THE GRAN FONDO AND SPORTIVE EXPERIENCE: AN EXPLORATORY LOOK AT CYCLISTS' EXPERIENCES AND PROFESSIONAL EVENT STAGING

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There has recently been a significant upsurge in popularity in cycling with not only increased participation evident but also new participants taking up cycling, especially in the UK, parts of Europe, US, and Australia. The branch of cycling that has witnessed the largest growth, in both numbers of events and participants, is the “gran fondo” or “sportive” cycle event. However, very little is known about either the organization of these events or the cultural experiences of cyclists participating in them. The focus of this article is to provide an exploratory narrative of the characteristics of a gran fondo or sportive, explored via a participant observation approach and interpreted through the use of experience theory. Drawing upon the exploratory stage of a larger “experiential ethnography” of cyclists at these types of events, the article presents observation findings from 12 event days to identify key characteristics of these events as experienced by participants. These are understood and contextualized within a discussion around the nature and concept of event experiences and related to the need for professional event organizers to identify experience components by applying models of experience within a management framework.

Key words: Gran fondo; Sportive; Cycle events; Event experience; Event management

Introduction and Background

Gran fondo or sportive cycling is viewed within the wider overlapping and interlinking concepts of bicycle tourism and sports tourism where it is embraced within the delimiting concepts of leisure and recreation. Cycling’s relationship with tourism is well documented, incorporating organized events and the travel to participate in them (Lamont & Buultjens, 2011). From a research perspective,

discussing the definition of bicycle tourism is complicated by the range and variability of definitions used by researchers and this in turn has complicated the existence of a comparable body of knowledge on the subject (Lamont, 2009). Recognizing that different “definitions” may be appropriate for different circumstances, Lamont has nevertheless sought to develop a new technical definition for bicycle tourism that would allow for more consistent data on cycling, which is described as:

Trips involving a minimum distance of 40 kilometres from a person's home and an overnight stay (for overnight trips), or trips involving a minimum non-cycling round trip component of 50 kilometres and a minimum four hour period away from home (for day trips) of which cycling, involving active participation or passive observation, for holiday, recreation, leisure and/or competition, is the main purpose for that trip. Participation in cycling may include attendance at events organised for commercial gain and/or charity (competitive and non-competitive), as well as independently organised cycling. (p. 20)

Gran fondo or sportive events are essentially noncompetitive, mass start events that offer a "challenge" to the participant based on terrain, time, and distance. They fit within the segments of cycle tourism termed "participatory events" that are characterized as being commercially organized, noncompetitive events embracing a single day or multiday and have profit or charitable objectives (Lamont & Buultjens, 2011). They are similar to mass participation marathons or runs, and although to some they are a "race," in which they can set a time they can compare with their age-group participants or all comers in the event, they are not technically competitive races (Sidwells, 2011). Their emergence is attributed to the running of the first ever French "cyclosportive," the Marmotte in 1982 (Spinney, 2006). Based on a route of 174 km, the Marmotte takes cyclists over some of the most famous cols of the Tour De France and it enables cycle tourists the chance to participate in a planned ride covering the same terrain that professional cyclists follow, and is a combination of what Gibson (2005) refers to as active sports tourism and nostalgia, combining participation with an element of vicarious adoration. Such events are reflective of a challenge culture that is not dissimilar to that discussed in the analysis of extreme and lifestyle sports where groups of individuals are undertaking more and more physically extreme activities that differentiate them from the mainstream cultural experience (Wheaton, 2000). Research on such event experiences lacks any real attempt to employ a multidisciplinary approach that considers, at the outset, the experiences to be multidimensional and multiphasic and to consequently develop a methodological mix that would give deeper meaning and insight into these variable components within

experiences (Gibson, 2004, 2005). The sharing of an experience with similarly inclined participants is a feature of events, and researchers need to develop a deeper understanding of why sport tourism experiences are enjoyable and likely to be repeated (Gibson, 2005; Weed, 2004, 2008). The implication is clear; if we can understand in more depth the nature of the active experience, then we can understand how better to plan and manage it.

Planning and Staging Event Experiences

The idea of experiences playing a central role is a key feature of modern society's choice with people seeking absorbing and immersive experiences (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1998; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Experiences have evolved to meet people's inner or psychic needs, with planners of experience taking great effort to create them (Ting-Yueh & Shun-Ching, 2010). This idea of creating experiences is central to the practice of event management, and the production and management of experiences has attracted academic study (Jensen, 1999; Morgan, 2010; Schmitt, 1999), with specific focus considering the creation of experience as a business and innovation (Sundbo & Darmer, 2008); the role of customers in the formation of experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004); and the evaluation and analysis of experience (Berridge, 2007; Gilhepsy & Harris, 2010).

