

**Title: LEVERAGING MEDIUM-SIZED SPORT EVENTS TO ATTRACT CLUB PARTICIPANTS**

**Abstract**

**Purpose** – Sport participation is the lifeblood of community sport clubs. This research investigates how sport clubs can leverage participation from local, medium-sized, elite sport events.

**Design/methodology/approach** - This study used an action research approach where researchers, along with representative stakeholders from two elite tennis tournaments and 23 local tennis organizations, collaborated to develop and implement a series of interventions as part of a wider leveraging plan. The interventions were developed and evaluated in one cycle of action research that incorporated predominantly qualitative research methods.

**Findings** - The interventions stimulated the interest of event spectators by offering a free tennis lesson at a participating club. However, the conversion from interest to club participation was limited.

**Practical implications** - Key recommendations for clubs to leverage participation from a medium-sized event include: (a) a leveraging plan should consider the resources and capacity of local community sport clubs; (b) clubs should act collectively and collaboratively; and (c) clubs should have a strong physical presence at the event(s).

**Originality/value** – Regional sports organisations can utilise existing collaborative networks to enable community clubs to design and implement event-leveraging initiatives. The study also highlights the limited capacity of community sport clubs to leverage participation outcomes from medium-sized annual events.

**Key words:** Leveraging sport events; Sport clubs; Sport participation, Action research.

**Paper type:** Research paper

## **Introduction**

Sport event leveraging is a strategic approach to achieving specific event-related outcomes (Smith, 2014). Increasing the number of people playing a sport is an outcome that can be leveraged from events (Weed *et al.*, 2015). However, increased sport participation is not a guaranteed outcome of sport events (Grix, 2016). Previous studies have failed to demonstrate a conclusive connection between hosting a sporting event and an increase in sport participation in the host community (Ramchandani *et al.*, 2015). While it is often assumed that an event has an inspirational quality that encourages participation, research suggests this assumption is easily challenged (Grix, 2016) and that activation or leveraging is necessary (Taks *et al.*, 2014). For best results, activation or leveraging by not-for-profit organizations (e.g., community sport clubs) should follow strategic marketing principles for both the *formulation* and *implementation* of the marketing strategies (Finoti *et al.*, 2017). Leveraging is the deliberate strategy, or action, to achieve an outcome or impact that is pre-planned and co-ordinated. Leveraging requires intent to create outcomes by utilizing some aspect of the event. Event leveraging studies emphasize the deliberate nature of leveraging (Grix, 2016), the benefit of specifying the intended outcomes of the leveraging strategy (Chalip, 2004; Chalip, 2006), and the benefits of a leveraging focussed organization that is distinct from the event organizer.

Whether or not mega-sporting events can create positive and long-term outcomes has attracted considerable research interest (e.g., Dickson and Schofield, 2005; Weed *et al.*, 2015). Studies on mega events have focused on a range of impacts, including economic impacts (Tien *et al.*, 2011), psycho-social impacts (Hiller *et al.*, 2014), and collaborative capacity impacts within the local tourism industry (Werner *et al.*, 2016). With the emphasis placed on leveraging mega events, less is known about medium-sized events (Ramchandani *et al.*, 2015; Taks *et al.*, 2015). Taks *et al.* (2015) noted that there is no accepted definition of

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this type of event. They described non-mega, or medium-sized events, as being smaller in size, scale, and scope than mega events. Medium-sized events are unlikely to have the resources to sustain leveraging (or legacy) focussed organization that would facilitate an increase in participation numbers for sports clubs. In the context of these challenges, the research question driving this study is: “How can local sport clubs leverage medium-sized elite sport events to attract participants?”.

This study expands the body of academic work by investigating the efforts of local community sport clubs to leverage participation from a medium-sized sporting event. As this study shows, the lack of resources in community clubs can obstruct optimal leveraging of sport participants. However, the findings in this study offer new insights to suggest a process where community sport clubs can shape an existing network of stakeholders that enables them to formulate, implement, and manage initiatives to leverage medium-sized sporting events for participation outcomes.

### **Event leverage**

Event leveraging encourages event stakeholders to achieve outcomes from the event actively and purposefully, rather than passively and hopefully. Early research on event leveraging focussed on economic benefits to the host community and on ways a sport event can enhance the image of the host community (Chalip and Leyns, 2002; Chalip, 2004). These outcomes could be achieved through the implementation of both short and long-term leverage strategies. Short-term leverage strategies used the opportunity created by event visitors with the objective of maximizing revenue. Long-term leveraging used the opportunity of the media surrounding the event with the objective of enhancing the image of the host community. These objectives were achieved by a range of means such as enticing visitor spending and displaying the community in event advertising.

