

INDIGENOUS SPORTING EVENTS: MORE THAN JUST A GAME

Lisa Ruhanen

The University of Queensland

Michelle Whitford

Southern Cross University

ABSTRACT

The Annual Sports and Cultural Festival is an Indigenous sporting and cultural event that has been held annually in Brisbane, Queensland since 1993. The event aims to provide an opportunity for the Indigenous community of Brisbane to gather, celebrate and reconnect with family and friends, while sharing and showcasing Indigenous culture, art, music and sporting prowess to the wider community. Research was undertaken to determine the extent to which the festival generates positive socio-cultural impacts. The results showed that the festival provides a forum for the community to come together, strengthening social networks and relationships in a positive environment where the emphasis is on sport and sharing and renewing culture. This paper provides an overview of the festival and outlines the research results. The opportunities for Indigenous communities to engage in recreational sporting opportunities and concurrently, achieve socio-cultural outcomes are considered within the framework of a new research agenda for Indigenous sports events.

KEY WORDS

Indigenous sporting event, social impacts, social capital, cultural event

INTRODUCTION

Sporting events can provide communities with opportunities to experience positive socio-cultural benefits as sport not only offers a bridge across social and economic gaps but also provides an opportunity to improve the quality of life (Smith & Westerbeck, 2007). For Indigenous communities who globally, are one of the most disadvantaged groups of the population (Pearson, 2000; Behrendt, 2009), sporting events can provide a vehicle to facilitate a more positive future through the development of, among other things, capacity building (Downey, 1993), positive health and well-being outcomes associated with engaging in physical activity (Biddle, Fox & Boutcher, 2000) and safe and supportive communities (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009).

While sporting events per se have been studied extensively in the literature, to date, the literature on small-scale-sport events is sparse (Garnham, 1996; Walo, Bull & Breen, 1996; Irwin & Sandler, 1998; Higham & Hinch, 2001;). Additionally, there is a noticeable gap in research addressing Indigenous sporting events. In particular, there is a dearth of empirical research

regarding events that have been staged specifically for, or by Indigenous peoples themselves. That is, where Indigenous peoples are active participants of the event rather than the 'focus' or 'theme' of the event and often for the benefit of tourists' education and entertainment. Further, the extent to which events such as these facilitate socio-cultural benefits for Indigenous peoples and communities has not been explored in any detail.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of The Annual Sports and Cultural Festival held in Brisbane, Australia. This Indigenous sporting event provides an interesting case, not only because attendees and participants come from Indigenous communities around Australia and the South Pacific, but also because the festival provides an opportunity for participants to celebrate and reconnect with family and friends, while sharing and showcasing Indigenous culture, art, music and sporting abilities to the wider community. Funding for the study was provided by the Australian government's Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] and First Contact Inc. (the festival organisers) to undertake a detailed evaluation of the impacts of the festival.

SPORT EVENTS

Sporting events are one of the 'big' ticket items of the event industry. Globally, both commercial and non-commercial sport is a phenomenon that has captured the hearts and minds of generations throughout the ages. Sporting events can vary in size, style and purpose but generally they range through the broad categories of mega events, hallmark events, major events, festivals and community events and each come with their own set of costs and benefits to both participants and host regions (Chalip, 2006). The enduring attraction to, and popularity of, sport can be accredited to an array of benefits, both non-commercial and commercial. For instance, sporting events are often used by attendees for leisure purposes (i.e., time left over from work and a sense of freedom from obligations) (Iso-Ahola, 1980) therefore many sporting events usually occur on weekends when potential attendees' free time is more readily available (Carpenter, 1995).

According to Pegg, Patterson and Axelsen (2009), sporting events are important contributors to any local community as they have the potential to facilitate a range of positive social and economic benefits. For instance, they can enhance community image and pride (Horne, 1992; Wolman & Spitzley, 1996; Jago & Shaw, 1998; Pennington-Gray & Holdnak, 2002), present opportunities for image enhancement of a host community or region through the diversification of its event calendar (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999) and can increase community cohesion and social capital (Arcodia & Whitford, 2002; Derrett, 2002). Although the concept of social capital is complex, it is similar to other forms of capital in that it is regarded as a community asset which can be increased or decreased. However, when social capital is not used, the community progressively loses its capacity to access it (Hemingway cited Arcodia & Whitford, 2006). According to Putnam (1993: 37) "social capital refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit", therefore ".....life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital" (Putnam, 1995: 67).