The actions of most interest to the study of event management as a profession are therefore those planned events that provide for cultural, leisure, and tourism experiences and in doing so achieve specific experience outcomes (Getz, 2012). The intended outcome of such events, the experiences of those attending/participating, is the result of planned deliberation on the part of the event organizer (Berridge, 2012b). Within leisure and tourism, organizations and individuals engage in staging experiences for their customers (Morgan, 2010). This "experience industry" consists of private businesses, government agencies, and not-for-profit organizations, all of whom have a mission to stage encounters that produce engaging experiences for participants (Gilmore & Pine, 2002). The use of the word staging for such event experiences has multiple meanings, ranging from a narrow to an all-inclusive interpretation that considers logistics, stage

setup, large-scale event staging, and experience staging. This results in a staging of experiences across a broad spectrum of settings. Leisure and tourism experiences have a focus based on the value of the emotional and motivational states before and during participation, which has been referred to as experientializing the intangible offering (Ellis & Rossman, 2008). A number of researchers have therefore sought to identify what characterizes such experiences.

Concept of Experience

The concept of experience has grown in influence across the business, tourism, leisure, hospitality, and event sectors as organizations operating within the sector exist to provide consumers with experiences (Pettersson & Getz, 2009). Pine and Gilmore (1999) coined the term "experience economy" to describe how the relationships between provider and consumer had advanced into "experience" where unique and memorable experiences played a key part in consumer decision making (as opposed to simply price). The staging of event management experiences has in turn drawn the attention of researchers and academics who have begun to apply the framework of experience to develop a more detailed understanding of all types of events (Berridge, 2007; Getz, 2007; Nelson & Silvers, 2009; Pikemaat, Peters, Boksberger, & Secco, 2009). O'Sullivan and Spangler (1998) argue that within this experiential approach any offerings need to be enhanced, infused, and made to successfully connect with people. Preevent communication forms the basis for experience by providing a preexperiential excitement and anticipation that has three separate phases: need recognition, alternative search, and preparation. Experiences then occur as a result of stimulation that prompts a response that affects the entire living being (Jensen, 1999). People attending or participating in events do so either collectively or individually on the basis that some type of experience will result. Nevertheless, our insight into experience is made difficult by its complicated and variable nature that is multifaceted across the course of any given time period (Ooi, 2005; Rossman & Schlatter, 2003). Getz (2012) draws attention to this and to the variability of experiences that can exist within and between events. Study

has shown that experience is not static, that it is multidimensional and is always open to the effects of participants' interaction (Botterill & Crompton, 1996; Hull, Michael, Walker, & Roggenbuck 1996; Y. Lee, Dattilo, & Howard, 1994).

The multidimensional nature of experience has three aspects to it that affect participants. The conative dimension is their behavior and what people actually do, the cognitive dimension is how they make sense of experience through awareness, judgment, etc., and the affective dimension reflects the feelings and emotions that they use to describe the experience (Mannell, Zuzanek, & Larson, 1988). Such dimensional affectations lead to an awareness of the components of experience upon which participants base their evaluation. Such evaluation comes from hedonic responses to things like satisfaction, sensation, emotion, and imagery (Holbrook & Hirschmann, 1982). Csikszentmihalyi's research (1990) postulates that the desirable outcome of all experiences is individuals achieving optimum flow—that is, the point of optimal arousal that leads to flow experiences where deep involvement, lack of self-consciousness, and intense concentration occur.

Models for Staging Experiences

Developing techniques that can be used for staging such event experiences helps assist the professional event manager. Silvers (2004) identifies six dimensions of event experience that a professional organizer must address when planning an event: anticipation, arrival, atmosphere, appetite, activity, and amenities. A conceptual model developed by Getz (2012), although not itself a staging blueprint, draws attention to the need for planned event experiences to address the liminal/liminoid zone whereby participants are made aware they are entering a time/space that is set aside for their purpose. Meaning attributed to the event is then transmitted via, among other things, symbols that reaffirm the spatial and temporal purpose of the event. Preevent preparation and anticipation is a key feature of the process. In the relationship between organizer and experience, the emphasis is placed on a deliberate series of actions on the part of the organizer that culminate in the lived experience. Those planning experiences need to adopt a methodological tool based on key elements that make up any planned

occurrence, namely: interacting people, physical setting, objects, rules, relationships, animation (Rossman & Schlatter, 2003). Organizers need to be aware of how any single element may change as a result of participants' interaction and interpretation and so the nature of the experience itself may change. Organizers staging experiences should do so based on a perceived knowledge of how people participate and become involved and they should address five key parameters of experience:

1. The stages of the experience
2. The actual experience
3. The needs being addressed through the experience
4. The role of the participant and other people involved in the experience
5. The role and relationship with the provider of the experience (O'Sullivan & Spangler 1999, p. 23)