Later research incorporated the purposeful objective of creating and maximizing social benefits (Chalip, 2006; O'Brien and Chalip, 2008). In essence, the *event* (i.e., a resource) generates a spirit of community, or *communitas*, (i.e., an opportunity) which can be used to create *social change* in host communities (i.e., an objective) (O'Brien and Chalip, 2008). In parallel, the event media (an opportunity) can target a social issue (an objective) by showcasing the issue using the event media (means). Economic and social leverage can be both symbiotic and potentially integrative (O'Brien and Chalip, 2008). O'Brien (2007) extended Chalip's (2004) model highlighting the central role of a sport's subculture to both short and long-term event leveraging initiatives.

In contrast to the early linear models of leveraging, Chalip *et al.* (2016) developed a circular model for leveraging sport participation and development outcomes. This circular model has a sport development goal at its centre with three interactive components: (a) the context of the event represented by three hierarchical concentric circles; (b) three types of organizations involved in leveraging; and (c) three categories of resources needed for a leveraging plan. Specifically, the hierarchical concentric circles of the context of the event has *systems* and *structures* that are influenced by *attitudes and opinions* of sport community members, which are influenced by the wider *culture* of that community. The three types of organizations are the event organizations, the sport organizations, and non-sport related organizations. Last, resources come in three forms: physical resources, knowledge, and human resources. A critical success factor in this model is the initial formation of a group of interested parties to develop strategies and tactics to support event-related goals.

A small number of studies demonstrate the potential for medium-sized events to stimulate participation. For instance, Ramchandani and Coleman (2012) highlighted that spectators at three medium-sized events in England felt inspired by their event experience to increase their sport participation. Taks *et al.* (2015) concluded that there is the potential to

leverage sport participation from medium-sized events and that these events may have greater potential for leveraging than mega-events. Taks *et al.* (2013) examined how medium-sized sport events can be used to stimulate sport participation in host communities. In summarizing their findings, they concurred that there are opportunities to use events to generate sport participation if the requisite strategies and tactics are put in place in the planning stages. However, in suggesting there is potential to leverage medium-sized events, they stressed that local sport organizations often lack the necessary skills and resources to take advantage of a locally hosted event to build participation or attract new participants in their sport.

## **Method**

This study adopted an action research method. The research question was: “How can local sport clubs leverage medium-sized elite sport events to attract participants?”. The events in this study are two tennis tournaments held in Auckland, New Zealand, in January each year.

### ***Tournaments***

The two tennis tournaments used in this study form part of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) or Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) tours. They are scheduled in sequential weeks and are part of the lead-in to the Australian Open at the end of January. The men’s event is part of the ATP World Tour 250 series, the fifth-highest tier of men's tennis. The women’s event is in the International Tour, the fourth-highest tier of women’s professional tennis. The Auckland tournaments are in line with WTA and ATP requirements for these tiers of a minimum centre court capacity of 3,500 spectators. Sell-out crowds in Auckland for these two events are frequent.

Tennis Auckland organizes both events with the support Tennis Northern. Tennis Auckland and Tennis Northern are two of the six regional tennis organizations in New Zealand. Tennis clubs in Auckland are affiliated to either Tennis Auckland or Tennis

Northern. The regional tennis organizations are members of Tennis New Zealand and are responsible for organizing interclub activities and providing support to clubs to enable them to extend their activities and membership. In response to many pressures facing tennis clubs, Tennis New Zealand (2008) highlighted in its strategic plan the importance of leveraging participation from these tournaments. Specific details for achieving this aim were left unaddressed.

### ***Action research***

Action research is a collaborative, future-oriented and situational method that involves a cyclical process that helps solve problems for members of organizations (Cardno, 2003). The process involves issue identification, intervention (planning and taking action), and evaluation. These phases aim to offer solutions to practical concerns and to develop the self-help competencies of the people facing problems. The participatory nature of action research makes it ideal for not-for-profit organizations when outcomes relate to community development (Greenwood and Levin, 2007) and event leverage (Misener *et al*, 2015). This method also resonates strongly with participative approaches to consumer relationships (Maklan *et al.*, 2008). Action research is particularly appropriate for self-governing organizations seeking change. The process allows for members of the organizations to develop and ultimately implement the desired change.

One cycle of action research was undertaken with a network of tennis organizations, with researchers acting as facilitators or “friendly outsiders” (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 104). Each of the three phases of that cycle are now described.

