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LESSONS LEARNED, LESSONS LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM THE CALGARY AND SALT LAKE CITY OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES

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ABSTRACT

The intense competition among destinations to host the Olympic Games (both winter and summer), demonstrates the value that is attached to this type of mega-event. Despite this apparent importance, there is surprisingly little comprehensive research that rigorously assesses the value of the Olympics--particularly in terms of their contribution to long term community and tourism development. In addition, as researchers, we have failed to document the lessons learned from one Olympics Games to the next. The result is that many of the same errors are regularly repeated. This paper seeks to identify the lessons learned as a result of hosting the 1988 Olympic Winter Games in Calgary, Canada. It also seeks to provide some preliminary insights into the lessons we are learning as preparation for the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City proceeds.

INTRODUCTION

The realization that various types of mega-events can be powerful vehicles for community and tourism destination development is now widely acknowledged as a somewhat general principle (1, 2, 4, 6, 9). Unfortunately, our acceptance of this principle has given rise to a less than vigorous question-

ing of the true value of such events to tourism destination development, for both a short and long term perspective. As well, relatively little distinction has been made regarding the relative value of different types of mega-events; are the Olympic Games, and one time world expositions, more effective or more valuable than recurring signature or hallmark events such as Mardi Gras, the Boston Marathon, and the Calgary Stampede. Similarly, little has been documented concerning "critical success factors" for different types of mega-events.

Given the size, cost, and impact of such events, it seems only logical that, as tourism management professionals, we should attempt to gain a much better understanding of each of the foregoing issues and concerns. Furthermore, since mega-events are by nature rather infrequent, it behooves us to take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself to learn as much as we can--and to do so in a consistent and rigorous manner.

This paper seeks to take advantage of two unique opportunities to gain insight into the lessons learned regarding the success factors surrounding one specific type of mega-event, the Olympic Winter Games. The two opportunities in question are the Games that were hosted in Calgary in 1988, and those that will be held in Salt Lake City in the year

2002. These two events present particularly valuable learning opportunities because they are being held in rather comparable locations; thus eliminating much of the research “noise” that would come into play for Games held in highly disparate settings. While it may be somewhat premature to attempt to reach conclusions regarding “lessons learned” regarding the Salt Lake City Games (since they are still over two years away), the current effort is still being undertaken to avoid the loss of the valuable insights that may emerge as we “seize the interest of the moment”. We should subsequently review any immediate conclusions after the 2002 Games are over, so as to validate and reinforce these conclusions.

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

As the foregoing implies, the present paper seeks to: 1) re-examine what we have already gleaned from existing documentation on the Calgary '88 Games; 2) to enhance these findings through supplementary work; and 3) to add to our knowledge by learning as much as we can from the current preparations for the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City. In order to fulfill this purpose, the present discussion contains three main components. They are as follows:

A review of the major studies concerning the 1988 Olympic Winter Games in Calgary; an update of what we learned in 1988 through interviews with selected key personnel involved in the 1988 Calgary Games; and a preliminary assessment of what we are learning from the current preparations in Salt Lake City.

CALGARY 1988—A REVIEW

While this author is undoubtedly biased, it can be argued that the Calgary '88 Games have been the most extensively studied Winter Games to date. Work by Ritchie & Aitkens (7); and Ritchie & Lyons (8, 10) placed a particular emphasis on tracking resident attitudes towards the event among residents of the host population. Ritchie & Smith (11) examined the extent to which the 1988 Games affected the awareness levels and the image of the host city. Ritchie (9) and Hiller (3) have discussed the impact of the Games on community development. King (5) has provided an extensive review of the Games dynamics from beginning to end. Since all of this material is readily available, it will not be further discussed here. Suffice it to say that it provides an extensive documentation of a broad range of topics from the moment the Games were awarded in 1981 until one year following the event (10).

CALGARY AND SALT LAKE CITY--10 YEARS LATER

In an attempt to extend, as well as to reassess and confirm the impressions of original research, a series of personal interviews was carried out with selected Senior OCO '88 Managers. This proved to be a most interesting exercise in terms of reviewing and reconfirming the impressions of the event and the conclusions of ten years earlier.

In addition, the author is closely following the 2002 Games and working with the Utah Department of Tourism in an attempt to both consolidate earlier “lessons learned” and to identify and understand new ones.

The result of both the above processes has provided the basis for the contents of Table

1. Undoubtedly, more time and effort will lead to further refinement of these “lessons learned”. Now that we possess an initial foundation of knowledge, follow-up reviews in 2002/2003 should prove very valuable.

An examination of the contents of Table 1 will reveal that the “lessons” included tend to address main five main areas. First, they deal with a certain number of policy issues concerning the desirability of the Games to a community, the risks of bidding, and the importance of delivering a quality “product” if the bid is successful. Second, they strongly emphasize the importance of financial integrity as a fundamental basis for maintaining the support of the public. Third, they stress the uniqueness of each situation. While these “lessons learned” may be a valuable starting point for event planning, local adaptation and ongoing flexibility in event management must be constantly kept in mind. A fourth major set of “lessons” pertains to a number of marketing issues related to the measurement and management of destination awareness and image—often one of the prime reasons for seeking to host the Games in the first place. Finally, another set of “lessons” involves a number of peripheral, yet still important issues such as concern for environmental impacts, and the role of parallel supporting events in determining the overall success of what is essentially an athletic event.