Event management emphasizes the role a constructed event has to play in producing experiences and essential to the successful staging of an event experience is the event organizer. In practice, this means that the professional organizer must "envision that experience from start to finish, from the guests' point of view. Imagine every minute of their experience. Identify event elements that will build on previous successes, elements that will take advantage of opportunities and strengths, and elements that will mitigate challenges, weaknesses, and threats" (Silvers, 2004, p. 5). The use of "valorization" tools is one the organizer may adopt because it enables them to visualize the purposefully staged space/time into which a participant will enter. Valorization facilitates participant engagement with their surroundings and absorption into the event (Falassi, 1987). Awareness and application of the model in the concept and planning stages will enable an organizer to embed this into staging of the experience.

Professional Event Organization

As the event industry has grown and matured there has been recognition that it is now a legitimate and recognized profession (Barron & Leask, 2012), albeit one that is immature. This raises questions of how events are professionalized, how are

they staged, and to what extent they anticipate, reflect, and confirm participant experiences. The issues faced by event management are its infancy as a profession, with limited government recognized standards, and the practice among professional associations to focus on specific event forms, which in turn perpetuate differences rather than consolidate standards (Getz, 2012). There remains little coordinated coherence or understanding of event professionalism (Harris, 2004), yet it is regarded as a key factor in the success of event management (Tassiopoulos, 2010). Skepticism around event management education among industry practitioners is evident (K. Lee, Myong, & Hee, 2009) along with a lack of clarity and consistency about content (Nelson & Silvers, 2009). Hence, there are difficulties in establishing the basis for professionalism. Yet given the size of the task and the nature of risk associated with running events (especially sport ones) some understanding of what it means to be a professional is required. However, "professional" services such as codes of conduct and professionalization vary significantly between industry associations (Arcodia & Reid, 2008). Equally, the level of understanding and management of risk varies between practitioners (Reid & Ritchie, 2011). Like all professions there is a recognition that a knowledge base is essential to achieving this, and the EMBOK (Event Management Body of Knowledge) framework seeks to identify useful knowledge domains (Silvers, Bowdin, O'Toole, & Nelson, 2006). Any knowledge domains, though, only become effective if they act as a framework for understanding and creating knowledge. Therefore, to further fuel our understanding of event professionalization a knowledge creation and research process is required (Getz, 2012). For knowledge creation for event management to be more professional a framework is useful to help establish a basis from which experience staging can develop. Although the experience models discussed above provided possible tools for this (staging) to be achieved, there needs to be some mechanism for event managers to adopt them within a management process. One such approach that might enable this is the "Framework for Efficient Management" that identifies five key fields and goals that should influence event management practice (Soteriades & Dimou, 2011).

1. **Planning:** Planning and strategies are the foundation for decision making.
2. **Product/event development:** Build up a portfolio of events.
3. **Event management:** Goal: Organize the event and elaborate appropriate action plans for implementation.
4. **Marketing strategy:** Objective: Commercial exploitation and enhance an image and continuous attractiveness.
5. **Monitoring and evaluation:** Objectives: (a) To evaluate event's impacts and (b) to ensure and measure events' competitiveness and efficiency.

Harnessing concept and models of experience to this framework enables the event professional to address how to begin to stage the event experience. The next key in the process, though, is understanding how events are actually experienced and what are the factors that determine that experience. Based on the idea that participant experiences are the key, it seems appropriate to develop a deeper understanding of those experiences that in turn will enable organizers to draw upon in order to develop their practice.

Methodology

An experiential ethnography project was developed that would allow for a rich and deep exploration of the experiences of participants in gran fondo and sportive events. Ethnography is based on participant observation in which the researcher can observe people's actions and interactions as well as the larger contexts within which these take place (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lambert, Glacken, & McCarron, 2011). The data presented here are the first part of a longer term "experiential ethnography" (Sands, 1999, 2002) into the lived experiences of cyclists riding such events. The key components of an experiential ethnography approach are labeled by Sands (2002) as:

1. The researcher participates as one of the population in every aspect of their interaction.
2. The researcher travels through several layers of participation, from passive observation and participation to extensive participation and becoming one of the population.
3. The stay in the field is for a lengthy period.
4. Observation becomes integrated within participation.
5. Interaction forms an important part of the validation.

