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Sport for all: an examination of how rural sports events are designed under the all-age-friendly idea—A case study of the Tanmen Beach Games

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Abstract. In China, two strategies are now being carried out, namely nationwide fitness and rural revitalisation, and under this background, sports activities in rural areas have gradually become more organised, no longer being the kind of casual events held in the past. This paper takes the Tanmen Beach Games in Qionghai, Hainan as a research case and uses it to illustrate some situations. In the study, a relatively basic event operations management approach is used [1], and three aspects are mainly examined, including how the event was organised, how the whole process was arranged, and what control measures were taken in terms of risk [2]. From the results obtained, the Tanmen Beach Games followed the path of government taking the lead and multiple parties working together, the event process moved forward step by step, and some practical methods were also adopted to control risks, so although resources were not abundant, the whole event was still carried out fairly smoothly. In addition, the event also took care of people of different ages, turning everyday fishing work into fun competitions, and people did not need any special sports foundation to join in, which gives the event reference value in promoting nationwide fitness. If other rural areas want to hold similar activities, they can also learn some practices from it. Later in the article, some common difficulties faced by small rural sports events are also mentioned, such as insufficient organisational capacity, safety that makes people uneasy, and difficulty in long-term operation, and some suggestions are put forward for these difficulties, hoping to be helpful for future activities.

Keywords: rural sports events, event operations management, Tanmen Beach Games, nationwide fitness, rural revitalisation, all-age-friendly

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

The mass sports have also become the national policy and therefore, the fitness campaign is not only a nationwide one but the Healthy China. In rural areas especially, there is an opportunity to get involved in sport events at the grass roots level; and these are the sporting events that have grown in leaps and bounds over the last few years. As many people were watching the rise of the Village BA and Village Super League as a new trend in Guizhou, it was followed by other locations where they had their own versions of the Village Volleyball and Village Marathon. These rural games do not merely represent a new trend in life of communities, but they perform some other tasks including the promotion of the rural development, easing the process of interindustry cooperation and enhancing the overall culture levels in the villages [3].

However, this has also been the case with a fast growth and some issues that were not seen before. Many of the rural events are still not so well organised, they have no proper safety precautions, they ask themselves whether it is possible to keep them in existence for a longer time, etc. And the question which comes out of this is: how can we make sure that the organisation of such an event will be as small as the size of the village itself?

1.2. Research questions and significance

The issue that is addressed in the paper is the following: how to make a small rural sport event successful, through the application of the reasonable organisational model and well-planned process and risk management, which is working [1]. In order to answer this question, there are selected the Beach Games organized at Tanmen Town, located in Qionghai City, Hainan Province, and they are analyzed with the focus on the organization of the games and its practical implementation.

The Tanmen Beach Games was chosen for this case study for various reasons. Firstly, this event has already run for several years and those in charge have gained considerable experience in the meantime. Secondly, the event combines traditional fishing culture and modern sport activities and thus has a very distinctive rural flavour. Thirdly, the event was designed with an all-age-friendly concept in mind, allowing people of different ages from toddlers to senior citizens to participate and thus matching quite well the notion of sport for all.

1.3. Research methods and approach

The two approaches to the research were the review of the literature and the analysis of the case study. In the first place, it was necessary to read all the literature on the subject of sports event management and then a theory could be built upon it [1, 2]. Then, in order to make the analysis, one of the games at Tanmen Beach was selected as an example, and the analysis was made according to three aspects: organisational aspect, process design and risk prevention. Lastly, the conclusion is that through this paper, it has been possible to learn some lessons out of this particular case which may be used to understand the implications that might be applied to the organisation and execution of small-scale rural sports events.

2. Theoretical foundations of event operations management

2.1. Basic framework of sports event management

A sport event cannot be managed in one shot; it is indeed a continual cycle consisting of three major components: the pre-event phase, the during-event phase and the post-event phase. If we refer to the standard text books in the field such as Sports Event Planning and Management [1], the major components of event management encompass several areas: overall planning, detailing, on-site organization and operations, financial management and sponsor acquisition, marketing and promotion, stakeholder relationship management, and risk control [2].

Mass participation sporting events differ from top-level professional competitions in that they involve a much wider spectrum of participants and their organisation is also often more flexible. Indeed, running a mass sport event is somewhat similar to managing a small social system, where all the different elements should function in a coordinated way in order to achieve the established goals.