In order to facilitate the development of social capital, communities must provide a resilient, caring and protective environment, promoting a range of positive outcomes (i.e., social cohesion)

(Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009). Participation in organised sport contributes to a positive community environment as it can lead to an array of benefits including; 1) improvement in many areas of Indigenous disadvantage, including long term health, and physical and mental wellbeing, as well as improving social cohesion in Indigenous communities 2) fostering (among other things) self-esteem, social interaction, and the development of skills and teamwork, 3) a reduction of boredom and an increased sense of belonging are generally seen as having positive impacts on Indigenous youth (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009) and 4) helping to protect and build traditional culture while demonstrating the strength and diversity of Indigenous culture (Ryan & Huyton, 2002).

While sporting events can facilitate opportunities for the development of socio-cultural benefits, they can also generate numerous opportunities for business development and positive commercial outcomes (Soutar & McLeod, 1993; Alston, 1998). For instance, sporting events can generate increased economic activity and can create interest and awareness of a host destination (Ritchie, 1984; Downey, 1993). The ability of sporting events to raise awareness and enhance the appeal of a particular destination has seen an increase in their use by governments and the tourism industry as a way to promote and increase visitor growth within a host region (Masterman, 2004). This reinforces the view by Getz (2003: 49) that 'events are a major component of sport tourism' (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). Consequently, sporting events have emerged as a significant economic and social phenomenon, influenced by the re-emergence and enormous popularity of the Olympic Games (McPherson, Curtis & Loy, 1989; Matheson, 2006; Bull & Lovell, 2007; Walton, Longo & Dawson, 2008).

Many countries, including Australia, now regard the hosting of major sporting events as a unique opportunity to market themselves to the rest of the world. As the significance and importance of sporting events continues to intensify (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003), the majority of Australian state/territory governments have established major events units, such as Queensland Events Corporation, to pursue the acquisition of, among other things, an array of sporting events.

Australia has had a long association with sporting events, stemming from the early days of European settlement when outdoor, physical and competitive sports, including football games and horseracing dominated the leisure time of colonists. Australians' preoccupation with watching and participating in sport for over two hundred years has resulted in the country becoming an internationally recognised sporting nation, home to some of the world's best athletes, sporting venues and host to numerous international events (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2008). Not surprisingly then, an estimated 27% of all persons in Australia aged 15 years and over were involved in organised sport and physical activity and 44% of Australians reported that they had attended at least one sporting event in the previous year (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). In 2008-2009, 43% of the adult population attended at least one sporting event as a spectator (ABS, 2011). These figures strengthen the notion that sport is 'Australia's national religion' and is considered to play a major role in shaping the country's identity and culture (DFAT, 2008).

Australian Indigenous Sport and Sporting Events

Indigenous Australians have a long history of sport and leisure activities, well prior to British

occupation in 1788 (Veal & Lynch, 2001). Indeed, the participation rate of Australian Indigenous people in sport or physical recreation activities is far higher than that of the rest of the population. From data collected on the activities of Indigenous Australians in 2002, 49% had participated in sport or physical recreation activities in the last twelve months (ABS, 2004). Furthermore, Veal and Lynch (2001: 296) report that Australian Aboriginal "sportsmen and women have achieved great things in such sports as athletics, various football codes, badminton, basketball, darts, hockey, horse racing, netball, volleyball, soccer and wood-chopping". Their accomplishments being all the more remarkable because of the social and economic challenges they have had to overcome, including previous restrictions on access to sporting opportunities through their residence in reserves and missions.