LOOKING TOWARDS 2002

As a participant in the hosting of the Olympic Winter Games in 1988, it is a particular privilege to also share in the building excitement that is so evident among the Salt Lake City Organizing Committee and the State Tourism Office. What is particularly encouraging from a tourism perspective, is to observe a more concerted effort to ensure greater collaboration between the Organizing Committee and those responsible for tourism promotion in the state. The failure, or lack of desire, of the 1988 Organizing Committee to recognize the value of the Games to the long term tourism well being of the region is one of the few areas where Calgary might have achieved even greater success. While there is undoubtedly room for improvement in this area in the Salt Lake situation, there is both a clear recognition of the potential the Games possess to enhance long term tourism development (12) and a greater commitment to support this “vision” for tourism development with a supporting Action Program (13) and Marketing Plan (14). While it is with some reservations due to local pride, the author nevertheless hopes that all of the foregoing commitments will again result in “the Best Games Ever”.

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TABLE 1

Some “Lessons Learned” and “Lessons Being Learned” from the Calgary and Salt Lake City (SLC) Olympic Experiences

Lesson/Idea	Discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A successful event and successful marketing of the host city are distinctly different concepts. 	<p><i>This reality has become very evident in SLC where the pressures for successful marketing of Utah are intensive.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting the Games “at any cost” is no longer an option 	<p><i>The repercussions of past practice in obtaining the Games have made the task of hosting the event much more difficult</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While in the past, it appears that the Games could be “bought”, such is now questionable. 	<p><i>The Olympic Organizing Committee (OIC) is now under scrutiny from an emerging morality that rejects the idea of illegal influence peddling</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the Games themselves are a major success. 	<p><i>In the end, nothing else matters; the major image of the host city relates to the message of competence and perceived desirability of the destination. This was the Calgary position.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There seems to be no such thing as a “typical Games”. Nor should there be. There is no “fixed formula”. Each host city/region has its very own unique physical characteristics and its own set of problems. 	<p><i>Host cities can certainly benefit from and learn from previous Game sites—but in the end, each Game city must develop its own distinctive program</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While previous host cities may be willing to help, the realities of changes due to time, limit the availability and value of this source of support 	<p><i>The Alberta tourism department has been radically transformed 10 years later (different structure, different people), greatly limiting its value to the Utah Department of Tourism</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive and detailed planning is essential. But flexibility and adaptability must be an integral part of the organization. 	<p><i>In 1988, the Chinook Winds that blew for much of the 16 days of the Games almost turned the “Winter Games” into the “Summer Games”. A high degree of adaptability proved essential to success</i></p>

- Getting there is definitely not half the fun.

Ease of access and an efficient transportation system are critical. In Calgary, the use of very large, easily accessible parking lots, some distance from the actual venues, reduced severe congestion and avoided a common criticism

- Each Games tends to end up with a “One Liner” that is continually cited by the media after the event.
Some are positive, some negative (e.g. Munich--the terrorism Games; Los Angeles--the commercial Games; Montreal--out of control costs; Lillehammer--the local culture; Calgary--the “volunteer” Games.

Managing this label is usually beyond the control of organizers--but they should still try. In particular, it is important to try and avoid a very negative label due to a specific “happening”--such as the Atlanta bomber.

- Visible local support sends an important message to the media--and to the world. In Calgary, citizen involvement through volunteerism was important in maintaining citizen support.

The Denver experience of 1976 demonstrated just how critical local support can be. The loss of the '76 Games to Innsbruck is an extreme case that shows what can happen.

- Perhaps surprisingly, in the short run, tourism may suffer more than it benefits from the Winter Olympic Games. However, in the long run, tourism is usually greatly enhanced by the hosting of the event.

*- Many tourism operators (especially the ski areas) were caught unawares from a fall off in business during the 1988 Games--even though they were warned
- Now, more than 10 years later, both leisure and business visitations have grown at rates above the national average.
- Perhaps more important (according to some key players), the profitability of the regional tourism sector is said to be competitive with the oil and gas industry
- Career opportunities in the Calgary region, particularly for college graduates have improved enormously.*

- The leverage that can be gained by building “alliances” can greatly enhance the total success of the Games.

The many smaller villages, towns, and even cities that are in reasonably close proximity to the event want to both contribute to--and benefit from--a mega-event experience. Sharing, without diluting the essence of destination identity, can create a stronger product

- Government commitments for support must be carefully monitored.

The constant “musical chairs” due to political changes, means that financial commitments made by one administration may not be readily honoured by succeeding politicians. Since these can be critical—documentation of all agreements is essential. “Handshakes” may work in the oil business, but...

