

Sports Event Ministry

Linda Hokit

Each major sports event is unique. The following material discusses basic concepts that need to be considered in planning a ministry during any major sports event.

Biblical Perspective

The thrill of athletic competitions has engaged the dreams and actions of humanity for countless generations. Like a smile, athletics is among the most universally understood languages. The emotions and images of athletic competition not only translate across cultural boundaries but can translate spiritually as well.

Paul spoke of pressing on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward (Philippians 3:14), of training for the race and competing for a prize that lasts forever (1 Corinthians 9:25). In Hebrews 12:1, we are urged to run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Finally, athletics brings together people who may never have any other reason or desire to be together. Athletes, coaches, relatives of athletes, members of the media, and spectators from the host city and from other cities, states, and countries crowd into cities and athletic facilities to cheer the athletes and the events. In this way, athletic events, especially international events are perfect opportunities for evangelistic and ministry-oriented, Spirit-led activities.

What to Expect

Athletes come to compete. Their minds are almost totally focused on their commitments to themselves, their families, their team, and their countries. However, after their events, they love to party, shop, and seek out those from their own countries who may be in the host city. Some may even choose to go home rather than stay for the closing ceremony.

- Athletes in major athletic events, such as the Olympic Games, are almost always cloistered in secure facilities. Access to athletes where they live and compete is almost impossible. Likewise, stadiums, fields, pools, ski slopes, ice rinks, and other facilities that the community normally uses freely are heavily controlled.

- International athletic events are conducted with a pledge to avoid political, cultural, and spiritual matters that would even hint at division or favoritism. Thus, religious services will be provided for all faiths equally. Therefore, those involved in ministry must determine if they want to work within an environment that will likely be interfaith and ecumenical, or if complementary ministry will be done in the community outside of such structures.

- All logos, words, colors, and mascots are trademarked. Use of anything trademarked must be avoided!

- Pin-trading is very popular. Sometimes venues are even set up to encourage pin trading. It may be worthwhile to consider the recent popularity in trading cards, especially among children and youth.

- A city that hosts a major event wants to put on the biggest and best event. Quality is not only appreciated, it is required. Also, activities proposed must not appear to be self-serving but rather a service that benefits the cause. Building relationships with the community before the event helps to develop credibility.

- Often host cities try to find home hospitality for family members of the athletes, but this seems to be a difficult project to coordinate.

Considerations in Planning

- The event is probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Therefore, establish a prayer ministry!

- The churches and leadership in place at the time of the event are equipped and capable of doing everything God has in mind for them — under His leadership — with existing resources and resources that can be acquired.

- Realize there may be a fear that the ministry will draw people away from the local church ministry. Anticipate the needs of the churches. Present opportunities for ministry in ways that reflect this understanding.

- There will be more opportunities to minister than can even be imagined. The key will be to discover the gap between service offered and existing needs. Consider (1) church needs, strengths, visions; (2) associational goals; (3) new ministries recently proposed but not yet started; (4) the time frame of the event; (5) whether people walk or drive to events; (6) whether church buildings and meeting places are located near venues or major traffic routes; (7) the expressed needs of the organizing committee and the community; and, (8) whether the event will be televised.

- Decide whether the ministry will be facility-based where people from all over come together to serve, such as a coffeehouse; whether it will be church-based, where most ministry happens on church fields; or whether it will be a combination of both.

- Seek out and plan ways to work within the event and the community organizations before, during, and after the event. For example, chaplains and other volunteers are usually welcomed.

- Plan activities, such as evangelism training, that benefit not only the event volunteers but also the entire association of churches.

- Plan a follow-up process before finalizing ministry plans and resources. Try to connect with similar ministries happening elsewhere before and after the event.

- Plan beyond the event from the beginning:

1. Because it helps people look at the ministry as an opportunity for God to work rather than as an event that succeeds or fails.

2. Because there is always a letdown after the ministry like the letdown after Christmas.

3. Because there is often a willingness to try new and different activities that can open doors for future ministry.

If the association needs a prayer ministry, clown group, or church start, try to leave it behind. When resources are available, use them where you are, where you have been, and where you are led.

- Plan for fatigue and stress before, halfway through, and after the event. Help people keep their expectations in perspective. Unmet expectations are a major source of stress and frustration. Plan to give recognition throughout.
- Plan for volunteers to be star-struck. Help them know that athletes are not the only people who need Christ.
- Select and train volunteers carefully. Select only as many volunteers as can be hosted without impairing the effectiveness of the ministry. Select only those volunteers who will come with a servant spirit.
- Plan for pre-trip visits for volunteers and ministry teams. Plan to practice the ministry before the event.
- Celebrate immediately what God has done!*

Adapted from an article by Linda Hokit in the 1993 National Resort Ministries Conference notebook. Used by permission.