Indigenous Australians, like many other Indigenous peoples and communities throughout the world, face social and economic disadvantage (Deruyttere, 1997; Altman, 2001; Lindsay, 2004), which is arguably a direct result of colonisation and the post-colonial impacts on their communities and their countries (Dodson & Smith, 2003). In many cases, the ability to overcome such challenges are inhibited by the fact that in most countries, Indigenous peoples' standard of living in terms of economic, educational and basic human standards are far inferior to that of the dominant groups in these societies (Fuller, Buultjens & Cummings, 2004). In Australia, the Indigenous population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are the most disadvantaged group in the country in terms of income, employment, imprisonment, child protection, health and wellbeing indicators, life expectancy and education (Oxfam Australia, 2007).

Importantly, sport is viewed as one avenue to increase the health and well-being, as well as social and educational opportunities of Indigenous Australians. Indeed, Harvey (2001) reports that access to sport and recreation activities positively impact on emotional, physical and social development. Harvey (2001: 37) further notes that, "for groups at risk of social exclusion, sports programs may have a positive impact. Indeed, the research results in this area are conclusive". Consequently, the Australian Government Department of Health and Aging [DoHA] support the active participation in sport and physical recreation for Indigenous Australians because it has the potential, either directly or indirectly, to contribute to broader social benefits such as social cohesion and diversionary activities in areas of social concern such as substance abuse and school attendance (DoHA, 2008). In Australia, government programs such as the Indigenous Sport and Recreation Program [ISRP] provides funding to community groups, and organisations to increase and encourage the active participation of Indigenous Australians in sport and physical recreation activities (DoHA, 2008). The ISRP supports projects that:

- encourage wide community involvement and active participation in group sport and physical recreation activities;
- are designed to build the skills of community members to participate in, organise and promote community sport and physical recreation activities over the long term; and
- promote healthy living, drug free participation and respect for players, officials and spectators.

Similarly, the Australian Sports Commission's *ASC+ Indigenous Sport program was developed to encourage Indigenous peoples to be more active and to play sport at all levels. The program aims

to increase opportunities for Indigenous people to learn the skills needed to organise, deliver and manage community-based sport and to ensure that talented Indigenous sportspeople are able to access the support they need to reach their sporting goals (ASC, 2009). Utilising a network of Indigenous Sport Development Officers, together with Australian state and territory government departments of sport and recreation, these officers look at the sporting needs of Indigenous communities and then develop programs, often in partnership with other sporting organisations, to deliver community-based sporting opportunities and services (ASC, 2009).

Participation in sporting activities and sporting festivals in particular, has broader benefits for Indigenous peoples and communities and is arguably recognised as a means of increasing community cohesion and identity and social capital (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006) while strengthening culture in minority and/or Indigenous communities. Although this is an under-explored area in the Australia context, the Canadian experience of minority francophone communities demonstrates the success of promoting Indigenous identities through the organization of sporting events. According to Harvey (2001), these include *les Jeux de l'Acadie* (the Acadian Games), *les Jeux franco-albertains* (the Franco-Albertan Games), *les Jeux franco-ontariens* (the Franco-Ontarian Games), and *les Jeux franco-canadiens* (the Franco-Canadian Games). Importantly, these games bring together the community and provide a forum for fostering community pride, particularly amongst the youth, and for entrenching francophone identity (Harvey, 2001). Further, they provide these minority communities with an educational mechanism for fostering community-based citizenship and for expressing their collective identities. Harvey (2001: 31) concludes that “the various francophone games within Canada are places where francophone identities are given voice, interact, and are created, recreated and reinvented”. Similarly, the *North American Indigenous Games* and the *Arctic Winter Games* offer opportunities to young people from Aboriginal communities’ to participate in competitive sport with the objective of promoting the identity and community pride of Aboriginal peoples (Harvey, 2001).

In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage continues to thrive, not only through art, storytelling, dance and community gatherings (van Den Berg, Collard, Harben & Byrne, 2005) but also through sports events. Sporting events provide Indigenous Australians with a means to reclaim heritage, increase economic independence and preserve Indigenous culture (van Den Berg et al., 2005). Consequently, Indigenous events have come into the focus of both Australian federal and state/territory governments for the array of social and economic benefits they can provide to Indigenous communities and regional economies. These benefits are particularly important given that the social and economic challenges facing Indigenous Australians are compounded by the fact that approximately half (49.5%) of Australia’s Indigenous population of 500,000 people live in regional, remote or very remote areas, compared with 13% of the total Australian population (ABS, 2004). Indeed, the DoHA (2008) claim that within the Australian community, sport provides a strong and continuous thread through a diverse and widespread population. In essence, sport is a binding element in the social and cultural fabric of Australia and the capacity of sporting events to positively contribute socially and culturally to Indigenous peoples and communities can be seen in the case of the *Annual Sports and Cultural Festival*.

