

Session: **Sport facility management**

Abstract nr: **EASM-0160**

The telemark ski race - history as survival of a marginal sport's race

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The research area of major sport events is increasing, in the European community of sport management researchers and the like, including in Norway (see for example Ganberg, E. & Myhre, 2008; Preuss, 2005; Solberg, 2003; Solberg, & Preuss, 2007, 2008). As a part of an overall Norwegian study into sport events (Hanstad, 2010), this paper conducts a presentation of a specific and rather minor telemark ski race: Galdhopiggrennet (the Galdhopiggen race, Galdhopiggen is the largest mountain in Norway). Its contribution to the field – however – lies in this particular case's roots in the general Norwegian history of skiing, and especially its survival as a relatively large event (400 participants annually) in a marginal sport as telemark skiing. The aim of this paper is thus to explain how the specific race survives as an event although the telemark sport itself is decreasing. It is argued that the survival depends on its historical roots and the societal context of skiing in Norway.

The race existed first 1934-1956 as an alpine downhill race, and participants such as Olympic champions, the Frenchman James Couttet and the Norwegian Stein Eriksen, are the most famous participants from the distinguished list. It was taken up again in 1988 as a telemark race, during the telemark wave, coming from the USA at late 1970s. It has been an annual event ever since.

Theoretically, this paper leans on understandings of doxic understandings of a phenomenon as historically stable not only as relevant but as important (Bourdieu, 1990), in order to explain its value the phenomenon in contemporary society. Methodologically, the paper leans on document analysis, interviews, a small survey, as well as observations during the event the last three years. Regarding documents, old books and newspapers are analyzed, Regarding interviews in relation to the old race, one old leader, two former participants and a child of former participant were interviewed. Regarding interviews in relation to the new race, leaders are interviewed (n = 3), and participants are surveyed by questionnaires (n = 175).

The findings so far clearly reveal that the initiation of today's race leans on the myths of the old race. The organizers of today's race are for example very proud about the fact that Stein Eriksen was there and even won a few years before he became one of the world's most famous alpine skiers through history by winning the Olympics in 1952 and the World Championships in 1954. Regarding the participants of today, opinions are more widespread. The main point of this discussion, then, is whether the myths that some of the informants, really are of importance in order to explain the ski race's sustainability today. Or whether there are other, more important explanations. So far, results of contemporary participants point out that the variable 'I race because then I feel Norwegian' seems important.

Tentative analysis suggests an intertwined and complex explanation, of which the myth or the history is one small but major part. The survey data suggest a number of other reasons for the race's success too. Despite a Norwegian skiing tradition, where the telemark style is conceived as the real Norwegian way of skiing (Allen, 2007), it is a decrease in the number of telemark skiers the last decade (Breivik, 2010). In that respect, the generalization value of this study is low. However, its value as the case which exemplifies something counter to the general trend makes it interesting especially in relation to the feeling of being Norwegian while doing this form of skiing. For managerial purposes, the lesson to learn is that tradition and roots are apparently relevant to build a niche brand on.

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No conflict of interest