

## EVALUATING THE POTENTIAL OF SPORTS EVENTS AS TOOLS OF PROMOTION FOR CITIES AND REGIONS ON AN INTERNATIONAL SCALE

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**Abstract.** One of the objectives of sports events is to achieve a promotional effect in the host city and to strengthen its international image. Some cities or regions organise sports events regularly, whereas others do it occasionally. Both the former and the latter strategy of using sports for the image-creating purposes has its pros and cons. This article focuses on the potential benefits related to the promotion of a place through sport. A typology of sports events based on own elaboration was used for this purpose.

**Key words:** sport marketing, sports events, marketing communication

### INTRODUCTION

More and more cities try to build their image through the organization of sports events. This tendency became even more evident in 1992, when the so-called Barcelona effect was noted – Barcelona became a few hundred percent more popular from a touristic point of view, after the city hosted the Olympic Games. Thus, sport appears to have a considerable potential with respect to the promotion, not only of sponsors' brands, but also cities, regions and countries that are actively engaged in its development and popularisation. However, not every event triggers the same positive effects and many cities find it difficult to exploit this opportunity.

This is why the article's main goal is to analyse sports events and their promotional potential, which could be used for building the international image of their host locations.

Apart from identifying some important characteristics of a sports event which determine its value as a promotional tool, the article also mentions a few threats related to the use of sports for the promotion of a region.

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Information from primary and secondary sources was used in this study. Additionally, it was based on: literature studies, accessible reports from research of the sports market, the results of own research and opinions of experts the author had the opportunity to talk to.

## THE PROMOTIONAL ASPECT OF SPORTS EVENTS

A deepened analysis of sports as a part of a broadly defined physical culture leads to a conclusion that its importance has changed dramatically over the last few decades [Watt 2003]. The socio-economic aspect of sports has become the subject of research conducted by numerous management, marketing, sociology and psychology specialists. The market behaviour of sports-organising entities, mainly sports clubs, as well as entities that benefit from the event, increasingly frequently lead to creating not only a sports event, which was once a target on its own, but also more importantly, to its economic, social, cultural, political or even religious use [Polus 2009, Greenwell et al. 2014]. According to B. Mullin, one of the most prominent sports marketing specialists, exercises and sports events are two basic products offered on the sports market. All other tangible and intangible sports products are derived from them and exist for the sake of the creation or the consumption of the two basic ones [Mullin 2000]. With reference to the subject of this article, the author will primarily focus on sports events and their potential in the context of the promotional activities of local government units.

According to its definition, a sports event is a single element of a wider programme or a group of elements that combined form a defined event [Pope and Turco 2001]. Each sports event has four distinctive features: it necessarily has to have a specified location, named performers, an audience and a set time of duration. Sports contests are organised with rivalry in mind, and their levels may be very diversified. The level, usually combined with the range of spatial influence, is one of the criteria most frequently used for the division of sports events into categories. As a matter of fact, this factor determines the promotional potential of an event (Fig. 1).

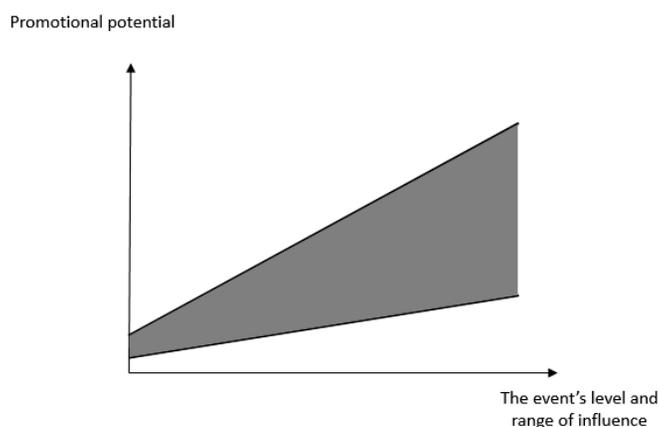


Fig. 1. The promotional potential of sports events

Source: Own elaboration.

It is essential to point out that not all sports events with the same influence range have the same promotional potential. The popularity of the sports discipline plays an equally significant role in this respect. For numerous disciplines which are popular only in certain regions of the world (for example: rugby in the Republic of South Africa, cricket in India, judo in Japan), even the world championships will not provide an opportunity for the sponsors to create their brand image globally [Lagae 2005].

