



# THE MAKEOVER: Transforming Sport Events into SPORT TOURISM EVENTS

By Douglas Michele Turco & Amy K. S. Scott

Not all sport events are sport tourism events. A three-on-three street basketball tournament may fill the downtown with sport and look impressive but the hoopsters are mostly locals and day-trippers who spend little money – and mostly on fast food and convenient store items. Those who stay overnight are likely crashing on their friend's couch and not spending large amounts of cash in the local economy. With a few changes though, this sport event could become a tourism magnet.

Is there a sport event in your town that needs a makeover? Perhaps there is an annual softball tournament, swim meet, 5K run, or holiday wrestling match that is nice but could be so much more - more competitive, exciting, popular, and valuable? Makeover television shows are a hit - let's make over your sporting event!

Sport tourism events create more opportunities for business relationships than vanilla sport events. Lodging establishments, transportation service providers, entertainment and other businesses may be keen to associate with an event that brings visitors and their money to town. This article describes how event marketers can transform generic sport events into sport tourism events, and add greater value for their stakeholders in the process.

One of the first ways is to cheat! Grow your own sport tourism event so you don't have to re-create it! That's what Williamsport, Pennsylvania and Little League Baseball did with the Little League World Series over 70 years ago. Little League Baseball started in Williamsport 1939 with three teams; today

there are 176,000 teams in 102 countries. The Little League World Series is held annually in August and is one of the most popular youth sporting events in the world, attracting 300,000 spectators and international media coverage. In 2001, the tournament expanded from eight to 16 teams and every team has at least one game televised by ESPN or ESPN2. Teams and fans from Latin America, Asia, Europe and North America flock to this community, filling hotel rooms in a 100-mile radius.

The World Series format is conducive for tourism. Teams play a round-robin tournament within their divisions and the four winning teams then play a domestic and an international semi-final game, after which the two winners play for the Little League title while the two losing semi-finalists play a consolation game. All expenses are paid by Little League Baseball for teams in the World Series; players and coaches travel, stay and eat for free in the Little League compound with all other teams during the tournament. The Little League World Series is the pinnacle of athletic competition for 12 year-old baseball players, and the families who travel to see them compete, spend money like there is no tomorrow! There really is no tomorrow for these athletes - most will be too old to compete the following year. The Little League World Series took years to grow into a world-class event. However, there are many ways that your town or organization can add value to a sporting event with an immediate impact.

The nature of the sport event competition format, whether team, dual, or individual, may influence consumer behaviors and tourism. For example, World Cup style competitions with round robin or pool play followed by an elimination tournament extend the length of stay and economic impacts. Running races need not only be for the swiftest of the swift but may include age-gender categories, walks, kids races, and relays to expand the pool of possible participants.

Sport tourism events typically attract a heterogeneous group comprised of residents, visitors, participants, fans, media, sponsors, and interested by-standers. "Casuals," persons in town for reasons other than to attend the event but who participate nonetheless, are another segment of a sport tourism event market.

Sport tourism events are not all gold medals and big money. There can be real costs and negative consequences: Pollution and environmental degradation, price gouging, social and economic costs. Residents are important to the success of a sport tourism event. After all, they will be some of the event spectators and may encounter visitors. Politically, if residents are not supportive of an event it will be more difficult to organize. "Homestayors" are residents who opt to stay in the host community because of the event. The allure of the event is so powerful that it keeps them from traveling elsewhere for holiday, and thus retains their income for the host economy. Conversely, "Run-aways" are those residents who perceive an event's costs to be so great that they



will purposely leave their homes to avoid its negatives. Runaways take their income from the event host city and spend it elsewhere thus adversely affecting the event host economy.

**How can a sport event become a sport tourism event and generate an economic boost for the host community? Here are eight ways:**

### **1 Encourage athletes to bring relatives or friends to the event.**

Visitors with relatives or friends participating in the event spend more money than those not associated with competitors. Event organizations can market supplemental attractions to lure these Watching Friends and Relatives (WFRs) and influence their consumer behaviors with spouse or family pack-

ages, discount tickets to parks, museums, casinos, restaurants, etc.

Go young. Some destinations have strategically targeted youth sport events since these often attract an entourage of parents-guardians who watch their loved ones compete. Visitors who are watching friends and relatives (WFRs) include proud parents, siblings, grandparents, etc. who travel to watch their relations perform, and can be a significant and lucrative niche for event marketers. Disney's ESPN Wide World of Sport complex in Florida was created for this purpose – and to drive theme park visitation for families during the summer when kids are playing sports. *If you build it they will come.* Disney built it (sport facilities on 220 acres) and now holds 180 events annually for 250,000 participants.

