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“Toughest Sport on Dirt”: An exploratory study of market demand variables of fans of the Professional Bull Riders, Inc.

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The “Toughest Sport on Dirt”: An Exploratory Study of Market Demand Variables of Fans of the Professional Bull Riders Inc.

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Introduction

With a television viewership of 90 million, a multi-network contract, a world championship ending in Las Vegas, large corporation sponsorship, and a growing fan base, the sport of bull riding has come a long way since its professional start a mere 10 years ago. From a socially accepted stereotype of the poor, lonely cowboy, cowboys and cowgirls today can reap hundreds of thousands—and even millions—of dollars in professional rodeo circuits. The professional rodeo industry even has the attention of ESPN and NBC Sports. Within the industry, one of the most popular events, the bull riding event, has become a stand alone professional league—the Professional Bull Riders Inc. Started in 1992 by 20 accomplished bull riders who each invested \$1,000, the PBR is very popular, with each event bringing in 20,000 to 30,000 spectators and winnings beginning to hit the million dollar mark.

Unfortunately, the sport management academic world has ignored this industry. Current researchers were unable to locate any studies involving professional rodeo in the sport management literature.

Literature Review

The Sport Industry

The sport business industry has experienced phenomenal growth in a short period of time (Pitts & Stotlar, 2002). Pitts and Stotlar indicated that studies have been conducted in an attempt to place a dollar value or economic impact number on the sport business industry, with each study focused on similar segments of the industry.

Although methodologies in the studies were not exactly the same and did not include the same factors, they at least provided an estimate of the size of the industry and the various segments from which the industry is composed since 1986 (Pitts & Stotlar, 2002). Some of the studies included spectator spending, which is a sign of the popularity of sports events as entertainment.

The most current study, conducted by and published in *The Street & Smith's SportsBusiness Journal*, included spectator spending information. That study reported that the size of the sport business industry (with a specific focus on spectator sports) was \$213 billion and that gate receipts alone accounted for \$10.47 billion of that total (The Answer, 1999).

In another study also reported by the *SportsBusiness Journal*, spectator spending for sports events had increased to \$26.17 billion dollars in 2001—a 16% increase from 1999. Of this, \$11.74 billion were ticket sales, \$10.70 billion was spent on concessions, parking, and on-site merchandise sales, and \$3.73 billion was spent on premium seating (King, Sweet, Lefton, Cameron, Broughton, Lombardo, & Lee, 2002).

The ticket sales alone increased 12.1% from 1999. In addition, King et al. (2002) also declared that not only the revenue from premium seating contributed to increased spectator spending, but also spending throughout the modern sports venue had been streamlined by the advent of fan-loyalty programs and the growing number of shops where merchandise and concessions are available.

Professional Bull Riding

The modern extreme sport has become the fastest growing segment of sport spending at the beginning of the new millennium. These sports appear to be in the newly emergent “alternative, extreme, or lifestyle” sports, which are highly individualistic, free-spirited, adrenaline-rush activities (Howard & Crompton, 2004). Those include such sports as in-line skating, skateboarding, snowboarding, whitewater kayaking and rafting, bungee jumping, BMX biking, windsurfing, surfing, and several others. Bull riding can also be considered one of America’s original extreme sports. Bull riding is a fierce, rough, and grueling sport with roots deep in American culture. Bull riding has turned into a “captivating, dangerous, on-the-edge-of-your-seat, stunt-like sporting event” (All About . . . , 2004).

The Professional Bull Riders Inc. (PBR) was created in Colorado Springs in 1992. A group of 20 bull riders broke away from the traditional rodeo scene and decided to start a circuit for bull riders only. Currently there are more than 800 bull riders from the U.S., Canada, Brazil, and Australia holding PBR memberships. They compete in more than 100 bull riding events per year on either the elite tour, the Built Ford Tough Series (BFTS), or the two minor league tours, U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company Challenger Tour and the Humps n’ Horns Tour. They accumulate the ranking for a chance to qualify for the PBR World Finals in Las Vegas and win the coveted title of PBR World Champion (All about..., 2004). In addition, riders compete across the circuit to accumulate points to win a \$1 million dollar bonus at the end of the season (Built Ford Tough Million Dollar Bonus, 2004).

Corporate sponsors of the PBR include well known brands such as Ford, Bud Light, Wrangler, Jack Daniel’s, Mossy Oak, U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company, and the city of Las Vegas. Annual prize money has increased from \$660,000 dollars in 1994 to over \$9.5 million dollars in 2003 (Professional Bull Riding

Competition, 2004). With increasing sponsorship interests, more television networks have carried the events as well. The number of fans watching the events on television has gained momentum—television viewership has grown from 12 million to over 90 million. In 2003, seven Built Ford Tough Series (BFTS) events were aired on NBC. All 29 events aired on the Outdoor Life Network (OLN) and a few even aired on the Spanish station Telemundo. OLN has provided fans with over 188 hours of original PBR events. And more and more people attend PBR tournaments. An Atlanta Invitational held in the Georgia Dome had a record-breaking attendance of 33,000 fans (Professional Bull Riders on TV, 2004).