Within the classification based on the range of influence, regional, national, international and global events can be distinguished. The last category can be divided into the so-called major events and mega events<sup>1</sup> [Mallen and Adams 2013]. The higher the level of sportspeople's rivalry, the more of a show the event becomes, and consequently, the more attention it receives from the fans. At times their number amounts to thousands of spectators present at the stadiums and arenas and millions of those watching the competition on TV or online. Such quantity of spectators has the potential of affecting numerous stakeholders' view on these events. From the marketing point of view, the most important segment of the sports events market is made of spectators, who can be divided into those who watch the event directly and indirectly.

The promotional potential of sports events is rather widely acknowledged and documented. For about four decades numerous enterprises have been benefiting from this potential, usually by engaging in sponsorship deals with sportspeople, sports clubs or sports events. At present, it is estimated that globally the expenses related to this form of activity amount to more than fifty billion dollars. The so-called celebrity endorsement, i.e. using the image of top-range sportspeople in promotional campaigns, is a popular promotion tool among companies. According to estimations, celebrities related to sports, music or films appear in almost 10% of the world's commercials [Agrawal and Kamasuka 1995].

## **THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SPORTS EVENTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORTS TOURISM**

Local governments attach a special significance to the fact that sports events attract visitors from other regions, as this creates an opportunity of promoting their town, city, or region. These visitors are perceived as current or potential tourists, whose excursions organised as a part of the so-called passive sports tourism can directly translate into a number of benefits for the city [Tribe 2003]. It is worth mentioning that for more than ten years sports tourism has been among the fastest developing segments of world tourism market ([www.businesswire.com](http://www.businesswire.com)). For example, it is estimated that in the United States the total turnover from sports tourism equals nearly thirty billion dollars annually [Greenwell et al. 2014]. One of sub-categories of the widely defined sports tourism is sports events tourism. According to literature, this term can be defined as "travelling with the main target of competing, seeing or supporting the sportsmen during organised sports

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<sup>1</sup> Meg-events – are sports events of the global range which are the subject of common interest; they include, for example: the Olympics, championships of the most popular sports, or the football Champions League. Major events – sports events of global range which are the subject of interest of the specified sports' fans, for example the tennis Grand Slam, Formula 1 car races, the Dakar Rally, or the biggest marathon runs in New York, Chicago, Boston, London, Berlin or Tokyo.

events” [Gibson et al. 1998]. Having this group of tourists in mind, the local governments engage in organising sports events, in hope that this way of promoting the region will result in its wider recognition, popularity as a vacation destination and, indirectly, a better investment potential.

According to B. Pitts, who is a sports marketing specialist, two types of sports tourists, that is – passive (watching sports events) and active (participants of competitions), are crucial to the development of tourism [Pitts 1999]. M. Derry, L. Jago and L. Fredline have a similar opinion – they say that more and more frequently organised sports events of different characters is what drives tourist activity in cities [Derry et al. 2004].

### **SPORTS EVENTS AS A MEANS OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION OF CITIES AND REGIONS**

Some time ago sports became another attractive medium used to create the image of cities and regions [Hoyle 2002]. It is related to the fact that local entities, such as cities, voivodeships, or countries, in some areas of their activity have to abide by the market rules, like many other entities. The competition between regions or agglomerations is what successfully accelerates their development – this is an effect that obviously could have not been achieved without the additional encouragement in the form of rival cities’ market activity, aimed at attracting tourists, investors, or even new citizens or the media coverage.

One of the relatively constant elements of a city’s competitive advantage is its positive and strong image, which currently plays a very important role in the enhancing the city’s market position or building and strengthening relationships with stakeholders. This is why, marketing orientation (on the concept level) and promotional activity (on the operational level) have become so crucial to local governments over the past several years [Kotler and Lee 2008]. To create a strong and coherent image, not only high expenditure and a wide range marketing tools are needed, but also an idea, time, consistency and coherence of actions that together form a city’s promotional strategy [Altkorn 2004]. As the image should not be random or incoherent, it is essential to start by defining the desired image in terms of the associations it is supposed to evoke in the stakeholders’ minds upon hearing the city’s name. This approach to building to a city’s image requires a thorough selection of promotional tools and actions with a view to the achievement of the desired effect. It is important to be aware of the city’s current image, because it will be an indication of the discrepancy of the present image and the desired one. In a situation when turns out that the desired image is unattainable, even in a long perspective, it is recommended to define a so-called optimal image. Therefore, benchmarking, i.e. referring one’s actions to the solutions of others, is a relatively common strategy in cities’ and regions’ promotional policy.

