

THE SCHOLAR ATHLETE GAMES: EXPERIENCING SPORT, CULTURE AND ART

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ABSTRACT

There are a number of events which seek to assist youth to develop and enhance their leadership skills through sporting activities and/or an educational program. Some programs try to blend the two forms together, while others keep them separate. The Australian Scholar Athlete Games (ASAG) sought to achieve a balance between the two. ASAG was an event which sought to bring together youth primarily from the Asia-Pacific region with the intention of facilitating opportunity through sporting activities and an education program designed to expose participants to the cultural, economic, social and environmental differences experienced by delegates. Offering a sports development or creative arts development program in conjunction with an educational program with a focus on leadership skills, ASAG provided delegates with a forum to learn and enhance skill sets from international sports and creative arts personalities and to dialogue with peers about international issues and concerns.

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which examined their experience of the ASAG. A series of follow up in-depth interviews were also conducted to further probe certain issues of interest pertaining to the ASAG experience as a vehicle to promote peace, understanding, acceptance and friendship amongst the youth of the world. This paper documents and analyses the experiences of the participants of the Australian Scholar Athlete Games and provides a series of recommendations for future Games ventures.

The findings indicate that participants were satisfied with their experience at and that the program of events and activities were found to be a useful vehicle to promote and enhance participants' understanding and skill sets related to the aforementioned core issues. The paper provides some implications for consideration for other events which try to blend activities that are formal program requirements with more informal social networking opportunities, as well as ensuring that communication about the event is properly managed. This will ensure maximum satisfaction for event participants and ensure the event is successfully staged.

KEYWORDS

Social impacts, Sporting events

INTRODUCTION

There are many events which encourage leadership and promote education within the community. Few of these provide participants with the opportunity to partake in either a sporting or an arts program in addition to providing an educational program dealing with current social, cultural, political and environmental issues with

the overarching goal of promoting understanding, acceptance and friendship. The Australian Scholar Athlete Games (ASAG) was an event which brought participating youth, primarily from the Asia-Pacific region, together with the goal of facilitating this opportunity.

A large body of work investigating the economic impacts of events is available (Burgan & Mules, 2000; Dwyer, Mellor, Mistills & Mules, 2000a, 2000b; Lee & Taylor, 2005; Lee, 2006). There is also a substantial amount of work on the social impacts of events (Arcodia & Whitford, 2007; Hall & Hodges, 1996; Fredline, Jago & Deery, 2002; Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules & Ali, 2002). Little has been written about using sports and/or arts events as a vehicle for promoting notions of understanding, acceptance and friendship. Many studies such as Kurtzman (2005) and Hirasawa (2003) use Pierre de Coubertain's philosophy of using sport to enhance cultural understanding and to promote peace by bringing people together, with both authors noting that the main idea of the Olympic movement is to promote solidarity through cross-cultural understanding and both global and mutual understanding through peace education. Hirasawa (2003) states that sport teaches about fair play, encourages people to comply with rules and to respect each other. Sport also encourages communication and assists to promote understanding; hence sport can help promote peace, to reduce conflict and to develop positive diplomatic relations (Hirasawa, 2003). The author states that this „Olympic Truce“ can help to create a more harmonious society. The Olympic Truce movement was created as a result of this and has been able to reduce diplomatic conflicts and promote peace (Hirasawa, 2003). In support of these assertions, the author describes the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games where both North and South Korean athletes paraded together under the same country flag, demonstrating the capacity of the Games to promote unity. Schwery (2003) expands this further arguing that sports can improve public health promote socialisation, increase economic development and encourage intercultural exchange to promote peace.

Another focal point in the literature is the capacity for sporting events to help build social capital, social leverage and intercultural dialogue. Social capital is defined by reciprocal relationships embedded within social networks (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Meisner & Mason, 2006). Chalip (2006, p.123) discusses the social leveraging opportunities presented by sport events, stating that „...events are more than mere entertainments; they are social occasions with potential social value“. As events have the potential to engage the community, additional social capital is enabled as new social relationships are forged or existing relationships are strengthened. Further, these relationships are usually free of age, gender and social class boundaries which are present outside of the event (Chalip, 2006). Also noted is the „positive feeling“ or „feel good outcome“ which events generate and are able to be leveraged (Goldstein, 1997), as it can agendas for social and community action (Hughes, 1999). Authors such as Sack & Johnson, (1996) and Whitson & Macintosh (1996) state that these positive effects are more commonly used for political gain rather than to create or to sustain meaningful community development.

Schwery (2003) found that sport encourages people to play together, which results in participants learning about teamwork, which creates trust and a sense of belonging. In addition, the author indicates that sport has the ability to create unity among people from different social, religious, race or cultural backgrounds because „...sport speaks a simple language“ (2003, p. 17). Furthermore, sports competitions especially at the international level are able to achieve cultural understanding and peace through increased opportunities for communication between people of different nationalities.

