

SOCIAL SCIENCES

CRISIS MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN SPORTING EVENTS: THE CASE OF GEORGIA

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Abstract

History shows that organized sports have played an important role in the development of society, and from this beginning began the large-scale sports events industry. Today, organized sports competitions, or events, are simply big business. It is extremely important to properly conduct the complex process of sports event management. In this paper, we will consider a situation that disrupts the normal functioning of a sports event and has an uncertain, potentially negative, and damaging outcome. These are crisis situations that arise during an event. A crisis is an incident that can potentially disrupt the course of an event or damage its results. We have discussed the impact of international experience and practice in sports event management on the practice in the reality of Georgia. The study identified a number of shortcomings, which were reflected in the presented conclusions, and for their elimination, in our opinion, important recommendations were developed.

Keywords: sport events, crisis management challenges, solutions.

Introduction

History demonstrates that organized sport has played a significant role in the development of society, and it was from this foundation that the large-scale sports event industry emerged. Today, organized sports competitions, or sporting events, constitute a major business sector. This industry is so extensive that determining its full scale is difficult. Participation rates in certain sports are available and may be supplemented by annual growth percentages. Unfortunately, statistical data remain limited not only on a global scale, but even at the national level.

Participants in sporting events are often perceived solely as athletes competing in the event. However, the number of other “players” involved is equally important. The stakeholders listed below may also be considered participants, as the conduct of an event without them would be inconceivable. These include: players (athletes), officials (referees, registrars), support personnel (coaches, physicians, team managers, agents), suppliers (providers of event-related equipment and services, sponsors, security services, manufacturers of sports equipment), event management personnel, staff (stewards, kiosk and ticket vendors, ball boys, etc.), spectators, media representatives, and other stakeholders.

The proper management of the highly complex process of sports event administration is of paramount importance. The functions of sports event management include the fundamental principles of planning, organizing, staffing, leadership, and control. These functions extend to specific areas such as budgeting, venue selection, marketing, logistics, stakeholder relations, and post-event evaluation, all of which contribute to ensuring a successful, seamless, and memorable sporting experience from conception to completion.

This paper examines situations that disrupt the normal functioning of sporting events and produce uncertain, potentially negative, and harmful consequences. These situations are referred to as crises arising during sporting events. A crisis is an incident that

has the potential to disrupt the course of an event or damage its outcomes. Since certain crises are almost inevitable in the course of any event, their proper forecasting and management are of utmost importance. Crisis management must be conducted in accordance with the specific circumstances of each situation. Whenever people gather together, an element of risk always exists, and neglecting this important issue, or failing to plan for its management, may negatively affect not only the course and results of an event, but also the overall development of sport itself.

The literature review was conducted using the databases of Google Scholar, Research Gate, and Academia.edu. Twenty-two printed and electronic publications were selected for the study, involving scholars from ten countries. The review was guided by the following research question: what challenges does risk management face in sports event management?

Risks within the event industry may manifest in various forms. Some of these risks arise from potential violence, health and safety concerns, or sudden adverse weather conditions such as torrential rain, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and others.

Broad social divisions based on religion, culture, and race also affect sport (Ugwueze, 2017). In turn, Layman (2017) noted that there is always a tendency in sport to favor a particular team on the basis of tribe, race, skin color, or geographical location. He explained that, due to partisan and personal interests, some officials disregard the rules of the game and openly display biased interests by ignoring the opposing team, fans, and spectators, thereby placing the event in a state of crisis. Wamplew (2017) observed that local, national, and international hostilities are also transferred into sport. He emphasized that such developments not only provoke crises, but also hinder the development of sport itself [1, p. 99].

Every risk has a certain probability of occurrence. This probability is influenced by various factors, some of which are controllable, while others are beyond hu-

man control. Once a risk materializes, it creates problems for both the event and its organizers, leading to: a/ temporary suspension or termination of the event process, damage to or loss of the organizer's or venue's resources and other assets; b/ physical injury, health problems, or accidents affecting event participants, service personnel, or spectators; and c/ other adverse consequences.

Several researchers (Danielle La Gree, Douglas Wilbur, and Glen T. Cameron) study sports crisis strategy from both marketing and public relations perspectives. They described how strategic efforts protect a sports organization's reputation [2, p. 407].