### **Phase 1: Issue Identification**

The purpose of the first phase was to identify key issues in developing and implementing a tournament-related intervention. The data collection and analysis for Phase 1 are described, followed by the three main issues arising from the analysis.

### ***Data collection***

In total, seven in-depth interviews and two focus groups were conducted. The interviews lasted between 20 and 50 minutes and were conducted with employees and board members from Tennis New Zealand, Tennis Auckland, and Tennis Northern. The focus groups included representatives from local tennis clubs, with the clubs selected by the lead researcher in conjunction with Tennis Auckland personnel. The two focus groups were 75 minutes and 90 minutes in duration. It was decided that two clubs from different geographic locations would provide more diverse representation. Both committee and non-committee members from these clubs were then invited to attend a focus group. A total of 18 members from the two clubs participated in the two focus groups.

The semi-structured questions for both the focus groups and interviews covered past, current, and possible club-based tournament-related activities, as well as issues impacting on the attraction of new participants or members. The same questions were used in both the focus groups and interviews, with the interviews generating more in-depth discussion of strategic issues, whereas the focus groups had greater utility for generating ideas (Stokes and Bergin, 2006). In the focus groups, the questions were phrased in a more conversational style to allow participants to engage in the discussion. During the interviews and focus groups, follow-up probing questions were used to clarify participants' comments. Both the interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by the lead researcher. For the purposes of de-identifying the participants, interviewees are coded as Interviews 1 – 7, and focus groups are coded as FG1 and FG2.

### ***Data analysis***

Cresswell's (2013) data analysis process guided this study. The lead researcher read the transcripts from the focus groups and the interviews, and then developed a list of descriptive and thematic codes (an inductive approach). After coding the data, the lead

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researcher reviewed the list of codes and modified to incorporate ideas that did not fit the initial list. Once all data had been coded, the codes were again reviewed and interrelating themes were developed from groups of descriptive and thematic codes. For example, a number of codes (e.g., inspiration for young players to continue and possible inspiration of spectators to take part) demonstrated the inspirational effect of the tournaments. The focus groups and interviews also elicited a number of suggestions for linking the clubs to the tournament. These suggestions were categorised into five groups – general, specific, promotions, publicity-generating events, and other. The general suggestions included Open Days at clubs promoted at the event, the presence of clubs and club members at the tournaments (e.g., booths and a desk in the marquee), and using the event volunteers in some way given that many of them were also club members. The specific club ideas were scheduling a club day at the tournament, scheduling a Kids Day at the tournament, club-related advertisements or editorial within the tournament programmes, and linking clubs to on-court activities. The promotion ideas included offering a prize (e.g., corporate box for a day) which would give a club a higher profile at the tournament, discounted coaching session at club for event ticket holders. The publicity ideas included organizing player visits to the clubs and scheduling impromptu tennis match between players in public spaces (e.g., town square and a building rooftop). Other ideas included linking clubs with the pre-tournament practice and qualifying sessions at the North Harbour tennis facility.

A number of techniques were used to maximize reliability (i.e., trustworthiness of the data) and validity (i.e., trustworthiness of interpretations) (Stiles, 1993). This included “intensive engagement” (Stiles, p. 604) with the lead researcher checking the accuracy of the transcription against the recordings, reading and re-reading transcripts during the coding process, and also looking for inconsistencies within individual participant's responses. Peer debriefing (Cresswell, 2013) within the research team provided checks that the commentary



(results and discussion) matched the data. This involved the lead researcher and one other member of the research team discussing in detail and checking the transition from transcript to codes to commentary. The third researcher provided critique of the process, questioning how the written commentary was obtained. The lead researcher maintained an audit trail of interview and focus group transcriptions, interviewer notes, and notes from the coding process. As focus group moderator, she engaged in a process known as recycling, whereby she periodically shared her understanding with the focus group participants to ensure accuracy (Attwood *et al.*, 1993). Validity was enhanced by using quotes from a variety of participants, and by stating the results tentatively in recognition that the aim of qualitative research is not to predict or generalize, rather it seeks to understand the human experience (Stiles, 1993).

There was consensus amongst the participants on three key issues: (a) the tournaments increase the profile of the game; (b) tennis clubs were insufficiently profiled at the tournaments, and (c) there are challenges and opportunities in leveraging club participation from tournaments.