Jones (2001) deals with another aspect of social capital and aims to explain why developing friendship in sport is important. The author presents a series of arguments, firstly suggesting that sport may lead to friendship, secondly that friendship is life-enhancing then to participate in sport and not to have made friends is to have failed to take a life-enhancing opportunity. Thirdly, there are sporting benefits generated from

sporting friendships and that friendship in sport is able to achieve a better and more peaceful world. Friendship may be developed when people share similar interests. In sports, competitors share a certain amount of pain, risk or physical danger. In addition, sport competitors face the risk of defeat. Therefore this shared awareness of common vulnerability and common frailty may lead to the development of friendship between competitors. Conversely, the author argues that some competitors believe that making friends with fellow competitors may disrupt their concentration and hence cause them to lose; therefore these competitors avoid making friends. Nevertheless, the author maintained that friendship may develop goodwill and mutual trust which lead to happiness. This without making friends when participating in sports is to have failed to take a life-enhancing opportunity. In addition, through making friends, competitors are able to develop and enhance their sporting skills and abilities, as the author concluded that sporting friends are able to stimulate and encourage each other to achieve better results. It was also found that friendship plays a significant role in team sports as friendship between team members enhance team spirit which is able to lead to team success. Besides proving that friendship is important to sport competitors, the author also emphasized the importance of friendship in sport to promote the good of the society. Further, Jones (2001) also stated that sports can bring people of different social settings together and hence contribute to a better and peaceful society. This is illustrated by the boxing event held in Northern Ireland where it was said that the sport event is able to bring people of different religions such as Catholic and Protestant, different regions such as North and South of Ireland, different political beliefs such as Unionist and Republican together without creating any friction. This is a concept which was a central part of the ASAG philosophy.

Hanley (1992) discusses how both sports and arts may be used in conjunction to promote social peace and equality. The author maintains that sport is a form of performing arts and is artistic in nature, where as arts are not necessarily considered a form of sport, the exception being dance. It is noted that the importance of creating harmony through sports and arts is not about competition between individuals, but about the participation in the events. In investigating the 1988 Seoul Olympic Arts Festival, it was documented that the event helped promote universal peace and harmony by attracting 80 countries and thousands of visitors to the region, hence providing opportunities for social interaction between different cultures. This highlights the importance of including both sports and arts elements in events such as the Olympics in order to enhance cultural understanding.

THE CONTEXT OF ASAG

The World Scholar-Athlete Games originated in 1993 and is the flagship event of the Institute for International Sport based at the University of Rhode Island, USA. The games focus on the youth of the international community as the next generation facilitators for international peace. The objectives of the Australian program were to:

- Promote understanding, acceptance and friendship among the youth of the world
- Establish open, non-political, long standing relationships among tomorrow's potential world leaders;
- To utilise sport and the arts as the means of communications and learning rather than a competition among nations; and
- Identify and train young people to develop leadership skills and networking strategies for when they pursue positions of leadership in government, education and other professional fields

The Australian Scholar-Athlete Games ran for six days and attracted approximately 100 participants who represented 12 different countries and nationalities predominantly from Southeast Asian, Pacific regions and India. The ASAG program is unique due to its blend of a sport program, an arts program, theme days and a series of special events. Sporting participants had the choice of fourteen sports programs and arts participants chose from nine different options. The sports program also has a series of sporting options open

to men or women only. Theme days dealt with a series of current social, political, religious and environmental issues and the featured special event of the Australian program was for all ASAG delegates to march in the Australia Day Parade in Brisbane.

RESEARCH METHOD

All ASAG participants were invited to respond to a questionnaire which probed a variety of issues pertinent to their experiences whilst involved in ASAG. The questionnaire was self administered and the data collection process took place over the last two days of the event, with the individual interviews conducted on the second last day and the questionnaires completed on the final day of ASAG. The survey collection process was facilitated by ASAG volunteers, who were surveyed separately and the data from this group is not included in this paper.

The questionnaire consisted of 14 closed and open-ended questions, with the former designed to help facilitate the data entry and analysis process. The latter helped to gain a more detailed insight to participant experiences. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections. The first dealt with the demographic information of participants. The second section dealt with finding out what factors motivated respondents to participate in ASAG. The final section investigated participant satisfaction with the whole ASAG experience.

In addition to the questionnaire, ten participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis in order to probe their experiences further. Interviewees were from both the sports and the arts programs. Participants were asked to comment on the following: their best experience at ASAG, their worst experience at ASAG and how connected they were to the ASAG experience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section deals with the findings in response to the questionnaire and the discussions at the in-depth interviews.

