Organising sport in the Australian outback is DIFFERENT

In the outback six is a crowd and social dynamics are ignored at your peril

by Kirsten Sparre

Sport is good for the health of both individuals and small communities in the Australian outback. Organising sports activities in the bush is, however, an entirely different kettle of fish from doing it in the suburbs, as Garry Humphries will tell you.

Garry Humphries is regional manager for sport, recreation and racing in the South West Region of Queensland in Australia. At Play the Game he provided a fascinating insight into the special characteristics of organising sport in the outback.

A fundamental difference between the bush and the suburbs is one of scale. Australia has a population of 20 million people. 18 million of those live in cities dotted around the coastline and the remaining 2 million share an area in the middle the size of Europe. People are few and far between and for Humphries and his staff this means a lot of travel.

"Last year the six people in our team travelled the equivalent of three and a half times around the world to serve our area. Most of it by car because people tend not to take us seriously if we fly in," Humphries explained.

Environment is everything

The environment also plays a much larger role in the opportunities for organising sport in the outback than in the cities. Changes in the natural environment such as drought, fire, flood or storms affect everybody immediately and can have a direct impact on planned events because people need to attend to more immediate matters.

But also changes in the economic environment can have an impact on sport.

With fewer people around, drawing a crowd also takes on an entirely different meaning. Getting 20 or even just six people together for a night with guest speakers in South West Queensland can get the same market penetration as a crowd in excess of 8,000 people in Brisbane.

"Once we had a sports medicine association that did not want to come and talk unless there were 25 people present. So I paid for 20 empty seats to get education for six people and that was a good deal," said Humphries who also invites Olympic level coaches and icons like Australian lifeguards to give talks in small towns far removed from the sea.

"The discovery of coal can lead to a booming industry but it may lead to small towns losing people with technical skills because they have gone to work in the mines and cannot repair lights at the sports grounds. In cities the impact of such a change can be absorbed, but that is not the case in the outback," said Humphries.

In general, it is a problem that local councils do not necessarily have people employed who are capable of building or maintaining sports facilities.

"So we are changing our way of thinking and instead of building traditional pools, we sometimes build pools in the naturally occurring rocks," Humphries explained.

Women are more active

Dealing with people in the bush also requires a different way of thinking than in the cities. Firstly, Humphries has noticed that the smaller the town, the more active the women are.

"The bush is perhaps getting more women active than in the suburbs, and it means that the audience you have to reach and the decision makers you deal with are more likely to be women. Therefore I sometimes start by closing deals with them," said Humphries.
In Ethiopia, football is not just played on the field. It has much more meaning than a game. Ethiopians are die-hard supporters of their national team and favourite clubs despite poor results. However, these days many prefer to watch the English Premier League instead of going to watch the local leagues in different stadiums in the country.

More and more Ethiopian football spectators have access to England’s Premier League matches. Ethiopian football fans regardless of age and sex sit glued to television sets and watch the action from all the English matches.

Photos of players, football icons and symbols of the English Premier League are everywhere from the capital Addis Ababa to the distant areas in the country. The name of the four giant clubs in English football: Arsenal, Manchester, Chelsea, and Liverpool are on the lips of supporters, just as players like Wayne Rooney, Adebayor, Ronaldo, Essien, and Gerard are in the hearts of the Ethiopian football fans.

It is very common to see devoted crowds packed into every corner of the street chanting for teams that are to be found faraway from Ethiopia. It is just as common to see local teams playing in front of a low number of spectators, yes sometimes even in front of empty stadiums.Yet, football fans still have time to watch the English Premier League in the middle of the night.

**24 years outside the Cup**

Ethiopia is one of the founding members of the African Football Confederation (CAF) together with Sudan and Egypt. However, Ethiopia has not appeared in the African Cup of Nations for 24 years. Its football fans desperately need to return to the Pan-African tournament. Once a power in the competition, Ethiopia has spent twenty-four years without participation in the big tournament. The English premiership is now the main challenge for the struggling nation in its football renaissance.

Last year there was a heated debate about the danger that the English Premier League poses to Ethiopian football. The football authorities warned that Ethiopian football is at risk because of the influence of the English Premier League. This viewpoint was met with ferocious opposition from the public and a number of sports journalists.

Those who are very fanatical about the English top league argue it is wrong to blame the premiership for the decline of attendance and quality of the game in Ethiopia. They rather point their hand to the crisis in the football administration.

Media also favours England

Once adoring supporters for their local league, Ethiopian football fans these days know more about teams and players in England than their own teams or players. The media tend to report about the English Premier League, not local matches. Journalists say the quality of local football is declining and readers or viewers turn their backs on it. As a result they say it is so difficult to cover it. Elsewhere there are accusations against the media for leading the fans to the leagues in Europe.

Attendance at Ethiopian football matches is falling and the quality of football is low. The tendency to favour the English premiership is extremely visible on every corner in the country. The English premiership remains as a very tricky challenge for local football that lost many of its true supporters. The top English league is now widely regarded as having a negative impact on the future of Ethiopian football.