THE ANNUAL SPORTS AND CULTURAL FESTIVAL

First Contact Inc. is a not-for-profit Indigenous operated organisation that was established in 1992. Based in Brisbane Australia, it provides a number of services to the local Indigenous community including the organisation of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival, an Indigenous sporting and cultural event that has been held annually in Brisbane since 1993. The festival, which was created, developed and staged by First Contact Inc., aims to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous touch football teams (i.e., a non-contact derivative of Rugby League football) from Brisbane, regional Queensland, interstate and overseas to compete in a competitive tournament. Additionally, a range of Indigenous music and cultural entertainers perform on the 'community stage' throughout the three day event and various food stalls and arts and crafts are available for sale. First Contact Inc.'s aims for the festival state:

- It is a gathering of our people and a time when you have true community spirit;
- It is a time to showcase our sporting abilities;
- It is a time when people are considered as one irrelevant of race, age or ability;
- It is a time to share different culture and interests;
- It is a time to catch up with old friends and a time to make new;
- It is a time when people have hopes for their future and thoughts from the past;
- It is a time to be proud of who we are;
- It is a time when we welcome visitors to Brisbane; and,
- It is a time when we can showcase our local Indigenous artists and sports people.

The primary focus of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival is the sporting tournament with teams competing in three divisions: Men's Open, Mixed Open and Mixed Divisions for secondary school competitors. With the exception of the school divisions, all teams compete for prize money which is generated through the nomination fee charged to play in the competition. The festival has grown from a small 'get together' in the local community to become a successful sports and cultural festival, as evidenced by the growing numbers of participants and spectators, from both Australia and overseas. For instance, showcase matches at the festival include the 'Battle of the States Cup Challenge' between Queensland and New South Wales and the 'Challenge of the Nations' with international teams competing from New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Funding was provided by AIATSIS and First Contact Inc., to undertake a detailed evaluation of the economic and socio-cultural impacts of the festival. Based on a post-positivist approach, the following triangulated research strategy was employed utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods (Phillips & Burbules, 2000):

1. A quantitative survey questionnaire that included scaled-response and open-ended items was undertaken with 481 festival participants; and,
2. Qualitative semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (i.e., representatives from local and interstate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander associations and local and state government departments).

Festival Attendee Questionnaire

The questionnaire was pilot tested at the 2006 festival in order to 1) develop, adapt and check the feasibility of techniques for surveying at the festival, 2) determine the reliability of measures and 3) calculate the final sample requirements. As a result of the pilot study and population estimates from the organisers, a target sample of 500 respondents was set. The questionnaire from the pilot study was refined to extrapolate the socio-cultural and economic impacts of the festival. Section one of the questionnaire sought demographic data of respondents, section two related to the economic aspects of the festival and expenditure patterns, section three focused on the socio-cultural aspects of the festival and the final section was related to festival marketing and communication. A questionnaire was deemed the most applicable instrument for this stage of the research as it allowed for standardisation and comparability and facilitated a rapid interview process which was necessary given the sample size, respondent availability (i.e., many respondents were participating in ongoing competitions throughout the festival) and the limited three day time frame available for data collection.

A seven person research team administered the questionnaire over the three day duration of the 2007 festival. The interviewers approached festival participants at random and invited them to participate in the study by responding to the questionnaire. Random sampling was employed to ensure that the sample remained representative of festival attendees and participants.

