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SRG 2010

Leveraging Sport Events for Sport Development

Project Summary

It is often claimed that sport events can stimulate interest and consequent participation in sport. The data on this matter are inconclusive. It is known, however, that sport participation is not being raised merely by the fact that an event is being hosted, but rather on the ways that an event is used to render desired effects (i.e., event leveraging). The purpose of this research project was to examine how medium sized sport events can be used to stimulate sport participation in host communities. Using a three-phased study, findings show that: (a) sport events are unlikely in-and-of themselves to generate increases in sport participation; (b) there are nonetheless opportunities to use events to generate sport participation if the requisite strategies and tactics are put into place; (c) sport organizations at the local level lack the necessary skills and resources to take advantage of a locally hosted event to build participation in their sport; (d) local sport organizations have a set of standard operating procedures for recruitment and retention which tend to support a status quo; and (e) an event can catalyze the interest of local sport organization administrators in the possibilities for a better effort at building their sport.

Research methods

In phase one (the evaluation phase), leveraging tactics and outcomes were examined for two past events: the 2005 Pan-American Junior Athletic Championships (Windsor, ON), and the 2005 Canadian National Figure Skating Championships (London, ON). Document and media-analysis, as well as retrospective interviews (n=21 and n=14 respectively) with key stakeholders (i.e., local organizing committee, local sport organization, facility managers, athletes) were conducted six years after the events.

For phase two (the planning phase), a task force was created to consider the challenges and prospects for leveraging sport events for sport development. The panel of experts was comprised of 12 practitioners and academics from a variety of organizations that would (or could) be involved in (and benefit from) leveraging sport events for participation (e.g., sports policy, event management, facility management, coaching, tourism, marketing, education, and community development). Brainstorming and nominal group techniques were used to collect the data, which resulted in a model for leveraging sport events to build sport participation.

For phase 3 (the implementation phase), an international youth sport event (2013 International Children's Games) was selected as the event to be leveraged, and athletics and gymnastics were selected as the two sports to be stimulated. The first step consisted of a one-day workshop six months prior to the event to scope, discuss and develop an action plan for leveraging. The next steps evaluated processes and outcomes through: participant observation and casual meetings during the event, a post-event workshop one month after the event, and reflective interviews (n=9) one year after the event.

Research results

Evaluation phase (Phase 1):

Key stakeholders of sport events support the idea that increasing sport participation through events is a worthwhile endeavour. There was an overarching assumption that the events in and of themselves, through the process of “creating awareness”, are sufficient to engender participation outcomes. However, participation effects in the absence of leveraging are negligible. We found no evidence for defined strategic intentions or plans to leverage events to foster sport participation; the leverage occurrences were more happenstance. In the case of the 2005 Pan American Junior Athletic Championships, a coaching clinic and a new facility were two intended tactics expected to intentionally trigger increases in sport participation. The 2005 Canadian National Figure Skating Championships implemented an educational program through schools and organized demonstrations during event breaks. Flyers were handed out on site for both events. No partnerships were activated to serve sport development. Despite the general belief that it would be a good idea to increase the number of new participants, the focus for any sport development efforts or ideas was clearly on individuals already in the system rather than any attempts to get new participants into the sport.

Planning phase (Phase 2):

The model for event leveraging consists of three elements: (a) the context (culture; opinions and attitudes; systems and structures), (b) three types of organizations with a stake in the leveraging process (event, sport, and non-sport entities), and (c) resources needed (human, physical, and knowledge). The centre of the model reflects the core of the leveraging effort: the sport participation goals. Each of the factors in the model can enhance or hinder leveraging strategies and tactics. Sport events can be leveraged to enhance sport participation if the necessary alliances among sport organizations, event organizers and non-sport stakeholders are forged to integrate each event into the marketing mix of sport organizations. Potential barriers need to be addressed (e.g., the lack of available capacity to absorb new participants; crowding out of local participation by the event; the disincentives resulting from elite performances that seem outside the reach of aspiring participants).

Implementation phase (Phase 3):

The sport communities (i.e., athletics and gymnastics) were unable to implement the solid ideas and initiatives that had been developed in the 6 months leading up to the event. Only some isolated tactics were implemented (e.g., handing out posters and flyers in schools prior to the event; flyers during the events). Challenges to implement the developed strategies and tactics seem to be a lack of human resources (in the case of athletics), and a lack of “community” to enable collaborative actions among a variety of clubs (in the case of gymnastics). One year after the event, stakeholders revealed some evidence of an “inspiration effect”; for those already involved in the sport, competing in an international context at this level and age was very attractive and rather unique. However, there is no evidence of increased participation in either sport. Without evidence of tangible outcomes, the key stakeholders displayed no efforts to sustain any positive impacts. As was the case in phase 1, they feel that lessons can be learned from the leveraging unsuccessful effort. However, what is being done to retain and capitalize on what was learned is unclear at this stage.

Policy implications

Formulation and implementation of strategies and tactics, and measurements need to be put into place well in advance of an event. This will enable the efficacy of strategies and tactics to be benchmarked and assessed. This responsibility needs to be assigned to a clearly identified entity. These requirements can be added to the policies for hosting sport events, be it at the federal level (e.g., Federal Policy for hosting International Sport Events), the provincial or the local levels (for smaller sized events).

Next steps

The findings of this study suggest that sport organizations' capacity to market themselves to participants is a prerequisite for effective leverage of events to build participation, and that capacity building must take place well in advance of an event so that the necessary skills and resources are adequately established. Future research should examine how local sport organizations can build that capacity, and to what degree adding an event into a well-developed marketing strategy will benefit local sport organizations in building participation in their sport.

Key stakeholders and benefits

Club administrators can use events to motivate, to reconsider and possibly further develop their capacity to build their sport. This study informs sport policymakers and sport event organizers about the means to build sport participation by using medium sized sport events to stimulate participation.

Further Readings

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