Invite the family. For parents living vicariously through their children's competitive sport participation, it seems that any price will be paid to see them excel, occasionally pushing beyond reasonable limits. That was before the Great Recession. In the current economic climate, there are limits to what some families (and other consumers) are willing and able to spend on sport events. Considering the accumulated costs to support their young athletes for months, sport WFRs may be short on money by the time your event is held. Parents of young athletes who frequently travel to competitions become adept at cost saving strategies, thereby minimizing the impacts of the host economy. Ride sharing, bringing prepared meals and snacks, and taking motor homes or camper trailers are among the practices used by parents who travel with their young athletes to competitions.

Target specific groups of WFRs. Distinctive segments of the WFRs have different interests. Have events and activities that

appeal to each of the different segments. Grandparents may be more interested in historical sites while parents and other siblings may prefer amusement and water parks. Friends and extended family may have different interests altogether.

There may also be differences in tourist characteristics between spectators traveling to watch their friends and relatives who are elite athletes and those who are amateurs, warranting future investigation. One would surmise fewer travelers, shorter length of stay, and less spending by the sport event WFRs of amateur athletes but this is not always the case. Serious sport tourists, those who pursue their sport as a leisure "career" or passion, may spend considerable amounts of money to compete.

### **2 Reach out to distant markets.** Sport event tourist spending is positively influenced by the distance traveled to the destination. All things being equal, sport tourists who travel greater distances spend more money. As the geographic origins of sport participants changes from year to year, so too will their impacts on the host economy.

Money-makers. Sports that are expensive to play i.e., sailing, alpine skiing, horse racing, triathlon, etc. often attract event participants and fans that are big spenders. Destination marketers seeking high-value tourists may stage events for these upscale sports.

Target the "Casuals." These are visitors who are in the area for another reason but decide to attend the sporting event. Market your event in both the local press and the tourist literature. Have information available at the Chamber of Commerce, Tourist Bureau, local hotels and other tourist sites. Work hard to make the event known to those who are in town even for a few days.

### **3 First-timers.** It's nice to have repeat customers but first-time sport tourists typically stay longer, engage in more "tourist" activities, and spend more money than repeat visitors. Do all that you can to attract first-timers through advertising, clinics and the internet. Consider a "Bring a friend" price discount promotion for race registration. Offer novice and development programs. Offer reasons for athletes to try your event - either through unique event, prestige or interesting location.

Once you do have those first time guests, take steps to ensure they return. Even if their subsequent spending is smaller, the return customers are important to the event's overall economic impact. Run a well organized, fun event and they will return.



**4 Promote area attractions.** What is there for visiting athletes and fans to do in your community when they are not competing? Offering sport event participants complimentary or discount passes for nature parks, theme parks, aquatic centers, shopping, historic sites, etc. will incent their visitation and their friends and relatives. Visitors may be interested in sport halls of fame, museums, stadium tours, etc. Bundle your sporting event with a mini-vacation through discounts and packages to entice visitors to come, stay and spend.

**5 Prestige matters.** The relative prestige of an event as perceived by the sport tourist influences upwards the size of the visitor group, their length of stay, and their local spending. All things being equal, a more prestigious event will elicit more spending by participants. Throwing more money at an event will not automatically raise its prestige; rather prestige can be a derived demand. What can you do to increase the prestige of your event? A marathon featuring a certified BQ (Boston Marathon Qualifier) course may be more perceived as more prestigious than others. Events are prestigious if they are deemed extremely difficult to enter (U.S. Open Golf Championships) complete and/or win (e.g. Ironman triathlon), and are scarce (one FIFA World Cup every four years). Strategic advertising including perception of exclusivity, team/athlete selection and quality event will all increase an events prestige.



**6 Core product extensions.** In endurance sports, the race itself is the core product for a marathon, triathlon, or ultra marathon. Adding a pre-race exposition, celebrity speaker, dinner and/or post-event gala may extend length of visitor stays and generate more spending. The Little League World Series added a "Parade of Nations" in downtown Williamsport the day prior to the opening game, extending visitors' length of stay and generating more foot traffic for local merchants.

**7 Buy local.** When possible, the event organizing committee should enlist local allied businesses for subcontracted services i.e., t-shirts, prizes, entertainment, catering, to stimulate the host economy and minimize leakage. Focus on local vendors and specialties. Runners at the New Orleans marathon expect (and want) to be served local cuisine. Tout your local area before, during and after your event.

**8 Grow your own event.** Sport governing bodies require competitive bids to receive the rights to their events, and at some point, the rights may be lost and the event relocated. This occurred in Illinois when Peoria outbid Champaign for the Illinois High School Association boys state basketball tournament. Community organizations that grow their own events are less likely to move them, permitting co-branding and legacy benefits. Consider the Indianapolis 500 – it is hard to imagine this event anywhere else!

These few simple changes can completely makeover your local sport event - going from drab to attention grabbing with a large economic impact – adding tourists in the process.



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