Chapter 8

Rationalizing Sport Spectatorship:
Analysis of Fan Behaviour in S-League

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aligns itself with spectatorship theories to identify possible causes for the poor spectatorship numbers observed at S-League matches. Taking into account club affiliations among spectators and how such relationships affect the fortunes of a club's following, relevant theories are discussed in the context of the sports situation in Singapore. Qualitative and quantitative components pertaining to S-League spectatorship are analysed, which serve as the basis for the recommendations presented on improving attendance at local football matches.

INTRODUCTION

The S-League is the premier football league in Singapore, commissioned by the Football Association of Singapore (FAS) in 1996. It has struggled with poor match-day attendances (spectatorship) and has shown no improvement over the years, noticeably dwindling in recent times. Little attention has been given to the factors that influence spectators in the decisions they make with regard to their support for professional sports in Singapore and this paper argues that such fundamental understanding forms the critical foundation on which the FAS (as well as other local football organizations) can enact measures that will lead to improved spectatorship.

The sport spectator is a curious specimen since he may support a particular team but yet not care for the sport itself (Branscombe & Wann, 1991, p. 116). However, instead of exploring the problem of non-attendance and what encourages fans to make themselves present at sports events, it is noted (Dominic, Ian & Ivan, 2000) that much of the research on sports spectatorship, even in the case of a popular sport such as football, has been on hooligan behavior. As there is a dearth of study on the average attendance of football spectators, there is a need for papers such as this to shed light that facilitates informed decision-making at the policy level.

ROLE OF SPORTS IN SOCIETY

Sport spectator involvement is defined as forms of unobservable motivation, arousal, or interest toward a sporting event (Rothschild, 1984; Laverie & Arnett, 2000), and spectators play a significant economical role as they end up becoming consumers of sports events (Milne & McDonald, 1999). A number of empirical studies have also shown that there is a link between sports spectatorship and active sports participation (Anderson 1979: Godbey & Robinson, 1979: Guttmann, 1986: Snyder & Spritezer 1983). In addition, fans fulfill their personal desire to be a sports celebrity or player by identifying with their chosen team, resulting in a feeling of strong attachment (Fink et al., 2002b; Trail et al., 2000; Trail et al., 2003). Individuals who are inclined towards sport typically have a need for vicarious achievement which can be satisfied through association with a successful other – such as being a fan of a successful club – and seeks to retain membership where there is positive contribution to his identity, thereby strengthening their own self-esteem (Posten, 1998).

Based on the concept of functionalism, people have shared values and cooperatively work for the benefit of all, and sport is viewed as one of those constructive forces with regard to the needs of the society (Troutman, 2003). In a stressful society such as Singapore (Channel NewsAsia, 2012), sport can also be an outlet for the release of tension, where the socio-cultural 'rituals' that take place at a football game allows an individual to become a part of the match (Cohen, 1974) and thus psychologically experiences real emotions (Funk et al., 2004). People in society generally look for a connection through sport and a purpose behind the activity (Troutman, 2003), and extensive research has shown that team identification can be a strong perception of social identity (Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002; Madrigal, 2001; Wann, 2000; Wann, 1993; Wann, Brewer & Royalty, 1999).

Social Identity Theory suggests that an individual feels committed or attached to a specific group as well as the status and characteristics of this group relative to other social categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In addition, participants become more resilient when they feel a sense of shared identity with other individuals (Haslam & Reicher, 2006), and feel more attractive and likeable (Posten, 1998) which can lead to positive relationships. Naturally, fans attempt to associate themselves with successful teams and in the process appear more positive as a result (McDonald, Milne & Hong, 2002). The economic interest invested by sports fans is not insignificant, evidenced by the wide range of sports-specific television networks, radio stations, and magazines in Europe (Johnsen & Solwell, 2007), for example.

SPORTS SPECTATORSHIP AND ATTENDANCE

Factors affecting whether a spectator attends a sports event can be divided into consumer preferences (crowd effect), economic factors (price of tickets, cost of travel, fan income unemployment level), stadia experiences, weather conditions, event characteristics (team success, match quality, uncertainty of match outcome, opponent characteristics) and supply scarcity (stadium capacity) (Borland & MacDonald, 2003). Wann's (1995) Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) similarly draws eight motivational constructs to assess sport spectator motive – namely, *eustress, self-esteem benefits, escape, entertainment, economic factors, aesthetic qualities, group affiliation, and family needs*.

Singapore's sports culture is promoted by the Singapore Sports Council (SSC), with the view to helping build the nation's identity through sports and bringing people from various walks of life and culture together (SSC, 2012). Its research efforts include studying sports participation trends over the past decade (from 2002 to 2011) which shows

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