Crisis management in sporting events involves a proactive, multi-stage process aimed at preparing for, responding to, and recovering from unexpected incidents. The stages of this process include:

1. Preparation and Prevention – identifying potential crises, establishing a crisis management team, developing a risk management plan, creating communication protocols, and conducting training sessions;
2. Response – prioritizing safety, acting quickly yet cautiously, ensuring effective communication, coordinating among stakeholders, and maintaining operations;
3. Post-crisis Analysis and Recovery – evaluating the response, updating protocols, providing support, and resolving critical issues.

Several authors describe the key components of a sports event crisis management plan. For example, Terrence A. Duncan, Ashlie Ardoin, Dr. Darrell Smith, et al from Grace Christian Academy consider the following key components:

1. Crisis Management Plan Personnel
2. Emergency Communications
3. Emergency Equipment
4. Roles of Licensed Sports Coaches, Student Coaches, Trainers, and Administrators
5. Event Venue Directions [3, p.3].

In developed countries, every sporting event, regardless of type or level, is managed by organizations possessing relevant expertise. For example, in the United States, the best sports event management organizations are identified annually based on their experience in planning and conducting sporting events of various scales and disciplines [4].

Best practices for emergency planning in sporting events have been established, including the development of comprehensive policies for specific risk management issues on the basis of the latest research. Sports Planning Guide highlights the importance of having an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) for a sports event. An EAP is the cornerstone of risk management in event planning. It outlines the procedures to follow during emergencies, ensuring a swift, organized response to medical emergencies, weather incidents, or security threats. The EAP serves as a blueprint for action, minimizing chaos and confusion during critical moments [5].

Some researchers have identified 15 risk issue categories: environment, financial, human resources, infrastructure, interdependence, legacy, media, operations, organizing, participation, political, relationships, sport, threats, and visibility [6, p.191].

It is important to understand the hierarchy of policies between the sports venue and the event organizer. Event organizers must ensure that their policies align with and complement the policies of the venue. Clear communication and cooperation with arena management help prevent conflicts and ensure consistent risk management practices.

A mixed-methods methodology was employed in the study, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, since mixed methods are ideal for addressing complex research questions that require both numerical measurement and qualitative interpretation. This approach also strengthens the reliability and diversity of the research findings.

Existing data were utilized for the purposes of the study, as this approach is both economical and efficient, relying on previously completed research. Documents and records proved particularly valuable for historical analysis. The selected methodology is objective and relevant to the research problem under consideration, and this methodological choice corresponds well to the objectives of the study.

The study examined the influence of international experience and practices in sports event management on the existing practices within the Georgian context. The research identified a number of shortcomings, which are reflected in the conclusions presented herein and for the elimination of which, in our opinion, significant recommendations have been developed.

Since every event is unique, numerous risk factors exist. These factors must be individually assessed and carefully evaluated with consideration of the previous history of the same or similar events.

There is no dispute that sport carries a great mission in establishing peace and humanism on Earth. However, sport may also become a source of tragedy and significant loss of life. The history of crisis situations arising during sporting events is unfortunately extensive. It is sufficient merely to recall the major tragedies that have occurred in football stadiums.

For example, Glasgow's Ibrox Stadium witnessed several disasters during the previous century. The first tragedy occurred on April 5, 1902, during a match between England and Scotland, when one of the wooden stands collapsed under the weight of spectators, resulting in the deaths of 25 people and injuries to more than 500 others. A far more horrific tragedy occurred at Ibrox later, on January 2, 1971, during the country's principal derby between Rangers and Celtic, attended by nearly 80,000 supporters. A massive crowd crush resulted in the deaths of 66 people and injuries to more than 200 others.

In February 1981, a match between Olympiacos and AEK in the Greek Championship ended in tragedy. The hosts' victory was overshadowed by a crowd crush that killed 21 supporters, most of whom were adolescents.

On May 11, 1985, Bradford was expected to celebrate the success of the local football club competing in England's Third Division, but the sporting occasion was devastated by a fire at the stadium, which claimed the lives of 56 spectators and caused burn injuries to 265 others.

In April 1989, Liverpool's visit to Sheffield to play Nottingham Forest generated enormous excitement in the city. Demand for tickets significantly exceeded the seating capacity of Hillsborough Stadium. Minutes before the match began, thousands of ticketless supporters gathered around the stadium entrances. In an attempt to ease the situation, local police made the disastrous decision to disable the turnstiles and open the gates. Predictably, the crowd surged into the stadium, trampling everything in its path. The resulting crush led to 96 deaths and 766 injuries.

