

# Consuming Sport, Producing Atmosphere: The Attraction of Sport Events from a Spectator Perspective

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## Background

In his important book on the nature of modern football fandom, King (2002:141) noted that «(...) the football fan does not simply purchase what the club presents to the fans. The commodity which fans buy is not confined to the players whom they watch; the fans also purchase the atmosphere which they themselves create (...) Paradoxically, at the football match, the fans are asked to purchase what they themselves actively and imaginatively create: the spectacle of support».

In research on football fans, some scholars claim that fans basically conduct a form of consumer behavior, meaning that it can be grasped by concepts and perspectives that are used to interpret consumption of popular culture in general (see, for example, Sandvoss, 2003; Dixon, 2013). Others (for example, Giulianotti 2002; King 2002) have tried to develop conceptualisations that make distinctions between different attitudes and practices among fans, for example that some fans are more consumer-oriented than others.

## Theoretical Perspectives

The paper draws on various theoretical concepts. A common denominator is that it is inspired by insights from the Cultural Studies-tradition (see, for example, Hall 1980). A basic idea is the Encoding/Decoding model, which implies that a message from an organizer (for example, a sport event) may be supported, negotiated or opposed by the audience/spectators.

## Research Questions

The schism between these approaches forms the point of departure for this paper. However, while most research on these issues, at least in Europe, has been done on football, my intention has been to investigate how they come into play in other sports, in this case: biathlon and handball. They are both commercially attractive sports (although not comparable to football), but they have a shorter history as major spectator events. The main research question is potential conflicts between fans and commercial sport organisations, and how they can be resolved.

## Methodology

The paper is based on extensive fieldwork on spectator behaviour in biathlon and handball, supplemented by previous research on football fans. A mixture of participant and non-participant observation, combined with informal and often spontaneous interviews, is the main source of data.

## Findings

Data suggest that both biathlon and handball fans are vital to the creation of the sport-specific atmosphere. The organizers of these events are much keener on «putting on a show» than is the case in most of football. The use of music is extensive, the PA service is utilised to a high degree and in some cases, these services aim to *direct* spectators into a specific form of behaviour. But a lot of it is ignored – although seldom explicitly opposed, as is often the case in football – by most spectators, who instead create their own rituals, practices and cultures. Participating in the rituals in these sports involves a form of «deep play» (Geertz 1973) on the

part of spectators: in order to be able to fully appreciate the ritual, they must familiarize with established practices, which are more often than not the product of fan practices, not of the direction of an organizer.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

A large proportion of sport fandom research in Europe has been conducted on football fans. While it seems to be the case that football fans are more keen to oppose and protest against how the sport is run, fans in other sports are also active in creating the atmosphere they consume. Putting too much effort into atmosphere-enhancing ideas on the part of the organizer (for example PA services, the use of music etc.) may be counter-productive to the atmosphere that spectators are attracted by in the first place. It may not be false to label sport fans as consumers, but it blurs the distinction between the consumption and the production of sport-specific atmospheres.

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