***Issue 1: The tournaments increase the profile of the game***

The participants in Phase 1 of the study expressed the view that the tournaments were ‘good for the game’ of tennis. However, they had difficulty in articulating what that meant, and explained that the high profile of the tournaments was beneficial to the sport: “Profile is so important. Tennis on TV engages people who are not players. It is the only way to preach to the unconverted” (FG1). The profile was described as arising from the coverage of matches throughout the day on television and the profile in the television news: “when else does tennis even get into the News?” (FG1). The close proximity in time between the Auckland tournaments and the Australian Open Grand Slam event was mentioned as a

positive aspect of the calendar. It keeps tennis "in the forefront of people's minds for a block of time" (FG 1).

When asked to be specific about how this profile benefited tennis, most participants were unsure and admitted that the benefit was nebulous. In one focus group, a participant admitted: "Now that you mention it, there is nothing specific, but they [tournaments] are good for the game" (FG 2). Other participants in the focus group nodded in agreement, mostly with a surprised or disappointed look on their faces.

One participant commented that the tournaments are "Good for showing the younger generation a pathway. Creates aspirations. Should inspire them to want to play. Role models to aspire to" (Interview 4). Another participant said the tournaments are: "Good for the game [and] something that encourages people to take part. Perceived healthy family environment" (FG 2). The possible impact on the development of tennis was felt to arise from the view that the tournaments show tennis as an "inclusive rather than exclusive activity" and this might encourage non-players to play (Interview 4).

Overall, the data pointed toward benefits of the tournaments in relation to tennis in general in New Zealand. There were no comments relating to benefits to clubs or regional centres.

### ***Issue 2: Insufficient profile of clubs at the tournaments***

The lack of presence of clubs at the tournaments was the subject for considerable comment, with general agreement that the club-tournament link was tenuous and not specific. One participant commented: "You could go to the tournaments and not know that anyone in Auckland played tennis elsewhere" (FG 2). Participants noted that there was no real presence for clubs at the events, with comments similar to "club presence is missing from the tournaments, they are quite simply not there" (FG1). Participants in both focus groups and four interviewees used the words "missing" and "not there" in relation to club presence at the

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tournaments (FG 1 and 2, Interviews 1,2,5,7). Participants in both focus groups were surprised by this with comments such as “this is odd when there are so many volunteers at the tournament who all come from clubs”(FG1).

### ***Issue 3: Challenges and opportunities in leveraging club participation from tournaments***

Participants viewed the tournaments as a missed opportunity for clubs to profile their services, and leverage participation outcomes. For instance, one participant made the comment: “that clubs should be there” (FG2). This comment with met with enthusiastic approval. There were several comments similar to, “it should happen” (Interview 1). This conclusion formed the basis for Phase 2 of the study.

When discussing the absence of previous leveraging interventions, it became clear that the clubs needed to work collaboratively. One participant stated: “A single club won’t have the resources to cover a tournament. But also a club only looks after a small part of Auckland. The tournament has people from all over the place” (FG1). There was also considerable discussion about the January scheduling of the tournaments. January is in the middle of the New Zealand summer and school holidays. Hence, January is a popular month for vacation. Club members can play tennis at the clubs during this time, but there are generally no organized activities. Therefore, even if the tournaments motivated spectators to visit a tennis club, the clubs would not be well-positioned to welcome new players. Most activity for new players occurs at the beginning of the season (i.e., September/October). Two participants commented that this is the way tennis clubs operate at present and expressed irritation with the situation, with one saying: “Clubs don’t have a mind-set to take advantage and so they don’t” (Interview 4).

### **Phase 2: Planning and taking action (intervention)**

Towards the end of the issue identification phase, there was no specific and workable action or intervention emerging. There were vague concepts to link the tennis clubs to the two

tournaments, but considerable work was needed to transform these into leveraging initiatives. This was not a simple or quick process. Rather, it was achieved through several meetings and conversations between the lead researcher and senior employees in the regional organizations. A draft proposal for action or intervention was presented to the Club Liaison and Support Committee meeting for feedback. This committee is a group of representatives from clubs in the region that discuss issues and initiatives of relevance to tennis clubs. Following feedback from this committee, minor details were modified and the leveraging initiative was finalized.

The leveraging action plan or intervention comprised a three-part initiative: (a) a promotional offer of a free tennis lesson at a participating tennis club, advertised at a club information booth and in the tournament programme; (b) a club information booth in the exhibitors' hall at the two tennis tournaments; and (c) advertisements in the tournament programmes promoting the club booth and the tennis lesson offer. The lead researcher assisted the regional organizations and some of their affiliated tennis clubs to implement the intervention.

