

TEACHING SPORT MANAGEMENT THROUGH NEW TYPES OF SPORTING EVENTS ORGANIZED BY STUDENTS

Peter Smolianov, Steven Dion and Chris Schoen

Salem State University
Salem, MA, USA

Abstract

The increasing need to prepare sport managers as leaders who can use the power of sport to lead mass recreational participation and public health was indicated by Smolianov (2016), Smolianov, Dion & Harris (2016) and Smith and Smolianov (2016) who agreed with the Amis & Silk's (2005) concern about the domination of hypercommercial enterprises and the lack of public consideration within the sport industry and stressed the necessity to more closely connect university education with the challenges faced by local communities and to intervene in order to promote social improvement. Therefore, the key objective of this project was that students are able to develop and manage new sporting event solutions to a social problem that has become more serious in at least the past 30 years—falling sport participation (NSGA, 2016) and increasing inactivity and obesity with all the illnesses and increasing healthcare costs associated with this epidemic (CDC, 2015; Jones-Palm, 2002; Mission: Readiness, 2010; PAC, 2016) in the United States, as this country falls behind other developed nations in providing equal chances to succeed and prosper for its citizens: “Of all the costs imposed on our society by the top one percent, perhaps the greatest is this: the erosion of our sense of identity, in which fair play, equality of opportunity, and a sense of community are so important” (Stiglitz, 2011).

Salem State University, located on the North Shore of Boston, Massachusetts, as part of its Wellness U program (a University wide wellness initiative managed out of the human resources department), has been searching for more inclusive and healthy ways to compete, for appealing new approaches to change the notion of sport from passive spectatorship to active participation and to shift our paradigm from individual to collective winning, which would foster friendship and community bonds. For a company or institution that achieves these results, a natural result might also be better teamwork, a more cohesive work force and, ultimately, better productivity.

This paper shares Salem State's experience in developing and implementing such a project and discusses its implications for the organizational community and students. Steven Dion, Chair of Sport and Movement Science (SMS) Department and Peter Smolianov, Professor of Sport Management at Salem State University, drafted the event concept in consultation with all possible members of their SMS department and administrators across the university, before handing over the reins to students of the facility and event management and sports marketing classes who then organized the university's experimental Wellness U Multisport Festival.

On three consecutive Thursdays, 217 students, faculty and staff from 38 departments across campus formed teams and competed in a softball home run derby, a walk/run event and a series of water sport competitions. About 100 participants took part in each of the three days of the festival, representing almost all university departments. The tradition of limiting university competitions to students, often undergraduate students, had been successfully challenged. Arlene Pero, who participated in the home run derby for the university's Information Technologies department, said she enjoyed seeing students and faculty come together in friendly competition. “What I liked about the softball home run derby was teams from different departments coming together and cheering each other on,” Pero said. “There were groups of students and faculty and staff coming together to participate in the home run derby in the middle of a busy work day.” The Multisport Festival idea, mass competitions among organizations and their departments, has been used successfully in many European countries for most of the 20th century as a tool for improving health, educational practices, and work productivity (Smolianov, Zakus & Gallo, 2014), and a new version of this concept with many tangible prizes was experimented with at Salem State University.

Salem State University departments celebrated the spring of 2016 by winning prizes for mass participation, rather than elite performance: the departments with the highest percentage of students, faculty and staff who participated were awarded prizes. First place won \$300, second place \$200 and third place earned \$100 at each of the events. Plaques, trophies and sport bags were also handed out to individual participants for a broad variety of fun-stimulating achievements, from best themed costume to the loudest team-supporting cheer.

Opportunities for attracting more community members are great: having achieved seemingly impressive participation numbers, the Salem State festival drew less than five percent of the university's community. This turnout was similar to 5K running events at Boston College, the University of New Hampshire and at Salem State University (Salem News, 2016). Coincidentally, U.S. health researchers stressed that only five percent of people exercise as needed (Westcott, 2016).

Salem State's festival showed that mass participation can be achieved efficiently when students are asked to practice civic engagement and community building by organizing activity based events which promoted inclusiveness. The elevated goals of this project boosted students' pride and motivation, allowing them to challenge paradigms about what they are able to do as part of their studies, an integral component of the Salem State event. The hands-on experience taught sport management students to become more competent facility and event managers and marketers. Working in teams on managerial tasks broadened students' understanding of what they might encounter in the complex world of sports management after graduation. Their experience also put them at the forefront of a European health model that is beginning to take root in the United States.