It enables research to explore the deeper levels of experience (Wheaton, 1997), and to all intents and purposes the researcher learns to become "an athlete in that culture, through physical skills and acceptable behavior" (Sands, 2002, p. 126). Further down the research line it allows for exploration, meaning, and understanding to be conducted to address the importance of participants' accounts of their experiences, thus relating to "why" and "how" questions (Burgess, 1988). The research plan consists of three phases: 1) initial observation at events; 2) participant observation and interaction at different events; 3) case studies with six cyclists at six different events consisting of pre-event interviews, participant observation and in situ interviews, postevent interviews. This article focuses on data collected from phases 1 and 2 and is a result of direct participant observation and improvised interaction in situ with a variety of individuals throughout each event. The data collection was compiled from 12 days of participant observation that resulted in initial descriptive observation being made (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Kiefer, 1968) based on a simple initial question: What is going on here? The research is based on multisited fieldwork (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995) undertaken at gran fondo or sportive events. The selection of events was drawn from those promoted within a specialist cycling magazine in the UK, *Cycling Weekly*, that publishes a calendar of events, and also from a global website (cycloport.org) that lists over 1,000 events worldwide. The following criteria were used to select the sample of events and there was also an element of access and convenience because events had to have entry spaces:

- up to four "kitemark" events (i.e., those with a degree of history and prestige rating in the UK);
- up to four new or emerging events;
- up to four overseas (Europe) events reflecting the historical base of cyclosporives;
- up to six established events (i.e., that had run for several iterations).

In total eight events were selected, which equated to 12 separate participant days as two events were multiday. The events were as follows: Dave Lloyd Mega Challenge, Wales, UK; London to Paris, UK and France; Tour of Wessex, UK; Brisbane Mall to Mall, Australia; Brisbane to Noosa, Australia; Tour of Flanders, Belgium; British Cyclo sportive, UK; Surrey Rumble, UK. The ride distances for a single day ranged from 75 to 180 km. In terms of time, the longest ride took 10.5 hours, the shortest was just over 3.5 hours. Participant registrations also varied with the smallest event attracting 550 and the largest had 19,000. Event organization came from a spread of public, private, and voluntary sectors and was made up of the following: Governing body of sport (cycling); Amateur cycling clubs; National and regional charitable organizations; Commercial sports event agencies; Retail organizations (cycle shops). Costs of individual entry ranged from £10 (\$15) to £695 (\$1,050).

The field note observations were recorded using a digital recording device due to the impracticality of making extensive written field notes while participating and were then transcribed immediately after the event. Initial questions for observation were based on the classical ethnography approach characterized by the Descriptive Question Matrix (Spradley, 1980), which identifies nine major dimensions of the social situation as a basis for guiding descriptive questions and observations. The nine guiding dimensions are: Space (physical place or places), Object (physical things present), Act (single actions that people do), Activity (related acts people do), Event (related activities people carry out), Time (sequencing that occurs over time), Actor (people involved), Goal (things people try to accomplish), and Feeling (emotions felt and expressed).

This allowed for Grand-tour (the major features of the experience) and Mini-tour (specific features of the experience) observations to be made (Spradley, 1980). Interactions with organizers and participants was, at this stage, minimized to casual, every day exchanges and was largely unsolicited except for essential exchanges. Presentation of data at this stage was done manually and was based around a framework of the nine dimensions described above.

Results

Considering the number of sites, range of event distances, varied geography, and time spent at each event it is clear that there is capacity for observational notes to be huge. Therefore, the writing up of field notes in this instance has followed a more systematic rather than narrative style for ease of reading and follows Spradley's (1980) Descriptive Question Matrix. Included in these findings are compacted points of reference interspersed with occasional narrative descriptions of scenes taken from field notes. The main headings of the matrix overlap and each dimension has a relationship with every other dimension, resulting in a matrix that has a minimum of 81 descriptive questions. Although all questions were used and noted, writing up for this article has, out of necessity, described the main features of experience from which a professional event planner would be expected to consider producing a successful event.

Space

Many participants will be overwhelmed or challenged mentally and physically by the sheer topographic and geographic space used on a route of 180 km. Thus, describing space is hugely variable across an experience because this covers the entire event. In this extract the focus is on the headquarters. The management of space, however, can be mapped via a series of key points. The initial event grand space is built on two things: headquarters for registration, changing pre/postride provision; and car parking. This is almost exclusively directed at actual participants because these events attract very few spectators. Access and physical space are key factors in forming the initial experience on arrival. Depending on location, the majority of participants arrive by car and are seeking "safe" parking for the duration of the event. The following notes suggest a successful facilitated initial experience, but with a caveat for value for money.

As I arrived at the site I could see a figure in a yellow vest directing cars into the parking area. I followed his signal, pulled in, got out. As I walked the 50 yards back to the HQ there were semi-dressed cyclists and bikes everywhere, some bikes were

still on racks others were leant up against either car or tree/hedge. Some people still seemed to building up parts of their bike. Others were eating or getting ready. All around the HQ entrance there were bikes propped up against something or other waiting for owners and there were other owners fitting numbers or timing chips to their bikes. As I went in others came out past me with large envelopes. Inside there were several small queues in single file waiting to sign-in. The hall was spacious so no sense of irritation amongst those queuing. I had found my sign-in point, indicated by a large poster on the wall which read A-E and in less than 5 minutes I was out. I opened the envelope. As well as numbers and chip there was a map of the route—160 km—and some flyers for other events. There was also a SIS Gel for me to try. A bit basic I thought for £25.