Demographics

A total of eighty-one ASAG participants responded to this questionnaire. 58% of respondents were female and 42% were male. Most of the participants are aged between 17-20 years with bulk aged 19 or 20 years. The majority of participants surveyed were from Australia (27%), Hong Kong (15%), New Zealand (12) and Korea (11%) respectively. Tables 1-4 give a complete breakdown of age, gender and country of origin of ASAG participants.

Table 1: Age of Participants

	Percent
Under 17	3.7
17	12.3
18	17.3
19	29.6
20	28.4
21	6.2
Over 21	2.5

Total	100.0
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Table 2: Gender of Participants

	Percent
Male	42.0
Female	58.0
Total	100.0

Table 3: Country of Origin

	Percent
Australia	27.2
Fiji	7.4
China	1.2
East Timor	4.9
Korea	11.1
New Zealand	12.3
Vanuatu	4.9
Singapore	2.5
Hong Kong	14.8
India	6.2
Vietnam	4.9
Other	2.5
Total	100.0

Table 4: Other Countries

	Percent
Malaysia	1.2
Zimbabwe	1.2
Total	100.0

Also included in the demographics category is the question of how participants first heard of the games. 78% of those surveyed heard about the games through their School/University/Institution. 9% of participants first heard of the games through their parents' recommendation. The last question included in the demographics category was if participants had been involved in other similar events prior to ASAG. A 42% majority

indicated they had not been involved in an event similar to ASAG. 26% had been involved in two-three events and 17% had been previously involved with one similar event, prior to their ASAG experience.

Destination Information

Additional tourism opportunities are appealing to both event delegates and to the host destination, so it was important to ask if ASAG participants intended to spend additional time on travel and tourism activities while in Australia. A majority of 49% reported that they would arrive in Brisbane on January 23, and leave on the January 29 with 47%, indicating that they would only stay for the duration of ASAG. 37% of participants were able to fit in some travelling whilst in Australia. The most popular destination for those who did get time to travel was the Gold Coast (15%) followed by Sydney (11.5%), Dreamworld (4%), and Surfers Paradise (4%). Melbourne, Cairns and Australia Zoo were also popular choices.

Motivation to attend ASAG

In order to ascertain some reasons for participants' involvement in ASAG, respondents were asked to answer a series of questions by indicating to what extent (if any) these reasons motivated them to attend ASAG. A scale of 1-5 was used where 1 indicated „not at all“ and 5 indicated „to a great extent“. The most significant reason indicated by those surveyed was their desire to develop new skills and ideas (64%), followed by participants' passion for sports/arts at 58%. Other significant motivators include having the opportunity to exchange ideas and skills with others (44%) and to share the experience of the Games (42%). There was also opportunity on the instrument to provide reasons other than those explicitly asked. Some of the other motivating factors included:

“To make friends”

“For international exposure”

“To collect experience“

“To experience and appreciate other cultures“

“To experience other cultures, dialogues and passions“

“To extend friendly relations and share one's culture and traditions“

Satisfaction with ASAG

Participants were asked to indicate their satisfaction with particular aspects of the Games experience, broadly categorized into facilities, programs and people. Participants were asked to respond on a scale of 1-5, where 1 indicated a „very poor“ experience and 5 indicated an „excellent experience“. Pleasingly, all categories received the majority of responses as either 4 or 5. Accommodation and dining received the highest praise, with over 50% of respondents indicating these facilities were „excellent“.

Cultural awareness

In an event such as ASAG, cultural awareness is a highly significant issue. Participants were asked to indicate if they felt ASAG staff and other ASAG participants were aware of their cultural background. Again, survey respondents were asked to rate their experience on a scale of 1-5, where 1 indicated „not at all“ and 5 indicated „great extent“. When asked to quantify the extent of ASAG staff awareness of cultural background, the majority of participants nominated a response of 4 or „high extent“ of cultural awareness (33%) followed by a response of 3 or „good extent“ (28%). 25% of participants felt that ASAG staff had a „great extent“ of cultural awareness, nominating a response of 5.

Participants were also asked to evaluate the cultural awareness of their fellow participants at ASAG. A majority of 44% indicated a response of 4 („high extent“) followed by a response of 3, at 21%. 30% felt that other participants had either a „great extent“ (5) or a „poor extent“ (2) of cultural awareness, with both ratings receiving a 15% response each. These results indicate that the overwhelming majority of participants felt that ASAG staff and their ASAG peers had a very high extent of cultural awareness.

Expectations and impressions

When asked if the ASAG experience was what they expected, the majority of respondents (33%) awarded a rating of 4 or „highly agreed“ with the statement. 27% of respondents indicated „modest agreement“ with the statement. There were also a series of written comments to this question, although no formal space was provided in the instrument. As respondents took the time to make these notes, it is important that they are included in an analysis of the ASAG experience:

“Didn’t come with any expectations but I loved it!”