Obviously, professional bull riding is a growing sport and there is growing interest from the fans. The event we examined was the first of three to be held in Atlanta, Georgia. This current study is also the first of three in which we hope to examine thoroughly this sport and its fans.

Sports Event Attendance Factors

Many sport marketing researchers (Green, 1995; Greenstein & Marcum, 1981; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Lu, 2001; Lu & Pitts, 2003; Schofield, 1983; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995a; Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Jambor, 1997b; Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Lam, 1998) have concluded that the factors that affect spectator sports event attendance fall into four broad categories: (a) game attractiveness factors (individual player skills, team records, league standing, record-breaking performance, closeness of competition, special events, and entertainment), (b) economic and spending factors (ticket price, substitute forms of entertainment, television effect), (c) sociodemographic factors (population factors, age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, education, geography), and (d) audience preference factors (event schedule, convenience, weather, stadium quality, team history in the community).

Game attractiveness factors have been found to be positively related to game attendance (Demmert, 1973; Zhang, Smith, Pease, & Mahar, 1996). Game day promotions, for instance, have been associated with a discernible increase in attendance (Marcum & Greenstein, 1985; McDonald & Rascher, 2000; Pruegger, 2003) and sales, or price, promotions have traditionally been in the form of price or nonprice promotions in professional sport (McDonald & Rascher, 2000; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2000; Pitts & Stotlar, 2002). Other game attractiveness factors such as a strong rivalry between teams, a possible record-breaking performance, and the chance to see outstanding athletes positively affect attendance (Fillingham, 1977; Green, 1995; Noll, 1974).

Economic and visitor spending factors can affect a consumer's decision to attend a sports event. Some of these factors include the cost of the ticket, the cost of other amenities, availability of substitute forms of entertainment or activities, if the event will be on television, and the choice to attend other sports events in the area. It is reported in the literature that these factors tend to have a more negative effect on the decision to attend an event (Green, 1995; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Jones, 1984; Zhang et al., 1995; Zhang et al., 1996). For example, a person on a tight budget may forego the opportunity to attend an event based on the fact that the price is too high for their budget.

Sociodemographic factors include such basic demographical and sociocultural characteristics as age, gender, ethnicity, income, education, occupation, and household status, as well as geographical factors such as distance to the park and type of transportation (Green, 1995; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Kasky, 1994). In addition, some research shows that a new stadium can positively affect attendance (Hill, Madura, & Zuber, 1982).

Audience preference factors include such factors as game schedule, stadium quality, weather, convenience, food, parking, accommodation availability, and the history of the team in that community (Green, 1995; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Pitts, Lu, Ayers, & Lucas, 2004; Zhang et al., 1996). A certain level of comfort is expected when attending an event. Many fans prefer a clean facility, well-behaved crowds, good food and drink, and reasonable parking.

Purpose of the Study

The PBR and the world of professional bull riding are receiving an increasing amount of media attention. Further, bull riding can certainly be considered an extreme sport. With no research (that the authors could find) for the sport management literature, the current researchers believed that both the profession of bull riding and the academic literature could benefit from research into this sport. In addition, understanding the fans of this emerging sport can be very helpful to the sport marketers and managers in the sport. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the fans of the Professional Bull Riders Inc.

Methods

Subjects

One PBR event in Georgia was identified for a first study merely based on its close proximity and convenience to the researchers in an attempt to explore sociodemographics, market demand variables, and fan interest in the PBR event. Subjects were 54 spectators who attended this PBR event.

Survey Instrument

Four major categories of variables affecting spectator decision making on game attendance identified in prior research were examined: (a) game attractiveness, (b) economic, (c) sociodemographic, and (d) audience preference (Green, 1995; Greenstein & Marcum, 1981; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Hart, Hutton, & Sharot, 1975; Lu, 2001; Schofield, 1983; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995). The questionnaire used in this study was developed with the use of those used by Green (1995), Hansen and Gauthier (1989), Kasky (1994), Schofield (1983), Zhang et al. (1995), Lu (2001), and subsequently modified by the researchers. An influencing rating was translated as follows: 1 (no influence) to 5 (strong influence), NA=Not Applicable. After analyzing by Cronbach's Alpha, the reliability of the questionnaire was .75.

Analysis of Data

First, because this study was exploratory, descriptive statistics of the composite scores were calculated for each factor. Second, the data were analyzed by using regression to determine if there were major factors that would contribute to attendance factors.

Results and Discussion

Subjects were 54 spectators who attended this PBR event. They averaged 30 years of age, 50% were females, 56% had some form of college education, most were Caucasians (72.5%), reported a household income average of \$72,000, and 51% of subjects reported to be single. A large majority—96%—were from the local area, and 81% of them had attended PBR events before (see Table 1). In addition, the average age of these PBR spectators was younger compared to spectators who attended other professional sport games (averaged around 40 years old) (Green, 1995; Lu, 2001).

