

## Sport participation from sport events: why it doesn't happen

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Although bids for sport events typically claim that the event will have a positive effect on sport participation, research finds that sport events do not increase the numbers of participants (Weed et al., 2015). The problem seems to be that sport organizations take little, if any, advantage of sport events to build participation (Taks, Misener, Chalip, & Green, 2013). This raises four questions: (1) Is there any potential for sport events to enhance sport participation? (2) If so, what needs to be done to capitalize on that potential? (3) Why have sport organizations failed to do what might be done to capitalize? (4) What can be done to overcome whatever obstacles are impeding sport organizations' willingness and/or ability to capitalize?

Previous work has demonstrated that sport administrators and organizers of championship events recognize after their event has passed that they have missed an opportunity to capitalize in order to build participation, and they wonder what could have been done (Taks et al., 2014; Misener et al., 2015). The suggestion, then, is that the event should be built into the overall marketing of sport organizations – a form of event leverage (Chalip, 2014).

This presentation reports an action research project that sought to assist local gymnastics and athletics clubs in Windsor, Canada to build participation in their sports by leveraging the International Children's Games. The first phase of the effort consisted of multiple meetings with administrators from clubs in each sport to consider ways that the event could be built into their marketing, and to determine if the clubs were interested in leveraging. Clubs in both sports were enthusiastic, so follow-up meetings were held to formulate specific strategies and tactics. The researchers served as facilitators and consultants. Participant observation was used to monitor what was actually done, and to identify any effects. A year later, follow-up interviews were conducted with administrators from athletics, gymnastics, and swimming. The latter were included to provide comparison because swimming clubs had also considered using the event to build participation, but had elected to proceed without support from the researchers.

Observation before the event demonstrated that little was actually done to prepare implementation of leveraging. During the event, the only tactic implemented was placement of a one-page brochure by an athletics club onto the windscreens of cars parked outside the athletics competition venue. Follow-up interviews confirmed that nothing else had been done, and that local administrators felt an opportunity had been lost. However, they were articulate before, during, and after the event regarding the reasons that there had been little effort to leverage. Four social forces were identified as impediments to leverage: club standard operating procedures, capacity concerns, event exigencies, and an aficionado bias.

Each club had procedures for marketing to new potential participants. Incorporating the event was a disruption to those procedures. It required effort and skills beyond what was normally done. That created substantial inertia.

Leveraging requires financial and human resources to implement. Clubs were already operating at their capacity, and so struggled to find the means to move forward with their leveraging plans. Further, there was some concern that a substantial influx of new participants would be disruptive. If the leveraging were successful, it might require added training times or space to be found, new coaches to be trained, and additional referees and administrators to be developed. Thus, the prospect of an influx of large numbers of new novice participants was daunting.

The challenges of implementation were exacerbated by exigencies of the event itself. Club administrators and officials were also involved with helping to stage competitions in their sport at the event. Deadlines loomed constantly. These took precedence, as the first priority was to host the event successfully.

Finally, there was the expectation that the mere fact of showcasing their sport would result in new interest. The people who would need to leverage were themselves aficionados of their sport. It seemed logical to them that anyone who saw the sport would love it as they do, and would therefore want to participate. So, leveraging should not be necessary.

These findings suggest that leveraging sport events to build participation requires that the necessary procedures, capacities, and analyses are embedded into local sport organizations well in advance of the event. Specific means are described. Implications for theory, practice, and future research are suggested.

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