Professionalization requires the packaging and managing of the experience from participants' point of view. Identification of key elements, based on previous successes, strengthens the likelihood that the event will be successfully delivered (Silvers, 2004). Variability in HQ does occur, and is often dictated by entry numbers and ranges from local community centers or halls to larger school halls and entertainment venue. HQ venues tend to be permanent spaces with a range of facilities and services to support cyclists such as changing rooms, toilets, large hallway or space, and provision for some type of food and beverage. The hall space itself is usually set out for participants to register for the event. In nearly all cases entry was prebooked in advance and so people are simply entering the HQ to physically register. The layout of the space is designed to enable minimal queuing via simple signage on walls or on bollards. Participant response to this is usually relaxed unless there is evidence of undue queuing and confusion. At registrations people simply want their info quickly and easily.

Objects

Objects can start from initial pre-event communication (promotion) and include electronic as well as physical objects. Virtual objects come via website information from the event organizer with the most important being a route map that can be downloaded to a GPS device. The popularity of GPS systems on bicycles has increased in recent

years, in line with cyclists becoming more aware of training aids. The GPS also has a key role to play as well because it largely ensures that riders will not stray off course. Organizers should provide route map information in advance that is downloadable. In turn, this relates to the other "key" object of such an event—actual physical route signage. This needs to be clear, directional, and visible to all those taking part and should be located at all junctions. For events with multiple routes (e.g., 50, 90, and 160 km) signage needs to identify which route the cyclist follows and so color coding is needed. There is a pragmatic simplicity required here.

Which way? No-one has a GPS and the sign isn't clear. We have to stop and go up to it to check. "It's left." This has been annoying me since we started. The directional signs are too small, they measure 6 inches by 4 inches and they are emblazoned with the organisers (a cycle shop) logo. Black text on white background it says P150 and the shop name. Directional sign is also in black. They are also not in the most obvious of places. This is the 4th time we have had to check. No-one else is saying anything, they don't have to, we all know the problem.

Obvious irritation is apparent, and the experience is disrupted by what many regard as a fundamental necessity: clear, accurate signage. If objects fail, such as direction signs disappear, have poor visibility, or are misdirected and GPS downloads are inaccurate, then this impacts upon the cyclist in negative way, causing uncertainty and hesitation and a break in momentum. At the core of these events is the guided route that offers cyclists a relatively safe, stable, and risk-free journey. Their breakdown leads to loss of trust and irritation if uncertainty in the route becomes apparent.

Acts

The acts of an event cover those organizing it and those cycling it but the focus here is in the former. Organizational acts are mostly centralized around the main start and finish hubs, feed zones, and marshal points. I have used the term "organizers" here to describe anyone involved in making the event happen on the day and who is visible to the cyclists. Acts occur through direct communication. Many

events rely on volunteers for staffing; in some cases entirely, in others as basic support crew. With event organization spread across public, private, and voluntary sectors, there are wide variances in the way an event is perceived. The acts of organization from localized, voluntary-run events such as the Tour of Wessex receive goodwill from cyclists and allowances for minor mishaps are tolerated. Those dominated by brand name support or sponsorship and relying on paid staff are given less leeway and understanding for things going wrong.

Acts of general encouragement are routinely expected, especially where the event is headlined as a fundraiser for a good cause (e.g., Cancer Research). Actions of the opposite, perhaps overzealous marshals, are frowned upon by cyclists anticipating or approaching physical fatigue. Goodwill and positive feelings regularly emerge out of participants who have been well treated during their endeavor and whose efforts are recognized. On the actual route organizers provide marshals on specific road junctions. They will also staff feed zones and their performance at the latter for tired and weary cyclists is a key experience moment. Their role is important in terms of encouraging participants to rest and take on board energy, especially across a lengthy challenge ride, where a cyclist may spend periods alone or in silence and might sometimes appreciate the acts of enthusiasm.

(Approaching feed zone) "Well done" (clapping). "Take anything you need, we've got tuna sandwiches, quiche, jam tarts, cakes, juice, some bananas, loads of food." It's like a feast I think. This is food stop 2, 110 km into the ride. I ask about the food. "Oh the lorry bringing all the energy stuff broke down. So Mike (points) was volunteering and he knocked on about half-a dozen houses to see if they could donate some food." I am staggered. There are twice as many people here as at the other stop, all helping out to provide food. It's an uplifting emotion, but it is also a physical and psychological spur. The taste of a tuna sandwich as opposed to an energy bar is so much nicer. I see some riders gobble down three jam tarts. I can't say I blame them.