#### ***Free tennis lesson promotion at a participating tennis club***

The free tennis lesson was offered to non-club members as a way of encouraging new and casual players to visit clubs. To register for the free lesson, potential players could either complete a form at the club booth in the exhibitors' dome or visit the website of the regional organization and complete the details online. This offer was also promoted in the tournament programme. Within a few days of doing so, all entrants received an email from the regional organization acknowledging their interest and explaining that a club would contact them. Entrants were recorded on a spreadsheet, sorted into geographic areas and their details provided to a nearby club participating in the promotion. The clubs then contacted the entrants, arranged a lesson, and undertook follow-up, approximately three or four weeks after

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the tournament. Rather than having a standardized process determined by the regional organization, each club was provided with the autonomy to communicate with entrants in the best way they could.

#### ***Club information booth in the exhibitors' hall***

A purpose-built club information booth was erected in the exhibitors' dome at the tournaments. The booth was strategically situated at the centre of the dome, opposite the food hall. Club members staffed the booth during the tournaments. Their role was to inform spectators about the free tennis lesson and answer questions about the local tennis community. The booth also included maps of the surrounding regions with the location and addresses of all tennis clubs. A large screen provided by a tournament sponsor featured images from several participating clubs.

#### ***Advertisements in the tournament programmes for club booth and tennis lesson promotion***

The materials in the tournament programme included: (a) A half page (A5 size) glossy *invitation* to visit the club booth in the exhibitors' dome. The caption read 'Visit the Tennis Auckland booth today' and the advertisement showed a map of the exhibitors' hall and the type of information available at the booth; (b) An advertisement promoting the *free tennis lesson*. There were two versions of the ad (each of them a half page in size), one featuring a photo of a man and the other one featuring a photo of a woman. The people were dressed in casual clothing and holding a tennis racket. Below them was the caption "Give tennis a go", with an explanation of the free tennis lesson; and (c) An *information pack* with details about tennis in Auckland and the North Shore, including a list of clubs with the location of their facilities.

The programmes were provided at no cost to each tournament spectator. There was no cost to the clubs for the advertising, although there was potentially an opportunity cost to the

event owner as paying advertisers could have used the space. There were minimal development costs for the artwork with the use of existing photographs and materials.

### **Phase 3: Evaluation of actions/interventions**

The data collection for the evaluation stage as well as the evaluation of the three components of the intervention are discussed here.

#### ***Data collection***

The final outcome of the three-part intervention was that relatively few people became long-term club participants. Therefore, it was important to evaluate the process and each part of the intervention to determine any apparent weaknesses in the invention. The three parts of the intervention are evaluated in the order in which they occurred: information in the event tournament programmes; club information booth at the event and free tennis lesson at a club. Quantitative indicators were frequency counts reflecting (a) the number of online and booth-based entrants for the free tennis lesson, and (b) the number of tennis lesson attendees. A structured evaluation process facilitated feedback from 15 of the 23 participating clubs. In addition, qualitative data was generated from five in-depth interviews with employees and board members of the regional organizations, three of whom were involved in development or implementation of the leveraging initiative. Qualitative data were analyzed in the same way as for Phase 1.

#### ***Evaluation of information in the event tournament programmes***

This aspect of the intervention was hardest to evaluate. Its role was to support the promotion and raise awareness of clubs amongst spectators. With no cost-effective way of measuring awareness, the impact of this intervention could only be assessed through the perceptions of the Club Liaison and Support Committee and of the five interview participants (employees of regional organizations). Overall, all participants were pleased to see club-related information in the tournament programmes. Occasionally, there was surprise, perhaps

even frustration that club-related information had not been provided in the tournament programme previously. For instance, a Club Liaison member claimed: “It was really great to see this happen. Why had it not been done before?”. The provision of information about local tennis clubs was considered by most to have enhanced the tournament programme.

#### ***Evaluation of club information booth at the event***

The purpose of the club booth was to support the promotion and to offer information about clubs to spectators at the event. Overall, the booth was considered to have been a successful initiative. Evaluation of the club booth was based on: (a) the number of people entering the promotion from the club booth, (b) reported reaction of Club Liaison and Support committee members who staffed the booth; and (c) the five qualitative interviews with employees and board members of regional associations. Data from the latter two sources indicated a high level of spectator interest.

The visual impact of the booth was described in terms of stopping “people in their tracks” (Interview 7) and inviting “curiosity and when they got here, they stayed and looked” (Interview 8). A few participants commented on the location and design of the booth: “It was an ideal location – opposite the food and right in the middle of everything” (Interview 8).