2.2. Key elements of small-event organisation

Three aspects are likely to become particularly significant when we are working with a small-scale sports event which lacks numerous resources.

It is the framework that will hold it all together. It has to be well structured so that there are no departments without a role, and a hierarchy of command should be established; in addition, the coordination between the various departments must also be effective. In the case of smaller events, the organisation would be kept as simple as possible, because the organisation can be achieved by providing only two or three levels of management.

The design of the process is like a line that is woven together to cover the entire process of the procedure, including the pre-processing, the processing itself and the post-processing. It encompasses all these: the preparatory measures which are made prior to the event, the day-to-day operations in the course of the event, the aftercare measures which follow the event, and all of them must be linked with the following one [2]. The main objective of the process design will be to ensure that there are no limitations in the achievement of the goals of the event in case of lack of resources.

Risk management is the last line of defence to keep the event safe from potential failures. Mass sports events typically involve large crowds of people and are staged in outdoor venues, which entail certain risks, therefore it is crucial to have a systematic approach to identify risks, assess their severity and plan appropriate countermeasures [4].

3. Organisational structure of the Tanmen Beach Games

3.1. Event overview

The Tanmen Beach Games are a part of the bigger Qionghai Tanmen (Ganhai) Season. The event is organized by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Radio, Television and Sports of Hainan Province; it is hosted by the Qionghai Municipal People's Government; and it is co-organized by the Qionghai Bureau of Tourism, Culture, Radio, Television and Sports along with the government of Tanmen Town [5]. As a key activity included in this season, the Beach Games draw many local fishers year after year and attract tourists from different parts of the country [6].

All the competition events have a very strong touch of fishing culture. The activities that are incorporated in it are tug-of-war, net casting, bead picking, shell stringing, net weaving and sea-snail picking; these are essentially the sorts of skills that fishers utilize in their work except that they have been transformed into games. There exist mixed-gender tug-of-war competitions, net-weaving races, dexterous snail-picking challenges, and fixed-point net casting events as well [5]. This entire design approach whereby life skills are transformed into competitive games has two benefits: one is that it simplifies the process of participation by anyone, and the other is that it adds a cultural dimension to the event.

3.2. Organisational structure and division of labour

A framework, which is referred to as "three-level linkage, four-group coordination" can be used to describe how the Tanmen Beach Games are organised.

The three-level linkage is the cooperation that occurs between the municipal government, the town government and village administrations [7].

At the municipal level, the first place is held by Qionghai Municipal People's Government which provides overall guidance and resources; in addition to that, there is also the Qionghai Bureau of Tourism, Culture, Radio, Television and Sports, which gives professional advice and establishes the standards to be observed [5].

The actual work of doing things is done at the town level by the Tanmen Town Government, including the preparation of the venue, the implementation of safety measures, organisation of logistics and handling of various other specific matters that arise along the way [6].

The village administrations are responsible of getting the fishers and other villagers to sign up and participate at the village level, therefore they are both contestants and local supporters who facilitate the event.

The four-group coordination refers to the four functional teams that work on site while the event is actually happening.

The on-site work of the Tanmen Beach Games is divided into four groups, based on the standard ways that are used in general sports events [2].

The rules of the Competition Group are to be written, referees should be organised, scores recorded and final standings worked out. In the case of special activities such as net casting and net weaving, this is a group that will need to devise the rules of fair play on the one hand and yet it is also fun on the other.

The Logistics Group will be the one to ensure that the venue is prepared, materials and equipment are supplied and also arrange the catering. Since it is a beach event, this group also has to make some special arrangements regarding sun protection, heat relief and sandy ground.

The publicity group is responsible for promotion and cultural displays. Their function is not limited to simply advertising the event itself, but also attempts to showcase the unique cultural heritage of Tanmen's fishing community to a broader audience [8].

The Safety and Security Group is responsible with maintaining order in the venue, providing medical assistance where necessary and addressing any emergency that may arise.

The primary characteristic of this structure is that the decision-makers, who are at the municipal level, provide the resources and policy direction; the people at the town level perform the actual execution; and the local people and their knowledge are introduced at the village level. This type of arrangement creates a system which combines both top-down guidance and bottom-up participation [7].

4. Process design of the Tanmen Beach Games

4.1. Pre-event preparation phase

The preparations to the event will be made prior to the actual occurrence of the event and this is what determines how successful the event will become. This is a major part of the preparation that the Tanmen Beach Games have undergone.