Here the cyclist is receiving and responding to sensory, emotional, and functional support. Participant acts are largely confined to pedaling, either alone or in groups, but also include what might be

called the morality of participating. Negatively this refers to those who litter, who cycle illegally or who "race" the event and show little camaraderie. Acts at feed zones often show this as some push and shove their way through because they are "chasing a time." Acts on the road include blazing past groups at breakneck speed, often too close for the comfort of those passed. As in the previous dimension, organizers are limited in what they can do to manage this other than by developing a cultural core that breeds respect. Mostly such acts are not overtly "managed" by organizers, who tend to adopt a light touch in order to avoid accusations of excessive officiating. The main place where this does occur is at the start, and the control systems, if any, put in place to grid cyclists or send them off in batches.

Activity. This is related to the smaller acts noted above. Activities can be seen as the things people actually do for and within the event. Initially this could be in their communication about the event, then on site it could be advice or support (where relevant). In their supervision of the event start and passage over timing software, at the finish, in their staffing of facilities within the HQ area such as food and beverage, and exhibition/information stands. In some cases where cyclists are started off in groups (e.g., of 50 riders) the activity is to marshal people and bikes into holding zones so that entry onto the route is controlled.

"Next 50. Come up to the line." It's a bit more formal than usual. Actually it is a lot more formal than usual. The problem is the event has 3,500 entries, it's 7.30 start and they are sending groups of 50 off at 5-minute intervals. There are stewards patrolling the barriers and shouting and gesticulating at cyclists who are trying to either climb over them or get through them. The holding zone is a strip of road that has barriers either side of it and it is packed full of people. It is easily 250 metres long; this means cyclists arriving to go to the start have to join the back of an already irritable group.

Almost indescribable feelings of frustration manifest here for cyclists who have arrived earlier, many having traveled long distances and stayed in accommodation overnight, and are suddenly faced with not only a long walk retracing their steps but a long wait to start. The alternative and more

common approach is a “mass start” where cyclists gather on a first-come first-served basis, which often leads to a large crowd bunching and pushing to get through the start grid. Both present organizational challenges, but effective practice does exist that avoids long waits, crowded areas, and a mass charge at the beginning.

Events

Events within an event setting can be described as unique moments. Within the sportive landscape these moments can be directly linked to a number of features such as scenery, beauty spots, vistas, and terrain challenge. They can also include interaction (acts) with others, especially where the event is supported by a well-known or famous person who may join the ride. In the case of the London to Paris 3-day sportive, the presence of past Tour De France winner Stephen Roche cycling and chatting to riders gave each one of those a “personal wow” (Berridge, 2007). For many sportives it is the terrain challenge that attracts most attention and comment as it requires physical effort and preparation. Invariably this relates to ascents of hills and mountains. Alternatively, it is something like the cobbles of Paris–Roubaix. At no other point, with possibly the sole exception of finishing, is there a moment quite like cresting an especially hard climb. Climbs are always topics of conversation before, during, and after the event. They form part of the preexperience phase of feelings of anticipation and trepidation. Routes that follow either locally, nationally, or internationally renowned ascents attract riders in their masses willing to take on the challenge.

The Bwylch loomed ahead. This year we were doing it not once but twice. You can see it up the Valley from a long way back. Riders noticeably started to hold back on their speed and there were more groups joining together. At one point I counted close to 80 people with me. No-one was looking to slip away or up the pace, just the opposite as everyone seemed to want to slipstream and take a rest before the climb.

Here are feelings of camaraderie, group identity, and physical preservation as the challenge of the ascent is processed. The link to the space dimension is obvious here, but the use of natural

resources like this to create a challenging moment is an essential component that the organizers draw upon (O’Sullivan & Spangler, 1999). The choice of route influences participation and, local regulatory permissions aside, is selected by the organizer. Preexperience marketing usually identifies significant “events” such as finishing London to Paris under the Eifel Tower or riding up past the chapels of the Mur De Huy in Belgium. What is also noticeable is events are being linked to regional tourist areas such as the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Surrey Hills, the “stunning” Yorkshire Dales, or the “gorgeous shores” of south Cornwall.

Time

Events are demarcated by time as there is always a start and a finish. And all other features of the event interlink through it. Here we will focus on participation time. The passage of time (actual participation time) for cycling begins when the first rider registers and then begins the ride and then concludes when the last cyclist finishes. Actual cycling time, say for example 6 hours, is a long time for many cycle tourists, so the duration of actual cycling requires careful staging to incorporate cyclists’ time and spatial progression. Organizationally time needs to be broken up by a combination of start area and registration, route distance, feed zones, route terrain, and finish area.