Sports are a part of social life that for a long time has been perceived positively, both by those who practice them and those who watch them. Depending on the discipline, it is usually associated with activity, health, strength, determination, beauty, grace, speed, and above-average skills. Sport is also a source of many, often extreme, emotions. For some people it is a way to relax, deal with stress etc. [Hoye et al. 2006]. Additional incentives

that help the spectators concentrate are the unpredictability of sports competitions and impermanence of their results. Those are the qualities that motivate millions of people all over the world, regardless of their age, sex, wealth, religion or life style, to watch sports events or participate in them [Westerbeek and Smith 2003].

The strong influence sports have on emotions is what causes the sports events to be seen as an effective type of marketing communication, used by enterprises, institutions, as well as local governments [Pilarczyk 2008].

## TYPES OF SPORTS EVENTS AND THEIR PROMOTIONAL POTENTIAL

As it was mentioned before, not all sports events have the identical promotional potential in terms of building a city's image. This is why, the decision about which type of an event to choose should be based on an analysis of necessary costs and potential benefits. It is difficult to properly assess an event, as both the costs and the benefits should be evaluated from the economic and the social point of view. What is more, the costs and the benefits should be considered in a short and long perspective, which means that some of them will be directly connected to the event, and others – indirectly. Taking this into consideration definitely makes it more difficult to unambiguously assess the influence a sports event has on the city's image. Moreover, the fact that the image depends also on many other factors, unrelated to sport, further complicates such assessment. In order to facilitate the analysis of the promotional potential of sports events, it is advisable to group them into four categories, according to two criteria: level of sports and frequency of events (Fig. 2).

		Category of sport	
		Professional	Amateur
Organisation of events	Regular	Formula 1 races Speedway Grand Prix Grand Slam	Marathon runs Triathlon Dragon boat races
	Occasional	The Olympics Football World Cup Bicycle races	Sports fetes Bicycle rallies City games

Fig. 2. Examples of sports events

Source: Own elaboration.

Sports events with professional participants are definitely more effective in creating the city's image internationally. Such events are popular and as such they have the media's, sponsors', business partners', and sport fans' support. They are also noticed by the citizens, even those who are not regularly interested in sports, though in most cases they tend to see the event negatively. To effectively play their promotional role, such events should be recognised internationally. Other advantages are: the level of competition, the participation of well-known sportspeople and the prize. Barcelona experienced the positive results of the organisation of a big sports event in 1992. After the Olympic Games, which were held there, the city changed from an unattractive and shabby location into a development leader and a Catalanian "must see" for tourists from all over the world. The growth of tourist interest in this city was called "the Barcelona effect" and it became the source of an inspiration for other cities, which from that moment on started to support sports more actively.

Professional sports events can be organised in one place regularly or occasionally, in which case each time the event is held in a different city. Examples of events regularly held in the one place are: the speedway Grand Prix competition (Prague, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Krsko and other), tennis Grand Slam tournaments (Melbourne, Paris, New York, London), Formula 1 races (Monaco, Budapest, Silverstone and others), light athletics Golden League track meetings (Zurich, Berlin, Oslo, Rome and other), or ski jumping tournaments (Zakopane, Obersdorf and other). The Olympics, football EURO Cup, professional boxing galas or multistage cycling tournaments (with the route going through different cities each year) are examples of events occasionally organised in a place.

Considering the wish to create a city's/region's international image, the main advantage of sports events organised regularly is the fact that they are repetitive. Events organised with the constant frequency, usually once a year, are remembered by sports fans, strengthen the association between the event and the city, and successfully transfer the excitement felt during the competition onto the emotional attachment to the location [Mallen and Adams 2008]. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that a city's image is created not only on the basis of what is happening at its sport arenas. What accompanies the sports events is of an equal importance, for example, available ways of spending free time, the gastronomic offer, or the way in which tourists are seen and treated by the inhabitants. Nice personnel in restaurants, high-standard hotels, efficient law-enforcement forces (such as the police), transport infrastructure, the city's marking, volunteers' support and friendly citizens will play a key role. This means that the city's image depends on a number of factors, both directly and indirectly related to sports. The prerequisite of success is convincing all the above mentioned entities about the potential benefits to the city as a whole and making it clear that these benefits will depend on the common organisational effort, based on mutual trust and on formerly built partnerships.