While previous studies suggested that promotions of the game, rivalry, closeness of the competition, record-breaking performances, schedule, access, and cleanness of the facility have positive impact on attendance (Green, 1995; Greenstein & Marcum, 1981; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Hart, Hutton, & Sharot, 1975; Lu, 2001; Schofield, 1983; Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995), none were found in this study.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Demographic Variables (n = 54)

Variables	Category	n	%	Cumulative %
Gender				
	Female	27	50	50.0
	Male	27	50	100.0
Age				
	Under 18	5	9.4	9.4
	18-24	15	28.3	37.7
	25-34	14	26.5	64.2
	35-44	14	26.4	90.6
	45-54	3	5.6	96.2
	55-plus	2	3.8	100.0
Marital/Household Status				
	Single	27	50.9	50.9
	Married	23	43.4	94.3
	Divorced	0	0	94.3
	Living with a partner	3	5.7	100.0
	Other	0	0	100.0
Highest Education Level				
	Some High School	2	3.8	3.8
	High School Graduated	20	38.5	42.3
	Vocational/Technical School	1	1.9	44.2
	Some College	3	5.8	50.0
	College Degree	23	44.2	94.2
	Some Post-Graduate Studies	0	0.0	94.2
	Master's Degree	2	3.8	98.1
	Doctoral Degree	1	1.9	100.0
Ethnicity				
	African American/Black	13	25.5	25.5
	Caucasian	37	72.5	98.0
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0	98.0
	Hispanic/Latino	0	0.0	98.0
	Others	1	2.0	100.0
Annual Household Income				
	\$10,000 and under	0	0.0	0.0
	\$10,001-\$29,999	5	11.9	11.9
	\$30,000-\$49,999	11	26.2	38.1
	\$50,000-\$69,999	4	9.5	47.6
	\$70,000-\$89,999	5	11.9	59.5
	\$90,000-\$109,999	10	23.8	83.3
	\$110,000-\$129,999	4	11.9	95.2
	\$130,000-\$149,999	1	2.4	97.6
	\$150,000 or more	1	2.4	100.0

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Demographic Variables (n = 54) (continued)

Variables	Category	n	%	Cumulative %
Numbers of children in the house (under 18)				
	0	15	36.6	36.6
	1	7	17.1	53.7
	2	11	26.8	80.5
	3	6	14.6	95.1
	4	2	4.9	100.0
Companion				
	Family only	12	22.6	22.6
	Partner only	8	15.1	37.7
	Friends only	19	35.8	73.5
	Alone	1	1.9	75.4
	Family, friends, and partner	12	22.7	98.1
	Others	1	1.9	100.0
People in the party				
	1	1	2.6	2.6
	2	12	30.8	33.3
	3	4	10.3	43.6
	4	5	12.8	56.4
	5	4	10.3	66.7
	6	7	17.9	84.6
	7	4	10.3	94.9
	8 and plus	2	15.5	100.0
Previously attended				
	Yes	43	81.1	81.1
	No	10	18.9	100.0
Zip code				
	Georgia area	50	96.0	96.0
	Other	2	4.0	100.0
How did you find out?				
	Radio	24	34.8	34.8
	Newspapers	4	5.80	40.6
	TV	12	17.4	58.0
	Friends	17	24.6	82.6
	Website	3	4.3	87.0
	Mail	1	1.4	88.4
	Local sports organization	1	1.4	89.9
	Other	7	10.1	100.0

Although subjects perceived highly on several factors that influenced their attendance, such as price of ticket, chance to attend a new sport, and a chance to see a star rider, regression analysis (R square = .121) and ANOVA ($p > .05$) showed that there were no major factors that influenced spectators' attendance in the categories of demographic, audience preference, economics, and game attractiveness. Further, the three major league standings of the bull riders (Challenger Tour Standings, Built Ford Tough Standings, and Qualified Standings) were listed only as somewhat important when people made decisions to go to this event.

One anecdotal finding in this study revealed a seating mistake made by the Georgia Dome. Fans in two seating locations found themselves behind the stage and others found themselves sitting behind television cameras. As a result, these fans could not see the event. The results of this study helped the Georgia Dome event management group to develop a different seating arrangement and event configuration in the facility for the next year's event (this was the first year of a three-year event contract between the Dome and the PBR).

Summary

The Georgia Dome staff have benefited from this research. There were follow-up meetings in which strategic decisions were made to enhance the event for its second scheduled date the following year. Follow-up studies are planned and will be conducted at each of the second and third event. The results of those studies will be used for comparison against the first.

Sport management faculty and students may also benefit from this research. For instance, this study reports information regarding a sport that is typically not studied and, thus, has yet to be included in sport management literature. Students can learn about this professional sport and might consider a career in it. Finally, it is hoped that this study will encourage sport management academics to conduct more research into the variety of sport businesses in the industry. Future research will involve follow-up studies at the annual event for comparison to the results in the current study.

In addition, this study contributes to the small but growing literature on fans and factors that affect their attendance at sports events in a number of ways. First, this study involved a sport that has yet to be included in the sport marketing literature. The authors hope that inclusion of previously ignored sports will encourage more research involving sports and sports events in order to enhance the literature.

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