At completion of the festival, 481 useable questionnaires were collected and analysed using SPSS and the 'Encore' Festival and Event Evaluation Kit developed by the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre. To place this sample into context, in a media release by First Contact Inc. (2007: 1) it was estimated that over the course of the three day event "more than 20,000 people turned up to see and participate in the 14th Annual First Contact Sports and Cultural Festival in Brisbane". Definitive festival attendee numbers are not recorded by the event organisers and so based on the 20,000 attendee estimate for the three days of the event this equates to some 6,600 attendees at the festival on any given day. Thus, based on these indicative estimates, attendees associated with competing teams represented around 31% of all attendees to the festival. Selected results of the questionnaire relating to the socio-cultural aspects of the festival are presented in the following section.

Festival Stakeholder In-depth Interviews

The second stage of the research involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 relevant local and state government actors and key stakeholders (i.e., individuals and associations) associated with the festival. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were deemed appropriate for this stage of the study as they provided the opportunity for participants to provide detailed and reflective answers based on the diverse experience and viewpoints. The researchers could obtain rich data and thus a greater understanding of the festival. Interviews were undertaken either via telephone or face-to-face, depending on the respondent's preference.

To address the diversity of festival stakeholders, two interview schedules were designed for this component of the research. The first interview schedule was administered to teams (i.e., competitors), festival performers and vendors/stallholders and a random sample of stakeholders from the event organisers' database for each of these groups generated a response rate of twelve. The interview schedule again contained semi-structured questions that focused on 1) the social importance of the festival, 2) the relationship between the festival and the local

community, 3) community input into the festivals' development and management, and 4) perceived success of the festival (Table One). The second interview schedule was administered to a total of six stakeholders representing government, other sponsors and the festival organisers (Table One). The interview schedule contained semi-structured questions that focused on 1) motivations for funding/supporting the festival, 2) community capacity development and 3) the importance of festivals to Indigenous communities.

Table 1
Stakeholder Respondents Sample Size

Stakeholder group	Sample (n)
Event Manager	1
Touch Association	2
Local Government	1
State Government	2
Team Participant	2
Vendor or Stallholder	5
Festival Performer	5
Total Interviewed	18

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim before content analysis was undertaken on the data emanating from the interviews. Content analysis is a technique used for gathering and analysing the content of text, by categorising and coding data. The technique employs objective and systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a more quantitative description of the symbolic content in a text (Neuman, 1997). The content analysis procedures used in this study followed the principles of Neuman's (1997) use of manifest and latent codes as Neuman (1997) suggested that the use of manifest coding in conjunction with latent coding strengthens the final result.

Latent codes identified in the literature review as being the most discernable during the study period were selected and relevant literature allowed the nomination of key distinguishing criteria for each code which were used as a reference throughout the ensuing latent coding of the interview transcripts. Secondly, single or multiple words and or phrases deemed important to the interview were selected and allocated manifest codes. Selected words and/or phrases were recorded in an Excel spreadsheet along with the relevant interview number. The importance of words and or phrases was determined by knowledge gained from issues raised in the review of literature and a critical colleague validated their importance. Following this, manifest codes were condensed to latent codes and placed in a corresponding column in the spreadsheet.

Latent codes were sorted by alphabetical order to provide visual ease of identification for the following procedure and grouped according to their respective manifest codes (e.g., strengthens family = social capital). The study involved interpreting the content of interview transcripts and during the analysis the researchers' own awareness of factors outside the social and historical context may have distorted meanings and understandings. Gadamer (1976) pointed out that the contemporary consciousness of history could be fundamentally different from the apparent reality prevailing at the time. Furthermore, subjectivity is an essential part of the interpretive

analysis and the researchers' political perspectives may have influenced interpretation of the text. In order to reduce researcher subjectivity, a critical colleague reviewed the manifest and latent coding of the transcripts and any discrepancies in interpretation were debated until consensus was reached.

RESULTS

Festival Attendee Questionnaire

The festival attendee questionnaire included a number of questions specifically related to the socio-cultural impacts of the festival and therefore pertinent to the focus of this paper. By way of context, 58% of survey respondents were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage. 52% of the participants were male and 48% female and a relatively even spread of age groupings were surveyed. Some 54% of respondents were from the greater Brisbane region, 20% intrastate Queensland and 25% interstate. The majority of respondents indicated that their travel party was comprised of three to five people (38.9%) or more than five people (36.2%), and most respondents were attending the festival with family or friends. The remainder of respondents attended on their own (6%), with their team (2%), with their school (2%) or with some other form of travel party (1%; i.e., youth groups).