If the event is organised in a different place each time, a city's international image needs to be created by different means. In such cases it is crucial that the event should be on a large scale and have a wide media coverage, otherwise it will not play its promotional role. Some examples of such events are the Olympic Games or the football World Cup. What is special about these events is the fact that the media inform people that an event is to be organised long before it actually takes place and its location is frequently presented in a positive way [Davis 2008]. Still, the local government has to put more effort into publicity than it would be necessary if the event was organised regularly. The

whole communication strategy has to be based on the way the place is to be perceived and remembered by potential consumers. This is why the organisation of occasional events hosted in different places usually means higher costs and more effort, which only few cities can afford. As for smaller events, for example cyclists participating in a competition passing through a city, their character is rather local. Their main task is to mobilize the citizens, capture their interest, make them feel proud and happy to be able to welcome the sportsmen, even if only for a moment. Promotional influence outside the event's location is usually limited to signalling one's own tourist attractions, shown for a moment during the TV relation, captured on reporters' photos or named by radio speakers.

Large-scale, professional sports events receive a wide media coverage. Depending on the level of the event, the information about it appears in the media long before its beginning, as well as during the event and after it. It is common for sports journalists to visit the place where an event is to be held and present this location to the spectators or readers, encouraging them to visit it and show their support. For example, the media in more than a hundred countries began talking about the four Polish cities to host the UEFA EURO 2012 as early as two years before the tournament. The event, which lasted three weeks, was watched in more than two hundred countries. Mikołaj Piotrowski, the Communication Director at PL2012+ sp. z o.o. sees the success of the event also in the fact that during the tournament 677 thousand tourists from 123 countries visited Poland. Exactly 79% of them declared they wanted to visit Poland again, and 92% – that they will recommend the country as an attractive tourist destination. Telewizja Polska aired hundreds of hours of transmissions, retransmissions and other programmes related to football matches, thereby strengthening the images of the host cities among fans, journalists, sports activists and politicians. According to Czesław Lang, the director of the Tour de Pologne race, this event always receives a live coverage by Telewizja Polska as well as French Eurosport, which broadcasts in 60 countries and in 20 languages. Tour de Pologne, along with Tour de France or Giro d'Italia, belongs to the 27 most important bicycle races in the world, which together form the so-called World Tour. There are also smaller events that are worth mentioning, such as the Kamila Skolimowska's Memorial in Warsaw. Usain Bolt, the Jamaican world record-holder participated in it and fans of light athletics from more than 50 countries watched the event either on TV or at the stadium. These three examples demonstrate the reach of the media's influence on sports events, which, in turn, create the image of their host cities.

Undoubtedly local governments are willing to organise big sports events mainly because of the possible promotional and image-creating results they may bring and with the hope for long-term economic and social effects. For example, every year a few dozen cities are interested in having the world's best cyclist race on their streets apply to be one of the host cities of Tour de France, Giro d'Italia or Tour de Pologne.

Obtaining the right to organise a large-scale sports event is a complicated task and it always involves high expenses for the proper preparation of the sports, hotel, gastronomic and transport infrastructure [Mallen and Adams 2008]. If the event is held in a different place each time, the endeavours begin usually a few years before the event. The necessary requirements set by sports federations, which grant the rights to organise an event, are so high that some cities initially interested in the competition decide to resign due to the costs disproportionate to possible benefits. The International Olympic Committee

faced such situations on numerous occasions in the process of selecting of the following Olympic Games.