Students organized all aspects of the festival such as selecting and planning the sporting activities, providing food and entertainment, managing financial resources, scheduling facilities, developing risk management plans and marketing the festival through word of mouth, radio, print and social media. The students' evaluation of the event's return on investment estimated that the festival's value exceeded the university's \$2,500 contribution more than two times, thanks to such benefits as three meals with different menus for about 100 participants provided by a sponsoring partner; student-made newspaper, radio, flyer, Facebook and other internet-based promotions which increased the university's exposure and brand equity; sport, music, entertainment and other equipment obtained by students from different university departments; and the educational value of hands-on experience taught to sport management students. Students also conducted an online survey of event participants which collected 100 responses and indicated, for example, that more advertising was desired, individualized times and performance measures and more organized plans for the events. Respondents particularly enjoyed taking a break from work and classes during their lunch time to be active and to eat healthy food served after each event. The analysis and research equipped students with critical thinking abilities and skills for continuous improvement and advancement based on hard data and customer feedback necessary for any successful business.

Although intense and stressful, these experiences taught sport management and recreation management students to become more competent facility and event managers and marketers. While having both independent managerial tasks and opportunities to work in small teams, the students received comprehensive individualized coaching to guide them through what amounts to intense exposure they can expect to encounter in the complex world of sport business. Angelina Favaloro, who took on the role of managing the festival's three events, said she and her fellow students were focused on attracting participants. "The fundamental goal of our festival was to attract the maximum number of participants," Favaloro said. "Our group believed the focus should be on getting everyone involved, which proved to be successful with about 100 participants at each event." Favaloro also mentioned that the freedom students were given in running the festival made the experience unique. "This festival was promoted, organized, and run primarily by students, which made it one-of-a-kind," Favaloro said. "Professor Smolianov gave us direction throughout the process but also gave us the freedom to take control and learn for ourselves."

This experimental festival confirmed the suggestion by Smolianov, McMahon and Dion (2008) that when charged with a project that is authentic, yet competitive, students' enthusiasm, involvement, creativity, responsibility, and cooperative efforts increase. The lesson learned here was that students, drawing from their experiences in their course work and charged with the ability to improve quality of life in their community, helped them become viable stakeholders in the creation of a more receptive learning environment.

Not only did this multisport festival showcase how to expand sporting events to different community and professional groups, but it also sparked conversations about providing new opportunities for active mass participation. In conjunction with revenue generated from taxpayers, passive spectator attendance to sporting events and consumption of sponsored products, universities and professional sport teams could partner to organize such inclusive events in every community. This will help high performance teams and their organizations by demonstrating social responsibility, thereby making their public relations investments contribute to public health.

References

- Amis, J., & Silk, M. (2005). Rupture: promoting critical and innovative approaches to the study of sport management. *Journal of Sport Management*, 19(4), 355-366.
- CDC (2015). Adult obesity facts. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Retrieved December 20, 2015 from: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>.
- Jones-Palm, D. H. (2002). United States: Sport for all as a complex and uncoordinated network. In, DaCosta, L. P. & Miragaya, A. (Eds.). *World experiences and trends of sport for all*. Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport.
- Mission: Readiness (2010). *Too Fat to Fight*. A report by Mission: Readiness. Military Leaders for Kids. Retrieved 2010 from: http://cdn.missionreadiness.org/MR_Too_Fat_to_Fight-1.pdf.
- NSGA (2016). *Historical Sports Participation: 2016 Edition*. National Sporting Goods Association: Mount Prospect, IL.
- PAC (2016). Physical Activity Council. 2015 Participation Report. Retrieved January 20, 2016 from: <http://physicalactivitycouncil.com/PDFs/current.pdf>.
- Salem News (2016, April 27). Salem State sport management students organize experimental sports festival. Salem News from Salem Gazette. Retrieved April 27, 2016, from: <http://salem.wickedlocal.com/news/20160427/salem-state-sport-management-students-organize-experimental-sports-festival>.
- Smith, J., & Smolianov, P. (2016). The high performance management model: from Olympic and professional to university sport in the United States. *The Sport Journal*, 4(0204), 1-19. Retrieved on February 4, 2016, from: <http://thesportjournal.org/article/the-high-performance-management-model-from-olympic-and-professional-to-university-sport-in-the-united-states/>.
- Smolianov, P. (2016, April). Experimental practices of high performance sport and holistic fitness: experiences of Eastern Europe. Keynote lecture. The North Central National Strength and Conditioning Association Regional Conference. University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa, USA.
- Smolianov, P., Dion, S., & Harris, S. (2016, August). Sport participation and Olympic legacies: 1996 Atlanta Games. West East Institute International Academic Conference on Business and Economics at Harvard University, Boston, USA.
- Smolianov, P., McMahon, S. G., & Dion, S. P. (2008, May). Teaching facility and program development through an authentic interdisciplinary student project. 23rd Annual Conference of North American Society for Sport Management, Toronto, Canada.
- Smolianov, P., Zakus, D., & Gallo, J. (2014). *Sport Development in the United States: High Performance and Mass Participation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stiglitz, J. E. (2011, May). Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%. *Vanity Fair*. Retrieved March 25, 2014, from www.vanityfair.com/society/features/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105.
- Westcott, W. L. (2016, April). Exercise and nutrition program for concurrent fat loss and muscle gain. The North Central National Strength and Conditioning Association Regional Conference. University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa, USA.