The activities were not selected at random when it comes to event design and rule-making, but they were chosen with consideration and borrowed in the daily routines of the local fishers such as net casting, net weaving, sea-snail picking etc. The smart thing about this design is that individuals are able to come and join without undergoing any form of special training since these are activities that they do anyway during their day-to-day lives. Simultaneously, by turning these routine activities into competitions, they become more interesting and introduce a new aspect of fun.

The location of the competitions is Tanmen Bay beach, which will require dividing it into various zones prior to the event, and placing safety signs as well as marking out spectator areas. The fact that it is a beach requires additional efforts, such as leveling the sand and ensuring that there is a clear distinction between the competition areas and the places where spectators are standing [5].

Regarding the organisation and training of personnel, the employees are referees, volunteers, security guards, etc., and they need to be trained in advance of the event day when they can know what they have to do and how it is supposed to be done.

4.2. On-site execution phase

The on-site execution is the most significant part of the entire process; and how the Tanmen Beach Games are conducted on the day itself demonstrates a rather good balance between orderliness and ensuring that they are fun.

In the event of the opening ceremony and setting up the mood, since the Beach Games are in Ganhai Season, it will start with an opening ceremony. The ceremonies held at the ceremony such as the costume show of the Nyonya or the ceremony to honor the 108 Brothers do not only bring a festive atmosphere but also a certain message that comes along with them [8].

All the various events are conducted under a schedule that is established in advance regarding competition organisation and flow control. Whether it be tug-of-war, net casting, net-weaving races or mixed-gender tug-of-war, each activity has its own rules which are clearly stated and judging criteria. The on-site staff are present to maintain order, to direct the participants and spectators to their respective locations and make sure that the entire process proceeds without too many interruptions.

The Tanmen Beach Games are a sporting event as well as an opportunity to showcase the local culture and to make it interactive. As they watch the games, the locals will also be able to see how the people of Tanmen do fishing. The combination of both sports and cultural activities makes the festival more interesting than any other one.

4.3. Post-event wrap-up phase

After the event is over, there are also a few things that must be completed. These include announcing the results and giving out awards, cleaning up the venue and restoring it to its original condition, and collecting feedback from people as well as reflecting on what worked and what could have been done better. In the case of an event that is held regularly, the lessons learned in each edition are used to improve the next one [1].

5. Risk management of the Tanmen Beach Games

5.1. Risk identification

When it comes to safety management of mass sports events, various types of risks must be taken into consideration. The Tanmen Beach Games are subjected to a number of risks that should be considered [4].

One of the types that can be mentioned is environmental risks. Since it is a beach event, there are dangers associated with exposure to the sun, heat and sand in the eyes. The weather conditions at sea may also vary very fast; powerful winds or heavy rain may come without much warning beforehand.

There are also risks that relate to personnel. The issues such as crowding and trampling of people may arise when there are many participants and spectators who gather in one place. Other events, such as tug-of-war, require touching others and may be a source of injuries which are associated with sports.

There are also organisational risks. The event is a rural one, and the organisers may have not much experience in it, they could be missing something on the way or the communication between various departments could fail.

5.2. Risk response

The risk management approach of the Tanmen Beach Games adheres to the principle of prioritizing prevention over contingency management [9].

The safety of the venue is ensured, and the place is examined before the event; signs and warnings are posted on the place; the employees are trained to be safe in their work; people are informed about safety measures and provided with a safety equipment where necessary.

On the contingency side, first-aid stations are established at the venue with basic emergency equipment and medicines on hand. Emergency plans are made to spell out what different people should do in case of an unexpected incident [4].

The organisers also ensure that appropriate insurance is purchased to cover both the staff and participants, such that there is a clear system of dealing with any responsibilities that may arise. Simultaneously, there is an avenue of complaints and feedback that remains open so that any problems that occur during the event can be addressed without excessive delays.

6. Discussion: design implications for small-scale rural sports events

6.1. The "all-age-friendly" design philosophy

Maybe the best thing that other rural events can learn about Tanmen Beach Games is its age-friendly design approach.

In case we consider the list of activities, such events as net casting, bead picking, shell stringing and net weaving do not require a high level of physical strength; they rather rely on skills and training. This implies that younger individuals and older individuals can find themselves a way to get involved. Mixed-gender tug-of-war and other similar games even take it further by eliminating the barriers of gender and age in order to ensure that everyone is free to participate regardless of these differences.