When we got to Cheddar Gorge I was starting to get tired and bored, the last 30 km were a bit mundane. But once we started to climb up through the middle of it, I perked up. Suddenly I forgot we had been cycling for 4 hours.

Riding along the coast was truly spectacular and I just felt completely absorbed by the beauty of the coastline. The cliffs were spectacular and it was inspiring to be riding alongside the sea. It was a clear day and a fantastic journey.

Both of these notes relate to specific scenery and terrain features, but illustrate how they impact upon cyclists as they become immersed within the moment. Organizational staging across time includes this and the periods either side of it (on the day) that is used to deliver the event. Time is a major feature of the event challenge because many

events now include standard times to achieve for set distance that relate to gold, silver, and bronze standards of performance. They are also based around age and gender. Obtaining a target time becomes part of the sense of achievement for completing the event distance.

I remember thinking: Make sure your chip is scanned on the way across the line.

Most cyclists use time to measure where they are and how fast they are cycling in relation to the standards. This in turn establishes how they ride and with whom. Time here becomes a potential tool that invigorates a cyclist to “chase” a time, but equally it can lead to a feeling of deflation if the time slips away and beyond the target. The requirement for timing is important for many, it is a mark of official recognition of a person’s efforts. At many events cyclists will begin to gather around the start area when the official start time looms. There is no requirement to start “on time” because recording chips do not operate until a cyclist passes by them, but the more recent tendency is for cyclists to want to start as soon as possible. Some want to be the first to finish, but not necessarily be the fastest.

Actor

This can be linked to the idea of animation and how organizers choreograph sequences of the event. The organizers facilitate this dimension providing only minimal connected episodes if needed (O’Sullivan & Spangler, 1999). The overriding sight is of a mass of potential actors—the cyclists—but the actions of “actors” for the organizer are repetitive and confined to certain areas, as outlined in earlier comments. People occupy the spaces and do the activities within the event. Some of it is invisible to the cyclists as it occurs away from the event site. Cyclists interact to a degree with each other throughout the event but can have limited interaction with others:

It had been a bit of an icy day with the temperature hovering around 0c. At the finish my toes were frozen and my fingers were heading that way. I had full winter clothing. I bought a cup of tea and headed back to the car to change. I’d cycled 90 km and spoken to two people one of whom was to ask them how much a cup of tea was.

There is a sense of isolation and frustration here for the cyclist who had clearly not experienced interaction or camaraderie during the event. Although some events do provide “ride captains” (i.e., cyclists whose job it is to marshal and ride at the same time), there is limited experience staging that can be undertaken to counteract the above comment. Organizers are usually visible by colored vests, armbands, or similar sign that indicates they are organizing the event. Their relationship to cyclists can be minimal as it is always need dependent. They act as a reassurance should support be required but are invariably not called upon. Those that are play the role of service providers, undertaking activity previously described. The key is their visibility and their affability.

Goal

A cyclist’s goal is, on the surface, relatively simple. It is to finish the event. The question of goal setting is advanced by various factors, one of which—timing—was discussed earlier. For some the goal is to finish within a certain time, to achieve the aforementioned standard. For others it is to complete the distance nonstop. For others it is to raise money for a good cause. Understanding the goals of cyclists is important for organizers. Interestingly, within the concept of the event some organizers have developed additional timing features such as the fastest ascent of a specific hill climb. Another operates a timed competition between specific points that mirrors the three major jerseys of the Tour De France: yellow for overall, green for best sprinter, red polka dot for best climber.

I looked at my HRM. I was approaching the Gold time but wasn’t moving fast enough to get it. Only 5 km to go but I knew I needed to be going faster than 35 kph. I could feel it slipping away. There was no-one ahead or behind to join up. I felt shattered but desperately tried to extract remaining energy from my legs. I ate a gel, it didn’t help. 1 km to go I knew I couldn’t do it. At the finish I had missed it by 27 seconds.

Feeling

Previously noted comments and analysis have identified the nature of some feelings that are experienced. Factors that influence feelings can

include weather, distance, terrain, perception of own fitness, camaraderie with other riders, and a sense of personal accomplishment. Feelings of safety, though, inhibit some cyclists' thoughts, and the organization needs to be able to provide a safe environment, notwithstanding the nature of the event itself, through visible signs demonstrated by clear information, marshals, and support staff. Scenic routes also attract cyclists and add to their sense of enjoyment if spectacular terrain or scenery is crossed or encountered. It is notable that when a route is mundane and on the "wrong" roads then cyclists discuss it liberally. The appeal of cycling some of these events is not only their epic nature but the geographic location that takes people away from urban sprawl and into countryside. Across 100 km these can fluctuate widely. Visible stress is evident on some cyclists as they approach the latter stages of a route and are physically exhausted. For others there is visible euphoria as they crest a steep hill or high mountain. Exhaustion and elation combined are often seen as cyclists pass the finish line and slump to the ground to rest. At the end there is invariably spontaneous exchange between ad hoc groups of cyclists as they congratulate each other on some sense of achievement. Postevent moments are relived and discussed and this is accentuated when there is provision for this at the HQ with food and beverage. Instant printing of certificates for time standards adds to feelings of accomplishment among some, but for others it is irrelevant.