The people staffing the booth were not asked to undertake a count of visitors. However, they reported “waves of people” visiting between matches. The number of entries from the booth showed that it had some impact. One hundred and four of the total entries (28%) came directly from the booth.

#### ***Evaluation of the free tennis lesson at a club***

A key issue was insufficient capacity from volunteer clubs to cater for all entrants. Prior to the tournaments, all clubs were invited to provide the free lessons. Initially, 12 clubs volunteered. Due to demand, 11 additional clubs were then specifically asked to participate. In total, 23 clubs offered free lessons. Reasons for clubs not participating in the promotion

included a lack of resources (e.g., a resident coach) or an inability to fit the activity into the club programme.

The tennis lesson offer was evaluated in a number of ways. Four hundred and fifty people entered the promotion to receive a free tennis lesson. Of the 450 entrants, 68 were from outside the Auckland region. Given the limited resources, the regional organization and the lead researcher focussed only on the Auckland residents. The details of the 382 Auckland entrants were passed on to 23 local clubs. The details of the 68 non-Aucklanders were shared with the relevant regional tennis organization. No data is available on the success of encouraging these 68 people to attend a club. The average number of entrant contacts given to each club was 15, with five clubs receiving between 25 and 30 contacts, and five clubs receiving five or six contacts. Even after contacting additional clubs, 51 of the entrants (13%) needed to travel to a neighbouring suburb for their lesson.

Towards the end of the season, clubs were asked for feedback on the tennis lesson initiative. Three areas of concern were raised: (a) the way the clubs promoted the initiative; (b) the way the clubs implemented the initiative; and (c) the clubs' overall assessment of the initiative and whether they would run it again. There was notable variation in the way clubs handled the initiative. Some clubs used a single method to contact people on their list, whereas others used multiple methods (i.e., a combination of phone, text, and email). Most clubs provided information at the lesson about the club, membership options, and future events. A few clubs invited entrants to a future club event. Some commented that it was hard to provide membership information with only two or three months of the season remaining. Clubs found that not all the entrants attended the organized tennis lesson. At one club, only one third of entrants attended the lesson. The strongest attendance was just over 50 per cent.

The majority of clubs reported that the people who attended the lesson had a "good tennis experience" (Club Feedback) and that the tennis lesson was a good initiative. Entrants



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ranged from complete beginners to people returning to the game. In some cases a returning player was accompanied by a friend or family member. A few clubs had difficulties coping with the variation in skill level of the lesson attendees. Approximately a third of the clubs managed an outcome beyond participation and recruited at least one new member from the initiative. There was optimism that others would join for the following season.

Whilst there was mixed reaction about the outcome of the tennis lesson promotion, the process was considered worthwhile. Employees of regional organizations and the members of the Club Liaison and Support Committee were surprised and pleased with the response to the promotional offer (i.e., 450 entries). The overall opinion was that it was “a good thing to do” (Interviews 10, 13, 14 and 15, and Club Liaison and Support Committee). Approximately half of the clubs providing feedback indicated they would definitely offer the lesson again. The remainder of the clubs were either uncertain or would definitely not repeat the initiative. Some clubs felt that it was a lot of effort for the result, whilst others felt that it was a relatively easy thing to do. Some clubs felt the uptake of the promotion was better or at least comparable to other recruitment initiatives they or the regional organizations had undertaken in the past. Clubs considered that operational weaknesses reduced the conversion from interest to participation and that these weaknesses could be countered if the initiative was repeated.

When clubs were asked to explain the low rate of conversion, the most prevalent comment related to the time delay between a person entering the promotion and being contacted by clubs. This delay meant the enthusiasm generated by the tournaments waned over time. Some clubs and interview participants defended the time delay, citing the (unexpected) large number of entrants, the need to identify additional clubs, and the preference for some clubs to schedule the lesson alongside existing club activities.

## Discussion

This study investigated the question “How can local sport clubs leverage a medium-sized elite sport event to increase participation at their club?”. Whilst there was limited success in the achievement of this goal, the process shows promise for future work. The methodological and theoretical features of this study are discussed using Chalip *et al.*'s (2016) model of three interactive components as a framework. The discussion focuses first on the goal at the centre of the circles; secondly on the network created by three types of organizations; and thirdly on the management of resources, with the influence of context (i.e., systems, attitudes and culture) embedded in the discussion.