This is the same as the present age of sports event business. There have been cases where it has been done in the past few years, and the rope-skipping competitions that are held in Shandong are divided into ten different age groups [10]; and the National Fitness Day that is held in Wenjiang District divides the people into six categories, including toddlers, teenagers, adults, middle aged, old people [11]. The other events are also

gradually focusing on all ages, and everyone can take part in them, so this principle is not only applicable to mass sports, but also to any other type of event.

What distinguishes the Tanmen Beach Games from some of these other examples is that they do not rely on complex age-based categories to foster inclusiveness. Rather, the activities are naturally accessible and appealing to all, as they are based on the daily skills of the fishing community that people of any age can perform. This content-driven approach to fostering inclusiveness offers lessons for other rural events with limited resources.

6.2. The participatory logic of "sport for all"

Sport for all is not a mere slogan which people are making use of; it is an idea of the design. It is about taking the sporting events back to the common man and bringing them into the world of normality.

What the Tanmen Beach Games have shown is that there are three conditions necessary for turning sport for all into reality. Firstly, there needs to be a low entry barrier, such that participation does not require any professional training. Secondly, there needs to be a strong sense of identification, whereby the content of the event is closely associated with the daily life of the participants and can evoke a sense of cultural belonging and emotional attachment. Thirdly, there should be a sufficient level of social interaction, such that the event provides a venue for community members to come together, which in turn strengthens the ties between people in the community.

Only when a rural sports event enables fishers to demonstrate their daily skills in a competitive setting, enables older individuals to pass on their knowledge of net-weaving and enables children to get familiar with the traditional culture through games and play does sport for all become an abstract concept that people can experience and feel themselves in their lives.

6.3. Key challenges and improvement suggestions

Despite achieving quite a lot, the Tanmen Beach Games still encounter some of the common challenges shared with other small-scale rural events like them.

One of the difficulties is how to maintain organisational capacity in the long run. In many rural locations, events rely on a small number of key individuals and on government support that arrives only intermittently; there is no system that has been established to ensure things continue over the longer term. One thing that could be suggested is to establish a more regular means of organising things, one that combines government guidance, village self-governance and professional support; and at the same time to record and organise systematically the experience that has been gained from running the event.

The other problem is the normalisation of safety. The smaller events are not properly provided with medical rescue services, emergency response plans and insurance coverage. It will be a good move to organize a more professional safety management system in line with the principles that are described in such documents as the Safety Assessment Guidelines on Mass Sports Events [9].

The third issue is the way to run the event as a brand in the long term. Most rural events are forced to face the challenge of how to make an experience that occurs once every year into a permanent annual event that people would anticipate. In order to assume this, organisers should work on enhancing the cultural content and image of the event; and they must seek opportunities to bring it closer to rural tourism, preservation of cultural heritage and promotion of local farm products [7].

7. Conclusion

The Tanmen Beach Games have been taken as a case study in this paper to investigate the design logic and operational practices of small-scale rural sports events; and the analysis has been focused on three key areas: organisational structure, process design and risk management. The results that have emerged out of this can be put together as follows.

To begin with, the model of organisation based on government leadership and multi-party cooperation is one of the factors that make it possible to ensure that rural events operate well in the case when resources are not sufficient [7]. The integration across the three tiers of the municipality, the town, and the villages, as well as the four functional groups concerned with competition, logistics, publicity, and safety contribute to fulfilling the two requirements of bringing resources together and performing the work on site.

Second, the content and inclusive design of the process is also a factor that makes it possible to make a low barrier to entry, high identification with the participants and an abundance of social interaction in which the daily fishing activities are transformed into the competitive ones. This is an innovative way of implementing the idea of all-age-friendly concept in the rural setting.

Thirdly, the practical ways of controlling the risk is a minimum security system that can be used in order to make the event not face any serious issues [4, 9]. A strategy that will prioritize on prevention and prepare against the contingencies when the resources are not enough will manage to address most of the significant risks which may occur during the rural events.

The example of the Tanmen Beach Games demonstrates that sport for all is not a dream but rather it can be made to come alive in the rural areas when the event is properly considered in its planning, by making it part of the local life, by removing the barriers that prevent people from participating, and by using cultural identity as a way of developing a sense of belonging. This logic of design, which makes sports events both out of life and out of life, is useful as an indicator of the numerous rural sporting events that are now expanding and spreading throughout the country.

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