- Environmental Sensitivity.
It should be recalled that environmental opposition delayed Calgary’s bid for a number of years—and moved the ski venues outside of Banff National Park.

- As for the 1988 Games, concern for environmental impacts due to venue development was primarily a significant concern for the first 2-3 years after the Games were awarded—and strongly influenced the choice of certain sites.

- As the Games approached, serious opposition subsided—however OCO was constantly concerned until the event was over—so never take environmental issues for granted. Have someone whose only responsibility is to monitor this dossier

- Roles of the cultural program.
The cultural component of the Olympic program turned out to be highly supportive and an important contributor to the overall success of the Games and tourism destination development.

- The many cultural events allowed citizens who had little interest in sports to be a part of “The Olympic Experience”
- The diversity of cultural events enables organizers to spread “The Olympic Experience” into many geographic areas. This was particularly important in a province where the political power of the rural ridings is very strong

- Managing ticket sales.
When the tickets first came out, this was a highly sensitive issue--perhaps one of the first that really risked a loss in the very high degree of public support.

- Clearly, equity, cost, distribution, and a whole range of similar issues had to be dealt with.

- As well, the issue of local versus national and international sales, created the potential for losing the support of people who for years had supported the Games—then to find they might only get to watch the Biathlon, or Bulgaria playing Romania in the first round of hockey.

- Roles of Research.

In the beginning, the OCO staff were very nervous about the possibility that research findings would find “problems” or create negative stories in the press.

- The lottery system established seemed to work—but this is highly technical, so I am sure it is being carefully examined. In the end, most residents appeared satisfied. But be prudent!

- However, appropriate research can make a significant contribution to helping ensure the success of the Games—and to documenting this success for future generations ... and future Games ... and to long term tourism development in the region

- For the first time ever, systematic measures were made of the extent to which the Games actually do increase awareness, and change the image of the host city. Awareness changes were dramatic.

- In the case of Calgary, unaided top-of-mind awareness increased from about 19% to over 43% in the U.S. In Europe, it rose from 10% to 40%. In both cases this represented a four-fold increase in destination awareness

- Just to demonstrate the true impact of the Games, awareness of the city of Edmonton, remained virtually unchanged over the same period

- As for the impact of the Games on host city image, Calgary’s image shifted from that of primarily being the “Stampede City” to that of being the “Olympic Games City”. Edmonton’s image stayed constant as (in the 1980s), that of “Wayne’s World”—Wayne Gretzke that is!

- Mascot selection is an integral part of destination

Mascots may have a relatively minor impact; but in the case of Calgary, the use of a male/female combination and the use of “Polar Bears”, was meant to convey at least two rather distinctive messages

- The impact of the Olympics on development. The power of the Olympic juggernaut to almost single-handedly create new resort communities was demonstrated.

Kananaskis Country—the site/region for downhill skiing is under great pressure for more development. One strong resistance from the environmental movement has prevented policy changes. The small town of Canmore, the site for cross-country skiing, has grown from a few thousand to nearly ten thousand since 1988. It is now larger than Banff (Canada’s mountain tourism icon), and is rapidly starting to rival Banff in terms of facilities and visitation

- Be a true “international host”—be prepared for disappointments and controversies regarding the performance of national athletes.

Be prepared to make the most of outstanding successes—for both national and foreign athletes. Resist the temptation to overlook the successes of visiting athletes

- Prepare for the unexpected—both good and bad.

The ability to react “with competence and grace” to potential disasters is one that garners great international respect

- Some Post-Game Lessons.

Be prepared for post-Games letdown. Although Calgary residents were close to exhaustion when the Olympic Flame was doused, there was an almost universal feeling of sadness that, after so much planning and effort, the once-in-a-lifetime experience was over.

- Once the Games are over, everyone seems to “head for cover” and “shred the files”. This is not meant literally, but you should expect that the “seemingly forever” interest in the Games suddenly disappears once the Olympic Flame is doused

- In brief—very few want to continue to take responsibility for anything negative related to the Games; and any and all documentation related to the Games suddenly becomes very difficult to obtain, regardless of whether or not it actually existed

- So, a word of warning—if you do want to maintain a post-Games file (or set of files), make sure that plans and responsibilities are clearly assigned in advance.

If you don’t...

- Start getting ready immediately to fill the void that is left behind.
 - *Since it is unlikely the Games will ever return (indeed, many feel it might be a great error to try and recapture the success of '88), it is advisable to start right away to identify other "Visions" for community and destination development*
 - *In the case of Calgary; the Convention & Visitors Bureau initiated a visioning process to identify ways to fill the "Olympic Void". This visioning process was built around the theme of "Calgary: Host Consultant and Educator to the World". Perhaps the most significant idea that emerged from this process was a proposal for an international exposition to be held in 2002--the 100th Anniversary of Alberta joining Canada.*
 - *Unfortunately, Calgary lost its bid made to the International Exposition office (to Japan).*