Participants in the festival attendee questionnaire were asked to indicate their primary reason for attending the festival. 51% of the respondents indicated that they attended the event in order to 'Support family or friends that were competing or performing at the event', 'Perform, participate or compete' (34%) in the event, to 'Socialise with friends or family' (21%), for 'Fun and excitement', to 'Support community organisation or event' (12.5%) and for 'Enjoyment or relaxation' (12%) (Table Two).

Table 2
Primary Reason for Attending the Festival

Support family or friends competing or performing	51%
Performing, participating or competing	34%
Socialise with friends or family	21%
Fun and excitement	14%
Support community organisation or event	12%
Enjoyment or relaxation	12%
Meet new people	8%
Experience something different	5%
Accompany partner	4%
Total	100%

When asked to consider a series of questions focused on the socio-cultural aspects of the event,

respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the sports festival was an important event for Indigenous people and the Indigenous community (94%). It was seen as important because it brought people together and facilitated the gathering of communities (38%). Further, respondents considered the event important because it helped Indigenous people engage with community activities and importantly sports and physical activity. A further 14% of respondents believed the event is valuable for Indigenous people and communities as it showcases Indigenous sporting performance and talent.

Respondents were asked if they thought that a sports event such as the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival could contribute towards sustaining Indigenous culture, traditions and values and around 87% stated that they felt that the festival did positively contribute in this regard. Respondents reported that this was because the festival provided the opportunity to bring different cultures and tribes together to display and showcase culture (25%). A further 22% of respondents thought it important as it provided a forum to bring people together and 18% felt the festival's cultural performances contributed towards sustaining Indigenous culture, traditions and values.

The respondents were also asked if they felt the festival helped to strengthen social networks and relationships and 92% of respondents answered affirmatively. Some 33% of respondents claimed that the festival strengthened social networks as it provided the opportunity to meet new people, with a further 20% citing the opportunity to catch up with friends. Other reasons that were frequently cited included spending time with family/friends (12%) and having the opportunity to network (10%).

Festival Stakeholder in-Depth Interviews

A series of questions were asked of stakeholder interview respondents regarding the socio-cultural impacts of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival. As noted, two interview schedules were designed to reflect the different stakeholder groups. The first interview schedule was administered to a sample of twelve competitors, performers and vendors/stallholders and the second to six stakeholders representing government, other sponsors and the festival organisers.

Performers, vendors and team representative respondents (n=12) were asked what they considered to be the most important features of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival. Respondents cited the most important features of the festival were its inclusiveness and ability to generate a sense of community, sport participation and the opportunity to engage in physical activity, the unique opportunity to combine sport and culture, and the family environment. In terms of what respondents considered were the aspects that made the festival a success and attracted participants; the entertainment, the sense of community togetherness, culture, competition, atmosphere, management and community involvement; were all cited as critical factors.

These respondents (n=12) were also asked to discuss the role of the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival in promoting sporting opportunities and showcasing Indigenous culture. All respondents agreed that the festival fulfilled these objectives, particularly in terms of providing sports, recreation and leisure opportunities for participants and attendees. This was seen as important given that the event took place in a family environment where most people attend the festival to

socialise and be with friends and immediate and extended family. Respondents (n=12) cited a variety of motivations for attending the festival including celebrating a sense of community, participating in competition, as well as gaining a sense of camaraderie from their team mates and supporters and as one respondent noted, *"because the whole weekend is just a celebration of Indigenous people coming together"*. According to Pegg, Patterson and Axelsen (2009) sporting events attract a wide range of participants, each seeking to satisfy their own motivations for engagement in slightly different ways.

Government/organiser stakeholder respondents (n=6) also discussed the opportunities afforded by sporting events to bring the Indigenous community together in a safe, secure and celebratory environment for participants and spectators. As a result, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the festival is not only important in terms of providing sporting opportunities, and in turn health and well-being outcomes for participants, but that importantly it also successfully promotes and builds cohesiveness in the community. As such, each of these respondents (n=6) felt the festival contributes towards the development of social capital.