Discussion

The research undertaken here forms part of a wider project studying the experiences of cyclists at gran fondo or sportive events. Drawing upon Spradley's (1980) Descriptive Question Matrix as a framework for initial ethnographic fieldwork observation across 12 different cycle participant event days, a number of key features of experience have been recorded. The notes around the use of space in event staging indicate it is a key element of experience as it provides not only the setting for the challenge but it affects us in many different ways (e.g., physically, sensorially, visually) (Berridge, 2007). Variable distances are regular offers by organizers, meaning different levels of experience are available, offering a stepped graduation in distances

for participants. It was also realized that pre-event information (objects) provides a perception of what is to come and it is a factor in any preparation for the cycle tourist experience (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1999). The routes selected (i.e., the roads) are themselves objects and are indelibly linked to the nature of terrain to be challenged, and are very much a part of the appeal of an event. Objects form one of the six key elements in experience design (Rossman & Schlatter, 2003) and understanding the nature of them (by organizers) is a key factor in the formation of meaning of the experience for individuals. Cyclists receive further sensory, emotional, and functional support from staff at the event, which relate to those elements identified in the experience matrix (Zoels & Gabrielli, 2003). Those smaller acts are the essential interactions between organizers and participants that are the result of the experience not being static and open to the effects of those interactions (Rossman & Schlatter, 2003). Selected special "event" moments within a sportive setting can be described as unique. These are the "special" occasions that impact on a participant's experience (Getz, 2007). In turn these "events" form part of the essential "physical setting" that Rossman and Schlatter (2003) note help give meaning to the experience. The selection of picturesque or scenic terrain also adds the element of authenticity to the challenge that enables cyclists to connect to the pristine and natural environment (Ferdinand & Williams, 2010). This element of experience can be related to the idea of time and the way it impacts experience. Time passes slowly or quickly and is an experience factor that is linked to immersion. This can take place at many points and is an indicator of participants' escapism (or lack of it) within the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Interactions can be guided via animation, which can range from level 1 (none) to level 10 (fully guided) (Berridge, 2007). Although these events do have animated moments, they operate at a low organizational level for the most part. Differences occur with more complex sportive events involving group riding and famous participants. Goal setting for participants is evident, and organizers have demonstrated some creative approaches to planning and organizing goals beyond simply distance. These require organizational input and infrastructure to provide unique achievement goals. These

can also become established as the rules for the experience (Rossman & Schlatter, 2003) that create standard times for all to negotiate. Finally, we have participant feelings that are typically multiphasic and vary enormously due to the nature of the event and the variety of participants (Berridge, 2007).

Conclusions

Past studies of leisure, tourism, and events indicate that experiences are multiphasic and multivariate in nature (Berridge, 2012a). This initial exploration of the gran fondo and sportive rides has supported this view and it has also highlighted some of the key features of both the organization and management and the participant experiences. For event organizers entering or developing events in this field, the adoption of professional practice is essential if the growth and appeal of these events is going to continue. As some of the field recordings note, some organizers get things wrong, and aspects of the experience are adversely affected. The question remains as to why such things occur. One reason is the unregulated nature of the market. Simply put, anyone can plan to organize these kinds of cycle events and the only regulatory aspect to overcome is really liaison with police and any road management authority. Organizers have to understand that they not only manage time; they have to manage distance as well. The concept of the planned event experience requires event professionals to manage the entire environment. This includes specific elements within the experience itself, the interaction between participants and experience, and the range of outcomes due to participation (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1999).

Using Spradley's (1980) Matrix for a participant observation approach has allowed for initial insight into the experiences of cyclists and has also helped identify the elements of experience that organizers cannot so easily address or manage. Mapping against the Efficient Management Model (Soteriades & Midou, 2011), in particular, could prove to be a useful tool for organizers to explore how better to provide a professional service to a large group of participants and how to evolve that over time. Clearly there is, as indicated in the methodology, further study to be undertaken where the

in situ experiences of participants will be recorded. Together with a fuller use of the field notes here, this will provide for a more detailed description of the gran fondo or sportive experience. Within that further discussions should be developed around theories of social capital and identity to explore the meanings people attribute to participant in these events. This, in turn, might have implications for innovative management features.

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