At the heart of Chalip *et al.*'s (2016) model is the goal, which is also evident in Chalip's (2004) earlier model of leveraging. In analysing the goal or output from the action, it is important to make a distinction between a one-off lesson and long-term participation. The results show that even though the interventions stimulated interest in attending a tennis lesson at a club, at best only half of the interested spectators actually attended a lesson. Furthermore, the number of people who remained in contact with the club after their lesson was very small.

Attrition took place at the several stages of the intervention, especially between interest and action; and then between action and long-term involvement with a club. This attrition illustrates the difficulty in converting interest to membership (Wicker and Breuer, 2013; Sotiriadou *et al.*, 2014). It also suggests that motives of spectators could differ from those playing sport (Tokuyama *et al.*, 2016). The network emphasised in Chalip *et al.*'s (2016) model is demonstrated through the collaborative approach between the local tennis clubs (sport organization) and their regional organizations (sport and event organization) with a team of researchers (researchers from an academic ‘non-sport’ organization) to design, implement, and evaluate a three-part leveraging initiative. This collaboration was a key difference between this initiative and previous initiatives at the tournaments. This study

demonstrates the ability of action research to create a collaborative approach, strengthening inter-organizational relationships that Chalip *et al.* identify as being a critical success factor. In this case the study also brought together two types of sport organizations (i.e., local and regional).

The event was organised by a regional sport organization, meaning it acted as both an event organization and a sport organization. This organizational arrangement does not fit neatly into the types of organisations within Chalip *et al.*'s model (2016) (i.e., sport organizations, event organizers, and non-sport organizations). However, the event team within the organization is separate from the club development team. So the principle in Chalip *et al.*'s model still holds – that event organisers and leveraging groups need to work together. Collaborative capacity refers to the conditions required for groups or networks to work together and to achieve joint goals (García-Ramírez *et al.*, 2009). For the tennis event leveraging, there was sufficient collaborative capacity to enable and sustain a multi-organization approach. Given the dynamics amongst rival sport clubs (Meiklejohn *et al.*, 2015), there is always the possibility that competitive pressures may dominate the co-operative pressures. The contribution of a federated network structure, and more specifically the involvement of a network administrative organization, to the organizations' collaborative capacity should not be underestimated (Dickson *et al.*, 2005; Meiklejohn *et al.*, 2015). Another feature of the inter-organizational network was that built upon existing relationships, with at least some degree of tie strength (i.e., well-developed history of communication, interaction, and exchange) to assist in the collaboration process (Werner *et al.*, 2015). Whilst sufficient in this case, collaborative capacities should never be assumed or taken for granted when a multi-club leveraging initiative is being considered.

The beliefs of the people involved in the intervention were also pertinent. As identified by Chalip *et al.* (2016) beliefs are both a challenge and an opportunity. A strong sense of

ownership of the tournaments was evident by all parties involved in the study, accompanied by a strong belief that the events could be leveraged to achieve participation outcomes for clubs. However, there was also a strong belief that practical considerations (e.g., tournament scheduling and limited resources) provided challenges. This study demonstrates that organizations with at least some degree of prior interaction, tie strength, and a network administrative organization can overcome attitudinal and cultural challenges when there is a belief that the opportunity is greater than the challenge.

The third element of Chalip *et al.*'s (2016) model is the management of resources (i.e., physical, human, and knowledge). The management by these organizations is evident in the intervention. Two parts of the initiative (i.e., the physical resources of the club booth and the promotional materials) were developed and implemented at the tournament by employees from the regional organizations. Local clubs managed the third part of the leveraging initiative, the promotional offer of a tennis lesson, requiring all three resource types.

The study demonstrates precisely the concern of Chalip *et al.* - that many clubs lack the resources to support such interventions in a meaningful and sustainable (i.e., repeated) fashion. For example, when seeking to leverage the free tennis lessons, many clubs experienced resource issues preventing them from follow-up with interested players in a timely and effective manner. These results reflect findings from previous studies of organizational problems in sport clubs when recruiting and retaining members, volunteers, and coaches. Limited club capacity can have a debilitating impact on the management and success of attracting participants to sport clubs (e.g. Wicker and Breuer, 2013; Sotiriadou, *et al.*, 2014). Similar to Chalip *et al.* (2016), the findings highlight the challenges clubs have in coping with an influx of new participants. In this regard, this study also highlights the contribution of regional organizations in facilitating the necessary collective action by clubs. This supports the premise of Chalip *et al.* that a core of interested parties is a precondition for

effective leveraging. It also supports the claim by Dickson *et al.* (2005) that network administrative organizations can enhance co-ordination between and amongst clubs.