DISCUSSION

The two phase research approach applied to evaluate the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival elicited valuable insights into the socio-cultural impacts associated with an Indigenous sports event. Indeed, the positive socio-cultural impacts generated by the sport event were threefold: 1) an occasion to engage in sports and leisure activities, 2) an opportunity to share and strengthen culture and community identity, and 3) the development of social capital.

The opportunity to engage in sports activity is a driving force behind the event and certainly one of the core objectives of the organisers, sponsors and participants. For most respondents, the sports activities at the festival were considered paramount and in particular, touch football was viewed as an ideal medium for the festival as it is a low injury contact sport which provides open participation across age groups, genders and abilities. Participation in sporting activities has the potential to produce positive benefits to Indigenous communities including improved health and less dependency on illicit substances (Biddle, Fox & Boutcher, 2000; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009). Some respondents believed that the 'sports' aspects together with the fact that the event is drug and alcohol free contributed to positive messages, particularly to Indigenous youth, regarding active and healthy living,

"it sets a good example for the community and at the end of the event everyone has enjoyed their time here and have had a good dose of sport" (interview respondent n=6).

Moreover and importantly, it demonstrates that the presence and use of drugs and/or alcohol at a festival is not a required requisite to having a good time enjoying sport and culture in a friendly, safe, supportive, family environment.

The family environment of the festival is recognised by many. Importantly this festival provides a vehicle to bring together attendees from both the local area and intra and interstate. This highlights the value of community sporting events as a forum for bringing geographically dispersed peoples together. This is particularly important given the remoteness of many

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia. Indeed, this supports the DoHA (2008) claim that sport provides a strong and continuous thread through a diverse and widespread population and is a binding element in the social and cultural fabric of Australia.

There is little argument that a sport event can facilitate positive benefits in terms of health, recreation and leisure outcomes (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009). Importantly however, the results of this research have identified a relationship between a community sporting event and the celebration of culture and development of social capital. For example, respondents considered the amalgamation of culture and sport as an important feature of the festival as it allowed the Indigenous community to celebrate talents, strengths and uniqueness via a single platform. According to an interview respondent (n=12), the festival is

“important because it does promote culture and it is a cultural festival as well as a sporting festival so you know the more cultural dances and cultural performances there are, it becomes really ideal for younger children to watch who don’t really learn about their culture”.

The positive amalgam between sport and culture at the festival strengthens Garcia’s (2001) argument that a cultural component to a sporting festival can make a positive contribution to an event. Indeed, the results highlight the capacity of sporting events to provide a forum for cultural engagement, enhancement and preservation. Indeed, these findings also support the assertions of van Den Berg et al. (2005), and particularly those of Harvey (2001) who reported on the use of sporting events within the francophone communities in Canada as a forum to enhance cultural identity and community pride. As respondents noted,

“one of the significant things that you come away from this festival with is having knowledge that it is purely a celebration of not only cultural events but also cultural achievements across the board” (interview respondent n=6).

Not only however, does the event generate positive outcomes in terms of Indigenous culture, the medium of a sporting event also strengthens social networks and relationships and as McCabe (cited Chalip, 2006: 111) found at a “traditional football festival in England, the event can become an occasion to reaffirm community by celebrating a sense of local identity”. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why DoHA (2008) support active participation in sport and physical recreation for Indigenous Australians as it has the potential, either directly or indirectly, to contribute to broader social benefits such as social cohesion. This notion was certainly supported by respondents, one of whom claimed a good thing about the festival was

“the camaraderie among black fellas. You know getting together, being part of the mob, enjoying each other’s company, talking about how things are going and how people are going in the community” (interview respondent n=6).

Indeed, all interview respondents agreed the event focused on strengthening family, friends and community. According to one interview respondent (n=12), the festival developed a “sense of togetherness with the community (where) lots of Indigenous people come together to celebrate

Indigenous culture and sport". This result is not surprising for according to Schulenkorf (2009: 126) events can "increase community spirit... and enhance cultural traditions". Chalip (2006) goes further to suggest that this sense of 'feel good' community spirit can be defined as 'communitas'. That is, there is a sense in the community that they are experiencing something special and that "something more important- something that transcends the sport - is going on" (Chalip, 2006: 112).

