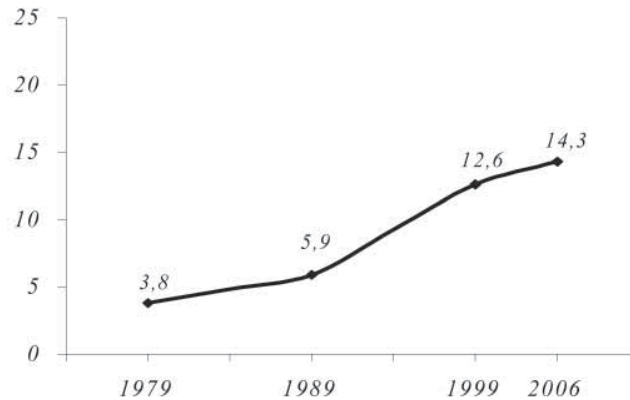
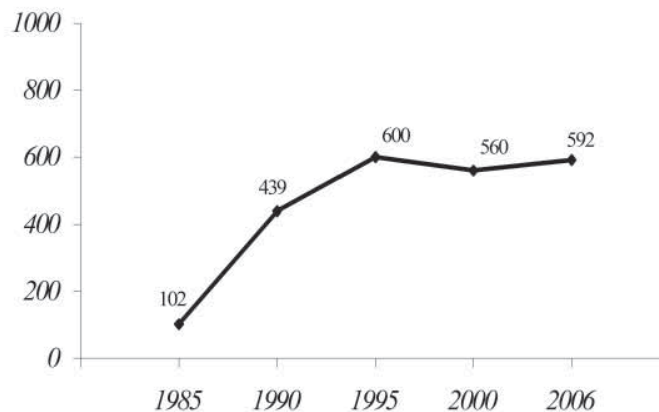


Figure 2: Number of Running Events in Flanders (Belgium), 1985-2006.



DISCUSSION

The aforementioned limited market share of traditional running associations is hardly surprising with regard to the commercialisation of the running sport. Runners no longer need the traditional athletic club to participate in running. As indicated by Van Bottenburg (2006) runners of today look for ‘weak’ rather than ‘strong’ relationships. This implies a fundamental change in the position and marketing strategies applied by traditional clubs and associations. Special attention should be given to the transformation from a ‘greedy institution’ into a so-called ‘light community’. The result is a shift from a service-oriented organisation towards a mainly consumer-oriented organisation. In 2001 the Flemish Athletics Association launched the successful Start-to-Run campaign. It is suggested that this initiative partly meets the needs of new segments of runners. Thus, a differentiated approach is needed in order to attract new markets such as females, youngsters and non-participants.

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