For similar reasons, 93 spectators died in Kathmandu in the spring of 1988. In this case, spectators were attempting to escape torrential rain rather than law enforcement officers, but only one of the stadium's eight exit gates was open.

Similar incidents have repeatedly occurred in Africa. One of the largest tragedies took place on May 9, 2001, during a match between Ghana's two most popular clubs, Accra Hearts and Asante Kotoko. As the home team was leading, enraged supporters of the visiting team began throwing plastic bottles and seats onto the field. In an attempt to restore order, police used tear gas, which triggered panic. Spectators rushed toward the exits, only to find the gates closed. The resulting stampede claimed 127 lives.

In 2012, disorder between rival supporters during a football match in Port Said, Egypt, resulted in the deaths of more than 70 people and injuries to over 1,000 others [7].

All these incidents should have served as historical lessons for both spectators and event organizers in order to prevent similar occurrences in the future. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. Comparable incidents have recently occurred in Georgian stadiums as well.

For example, in 2024, the UEFA Disciplinary Committee fined the Georgian Football Federation €56,000 for disciplinary violations that occurred during the Georgia–Albania UEFA Nations League match. The federation was fined €14,000 for blocking public passageways, €12,000 for the use of lasers from the stands, and €30,000 for the use of pyrotechnics by fans [8].

Another incident occurred on March 23, 2025, following the football match between Georgia and Armenia. According to eyewitnesses, some supporters entered the field and clashed with Armenian fans, leading to the throwing of bottles. UEFA subsequently fined the Georgian Football Federation €40,000 for pitch invasion, the use of laser devices and pyrotechnics, as well as blocking exits. In addition, the Georgian national team was required to play one home match behind closed doors. Fortunately, these incidents did not result in fatalities, although many supporters sustained injuries and the organizers were sanctioned accordingly by UEFA's Disciplinary Committee [9].

It is evident that, in these cases, insufficient communication existed between event organizers, arena management, and law enforcement agencies for the purpose of preventing disciplinary violations among attendees.

Serious injuries and fatalities among athletes themselves are also not uncommon during sporting

events. Taking Georgia as an example, several sporting events have ended fatally. Among the most well-known and tragic cases involving Georgian athletes who died during competitions or training sessions are the following:

- Nodar Kumaritashvili (Luge): The most famous and tragic case occurred on the opening day of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. During a training run, he was thrown from his luge sled and collided with the track structure, dying from the injuries sustained.

- Giorgi Targamadze (Motorcycling): In 2021, he was involved in a fatal accident during a motorcycle race at the Rustavi International Motor Park.

- Otar Berianidze (Athletics – strength disciplines): In 2017, during an international tournament, he was struck by a barbell during the "Athletics Classic" competition and later died in hospital from his injuries.

- Giorgi Koberidze (Rugby): He died unexpectedly, because of heart attack, during training in January 2024 [10].

These cases underscore the critical importance of adhering to safety measures in sport. The causes of sports injuries may include: a/ improper or poor-quality training practices; b/ inadequate sports infrastructure and equipment; c/ insufficient monitoring of athletes' health; and d/ other related factors.

Conclusion

These incidents indicate that organizers failed to take existing risks into account and did not implement adequate preventive measures. Such incidents may be explained by the lack of appropriate knowledge and experience in sports event management, or by inadequate assessment of risk factors.

According to the Law of Georgia on Sport, "The National Sports Federation of Georgia is the sole governing body in the respective sport and is responsible for its development" [11]. Thus, the relevant sports federations are responsible for holding sporting events in Georgia.

It should also be noted that, under the same law [12], the competence of the Ministry of Sport in the field of sports is defined as follows: "coordination of the training, distribution, and retraining of personnel in the field of sport; organization of the certification of sports personnel and determination of their professional qualifications." It appears that greater attention and stricter control from the Ministry are required regarding the certification of sports event organizers and the determination of their professional competence.

The successful organization of sporting events requires detailed planning, coordination, and an understanding of participation and engagement. Sports event management encompasses numerous aspects. Whether through innovative approaches or refinement of existing practices, understanding the full scope of sports and event management is the key to conducting events smoothly and successfully.

It is noteworthy that Article 21, Paragraph 7 of the Law of Georgia on Sport provides that: "An employment contract concluded by a professional athlete, in addition to conditions concerning sports activity and

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