Arguably, participants are experiencing, among other things, the development of social capital as Chalip (2006) maintains *communitas* fosters social capital. In this instance, respondents claim "*it's a good binding festival because it brings people together*" and promotes '*participation across socio-cultural economic areas and racial barriers*' (interview respondent n=12). This recurring social occasion then, provides an opportunity for all members of the community to unite and share a worldview through ethnic, linguistic, historical and cultural bonds (Falassi, 1987) under the banner of sport which "...is a language in which all people in the world understand and speak, and which is able to emotionally unite groups" (Schulenkorf, 2010: 127).

CONCLUSIONS and IMPLICATIONS

Utilising a case from Australia, this study provides valuable insights into Indigenous community sporting events and in particular, the ability of sport to contribute to cultural and social objectives of Indigenous peoples and communities. While the event phenomenon has been studied extensively, to date, Indigenous sporting events and their broader impacts have received far less attention. In the words of Chalip (2006: 123), "the most vital insight here is that events are more than mere entertainments; they are social occasions with potential social value". Indigenous sports events have considerable potential to improve the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples and communities. Not only does the event provide a forum to engage in a positive recreation activity, thereby contributing to goals of health and well-being of Indigenous people, but the occasion of gathering communities together also provides opportunities to concomitantly share, preserve and enhance culture and increase social capital. To some extent, this aspect has been recognised in the findings of Harvey (2001) in studies of the francophone communities in Canada. However, the research has not extended beyond this, thereby highlighting considerable gaps in our knowledge of Indigenous sporting events. Importantly, an improved understanding of such events can assist governments and other funding bodies to not only target sponsorship but to develop programs that generate initiatives which provide the greatest benefit for target populations.

Arguably community sporting events, as opposed to other events which 'showcase' Indigenous culture, have the potential to offer far greater returns to Indigenous people and communities. For instance, the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival is firmly grounded in the sporting tournament which, aside from creating a positive leisure activity for participants, contributes to other objectives such as alleviating and/or preventing boredom, delinquency and drug and alcohol abuse (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009). Other social benefits arising from this festival include the creation and strengthening of relationships and networks within the immediate and broader community. Given that the event has emerged from the grass roots level, where Indigenous people are active participants at the festival rather than just the 'performers' of an event which has been developed for tourism purposes, the social benefits derived from the Annual Sports and Cultural Festival become of

paramount significance. Additionally, the opportunity to include Indigenous cultural performances, food and art and craft at the festival, alongside the sporting component, reinforces cultural identity, community pride and the sense of belonging. This also improves the broader attractiveness of the event to visitors and can create the added benefit of economic returns for the organizers and stakeholders.

This study has provided the first insights into Indigenous sports events in the Australian context and added to a limited body of international literature. Further research should explore Indigenous sports events in terms of their contribution to Indigenous health, well-being and physical activity. One area worthy of further exploration in this context is the pre and post training for the event that participants are required to engage in. The value of these training regimes in terms of participant's health and physical well-being would be valuable to explore. The socio-cultural aspects associated with sports events are certainly worthy of further investigation. The potential to build on the First Contact Inc., model to incorporate cultural performances gives the event a wider audience than simply those that would otherwise be associated with a sports tournament. The festival not only provides a forum for community cohesion and celebration, while concomitantly strengthening and enhancing cultural knowledge and development, it also generates significant economic benefits for the host community. Event organizers and Indigenous communities can learn from this approach and an improved body of knowledge with documented cases can aid in enhancing the value of Indigenous sporting events for all involved.

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AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

Lisa Ruhanen
The University of Queensland
l.ruhanen@uq.edu.au

Michelle Whitford
Southern Cross University
michelle.whitford@scu.edu.au

JOURNAL CONTACT DETAILS

Executive Editor
Charles Arcodia
c.arcodia@uq.edu.au

The International Journal of Event Management Research
is a double-blind, peer reviewed journal.