Another group of sports events that can be used to create a city's image are amateur sports events. In the context of building an international image, the primary focus is on regularly organised events, such as marathon runs or triathlons. These sports that are the most popular among amateur sportsmen, who often travel from very distant countries in order to participate in them [Wicker et al. 2012]. Participants from 100–150 countries run in the marathon runs that are considered the world's elite ones. Each marathon runner from a different city is usually accompanied by 1–2 people and they spend 3–4 days in the city [Waśkowski 2014a]. According to S. Gammon's and T. Robinson's estimations, each year there are a few dozens of million people participating in such events. These researchers use the name "strong marathon tourists" for the competitors who participate in marathon runs and the name "soft marathon tourists" for those who accompany them [Gammon and Robinson 1997]. Also in Poland the popularity of running resulted in the organisation of numerous marathon runs in cities that wish to build their sports image. Besides the well-known runs in cities such as: Poznań, Warsaw, Cracow and Wrocław, there are others, for example in: Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Szczecin, Kołobrzeg, Białystok etc.

Amateur mass sports events have their promotional potential and can be used to build a city's image. However, it needs to be pointed out that, due to their specifics and lesser interest of the media, their role is basically limited to the supporters of a sports discipline [Waśkowski 2014b].

The last category of sports events are those organised sporadically or only once, in most cases meant for the people who wish to spend their free time in an active way. For example, these are sports fetes, competitions held to celebrate a national holiday or related to local traditions. Their level of organisational difficulty and necessary costs are relatively low, but their effectiveness in promoting the city is proportionally low as well. They definitely cannot be treated as the main tool of building the international image. Instead, they should be included in the promotional strategy based on different sports-related and other events and act as a supplement to the strategy. Nevertheless, these events can be used to create an image of an active city among its citizens, which should not be ignored by the government.

## **THE THREATS TO A CITY'S IMAGE RELATED TO THE ORGANISATION OF A SPORTS EVENT**

Unfortunately, there are situations, particularly in professional sports, which may possibly harm the sports' image, consequently weakening its potential as a promotional tool for various entities. For example, the corruption scandal in the Russian light athletics severely harmed the country's image, and the Russian participants may even not be allowed to participate in the upcoming Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. The death of a runner participating in the Poznan Marathon in 2013 negatively affected the international running environment, also due to the wide media coverage of this accident. According to the run's director, the media were more interested in the accident than in the marathons such. The numerous casualties of the construction process of the sports arenas prepared for the

Olympic Games in Beijing, or the pollution of the natural environment in Brazil (the host of the next Olympic Games) did not go unnoticed, either. The negative associations are always directly related to the sports event itself, but at the same time they indirectly influence the location where it took place.

## CONCLUSIONS

A closer analysis of the image-building effects achieved in the past by cities or regions associated with sports events allows for a conclusion that hosting such events is an effective form of promotion which increases the attractiveness of these places, for example as tourist destinations. These are primarily big cities, such as: London, Berlin, Barcelona, Tokyo, and in Poland: Poznań, Wrocław, Gdańsk, Bydgoszcz, that seize this opportunity of promoting themselves.

It is an exceptionally difficult task to assess a promotional potential of sports events in the context of image-building. This is mainly due to the fact that it is problematic to unambiguously relate the effects that have been achieved to merely one event. The image is created by a number of factors, such as: actions, experiences, other people's opinions, as well as the information presented by the media. The promotional potential of an event depends only on a variety of factors as well, for example: whether a sports discipline is popular in the target group of customers, whether the event will be broadcast by the media, the level and range of rivalry involved in the event, and whether it is organised regularly or only once in a place. It needs to be pointed out that if an event is ill-adapted to the other instruments of the marketing communication in the region, it will not play the expected image-building role by itself.

## OCENA POTENCJAŁU WYDARZEŃ SPORTOWYCH JAKO NARZĘDZIA KREOWANIA WIZERUNKU MIAST I REGIONÓW NA ARENIE MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ

**Streszczenie.** Duże wydarzenia sportowe organizowane są między innymi z nadzieją na uzyskanie przez miasta, w których się odbywają, promocyjnego efektu i wzmocnienie wizerunku na arenie międzynarodowej. W niektórych miastach lub regionach takie imprezy organizowane są okazjonalnie, w innych odbywają się cyklicznie. Zarówno jedna, jak i druga strategia wykorzystania sportu dla celów wizerunkowych ma swoje zalety i wady. W artykule dokonano identyfikacji potencjalnych korzyści, jakie płyną z promocji destynacji poprzez sport w zależności od rodzaju imprezy. Uwzględniono przy tym zaproponowaną własną typologię wydarzeń sportowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** marketing sportowy, imprezy sportowe, komunikacja marketingowa

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