The tournament scheduling and its location provided challenges for the leveraging initiatives. The scheduling of the tournaments was not compatible with the clubs' operating cycle. The tournaments are scheduled half way through the traditional club season, at a time when club capacity (e.g. available volunteers or coaches) to deliver event-related initiatives is low. As part of the ATP/WTA tour in the lead up to the Australian Open, a change to the event's scheduling is not likely to be influenced by the local tennis clubs.

However, the scheduling of the free lesson following the events was in the control of the organizations. Feedback from this study suggests the free trial should be offered much sooner (perhaps even a week) after the event to capitalise on the participants' excitement and then offer a follow-up incentive to enable participants to join the club. This finding adds another dimension to Ramchandani and Coleman's (2014) list of factors which constrain the inspiration effect of events on sport participation: the time between the actual event and the leveraging activity.

In addition, the tournaments' wide geographic drawing power was incompatible to the limited geographic focus of local clubs. By implication, some people who attended the tournaments and entered the free tennis lesson did not reside close to the participating clubs. Therefore, the leveraging strategy was limited to local residents. These structural issues help to further explain why clubs choose not to pursue event-leveraging recruitment strategies.

Several practical considerations for managers in sport organizations are evident. The complexity of the leveraging initiative reflected the organizational capacities of the organizations involved (Balduck *et al.*, 2014). Financial and human resources (and perhaps knowledge) are limited. In essence, clubs need to ensure they are able to meet the demand and offer services to new participants before embarking on initiatives to leverage sport

events. That capacity building must take place in advance of an event leveraging strategy so that the necessary skills and resources are well established. This need further reinforces the role of regional and national sport organizations and the creation of a strong network to support event-leveraging initiatives.

### **Conclusion and future research considerations**

This study creates increased understanding about how to leverage medium-sized events to stimulate participation. The findings support previous research that indicated medium-sized sport events have the potential to contribute to increases in participation by event spectators (e.g., Ramchandani *et al.*, 2015), if the requisite strategies and tactics are implemented (Taks *et al.*, 2015). Effective collaboration between sport organizations and the event organizer is a key success factor. This is more likely if the personnel are part of the same organization, as was the case in this study.

The authors acknowledge limitations to the research. A notable limitation is the lack of feedback from the perspective of the free tennis lesson attendees. Another key limitation, due to time constraints, is the absence of a longitudinal approach. Such an approach would allow follow-up with clubs to support them in the continuation of leveraging with another cycle of action research. These limitations suggest future research should also examine both sides of the experience and in particular explore the similarities and/or differences between peoples' drive to spectate as opposed to play sport. This insight could offer marketing ideas to event and sport managers and marketers to use in their leveraging strategies. Furthermore, it is recommended that future studies adopt 'blanket coverage' so that all clubs in the region participate. This would mean all lesson attendees could go to the closest club rather than having to travel out of their area.

A further unresolvable limitation is the inability to calculate the ratio of tennis lesson entrants to event spectators is fraught with difficulty. The events ran over two weeks, with the

total number of spectators unknown due to repeat spectators attending multiple sessions. The promotion was only available to current non-members (i.e., either new players or lapsed members). Using the average centre court attendance as a guide, and a range of unpublished visitor surveys, the best estimate is that fewer than 10% of potential entrants showed interest in the tennis lesson offer. However, this figure is very hard to validate. It is also hard to form any judgment about this ratio, as there are no relevant 'industry' standards for formal benchmarking or comparison. Low as it might have been, the key points to emphasise are (a) the participating sport organizations were satisfied with it; and (b) the intervention outcomes compared favourably to previous efforts to leverage participation outcomes from these tennis events.

In spite of these limitations, the contribution of this study centres on highlighting how an existing collaborative network can potentially overcome capacity or resource-related challenges that inhibit clubs from leveraging of participation outcomes from events. More specifically, the study demonstrates the potential for regional sport organizations to not only enhance the collaborative efforts of clubs, but also to enhance the capacity of individual clubs. The use of an existing collaborative network may ameliorate the organizational capacity deficiencies of clubs.

If sports clubs are left to their own devices, it is likely leveraging will not be initiated at all or at least fail to reach full potential. The study demonstrates the challenges that community sport clubs encounter when leveraging events as part of their 'everyday' activity. This reflects the concern of Chalip *et al.* (2016) about the lack of club resources to support interventions. Similarly the findings highlight the challenges clubs can face in catering for new participants. The action research approach in this study involved a regional sport organisation and enabled the utilisation of an existing, collaborative network of clubs which collectively embraced a leveraging initiative.

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