“Philosophy and cultural sharing”

“No but I’m glad (I didn’t know what to expect)”

Respondents were given free text space to provide insight into what aspects of ASAG impressed them the most and what impressed them the least. Sixty-two respondents provided an answer to this question. Many responses praise the entire games experience, the coaches, facilitators and organizational team. Many also indicated that the most impressive aspect of the games centred on the friendships, social interactions and cultural diversity. Participants were also asked to provide which aspect of the games impressed them the least. Fifty-four participants provided responses. The majority of responses revealed that the only negative experience participants had was that ASAG was too short. Clearly, this is not necessarily a criticism of their experience. Other comments to note were that many felt that there was not enough free time to interact socially with other ASAG participants and early starts after long days/late nights were viewed negatively. A number of respondents also indicated that the lack of competition in the sporting program was a disappointment. A few participants noted that there was not enough information prior to their arrival.

Achievements

Achievements and outcomes from ASAG are important. Sixty-two participants provided answers to the question which asked what they achieve by participating in the games. The dominant response by far was friendship and making new friends from different parts of the world. Other predominant themes on the list included new ways of thinking and enhanced cultural understanding.

Connection to the Games

Participants were asked to provide insight as to how „connected“ they felt with the games. In this context, „connectedness“ referred to how involved participants were in the games and the extent to which they „lived“ the games. Free text space was provided in the instrument for respondents to provide as much information as they wished. The vast majority of responses indicate that participants were able to immerse themselves completely in the experience. The excitement can be sensed in some of the responses, even when they are being read. There are a few comments that demonstrate that some participants were not able to make a connection to the games, with one participant noting that they were not informed sufficiently about the program.

Satisfaction with ASAG experience

The final question on the ASAG participants’ survey was asking respondents to provide information on their ASAG experience. Respondents were asked to specify to what extent they agreed with a series of

statements designed to ascertain feedback on a variety of ASAG areas, where a response of 1 indicated „strongly disagree“ and a response of 5 indicated „strongly agree“. The majority of participants indicated they agreed (awarding a „4“) that they received useful knowledge and skills, that communications seemed good, they could express their ideas and they felt a sense of pride as an ASAG participant

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study reveal a few key implications. Firstly, the use of an event that blended a sport and arts program was a successful forum for learning and interacting with other cultures. This is especially important to a demographic that is continually exposed to international media which associates sport with being socially acceptable arts-related activities with being less so. From a practical event management perspective, the findings highlight the importance of balancing the formal program and social opportunities. This is consistent with previous research by authors such as Collier, 1999 and Xu and Pegg (2007) who found that a primary motivator for engagement in sporting events was actually the social dimension and not the competitive element of the sport itself. As such, event managers need to include appropriate social opportunities for their delegates. Further, the importance of communication was also emphasised. Participants need to have a comprehensive understanding of the event in order to ensure their expectations are met and the success of the event is assured.

CONCLUSION

The Australian Scholar Athlete Games were designed to provide youth with an opportunity to compete and develop sporting and artistic skill sets. Further, this unique event also gave delegates the opportunity to educate and be educated on current social, political, religious and environmental issues. The purpose of this paper was to identify participant experiences at ASAG and to investigate whether these experiences were in-keeping with the goals and objectives of the event: to share, to learn and to change. The results of the study indicate that participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with their ASAG experience with many citing to have the opportunity to meet and interact with and learn from so many people from such a variety of different cultures as being one of the most significant experiences they had. Many participants also indicated that one of the outcomes of their experience was the formation of many new friendships as a result of meeting new people who share similar sport and art interests along and perspectives on the issues that were discussed. This is a concept which Jones (2001) argues is central to a sporting experience of this calibre and those who did not have this experience have missed a life-changing opportunity. Further, participants also indicated that they learned to appreciate different points of view and how variables such as race, culture, religion and political perspectives can have an influence on these viewpoints. This finding is in keeping with the conclusions reached by authors such as Hartzman (2005), Hirasawa, (2003) and Hanley (1992) who found that events which feature both art and sporting components help promote cultural understanding and peace. Clearly, the event contributes to the creation and development of social capital. The event also created social leveraging opportunities for the participants (through the creation of new friendship networks), the host institution and for political leaders with press opportunities (through extensive media coverage). It is unclear on the basis of this research whether the leveraging opportunities for the latter parties outweighed those of the former as cautioned by Chalip (2006).

Although the findings presented here are favourable, it is important to note that the timing of the survey may have impacted on the results, as participants were still experiencing the „honeymoon effect“ and had no time to reflect on their experiences. The findings of this paper would be strengthened with follow-up research to see if their opinions are still the same and whether the friendships and contacts that were forged at the event were still existing and whether they are still sources of support and motivation. Further study could also be conducted which investigates the links between events that combine both sport and arts programs and their impact on issues such as those discussed in this paper.

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