

Sporting mega-events and the residents: Assessing the IAAF World Championships 2005

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In city development agendas, sporting mega-events are often linked to conceptions about beneficial economic and marketing effects. This was true also for the IAAF World Championships that took place in Helsinki in August 2005. However, this article focuses on the various ways in which the "home crowd", i.e. the inhabitants of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (the cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa) engaged themselves in the games. Above all, the article attempts to measure how the residents perceived the advantages and disadvantages of the event¹.

The championships were marked by unusually heavy rain. This would normally have affected people's opinions negatively. Yet our interviews, which were done immediately after the championships, show that people in Helsinki primarily had good feelings about the games, with 75 per cent thinking the event was important for Helsinki and 72 per cent feeling the games had been a success. Two-thirds hoped Helsinki would apply for similar large sports events in future, too. Traffic jams were the greatest perceived drawback. Our article also uses the findings to draw a larger picture of the various dimensions and characteristics of a large modern sports event.

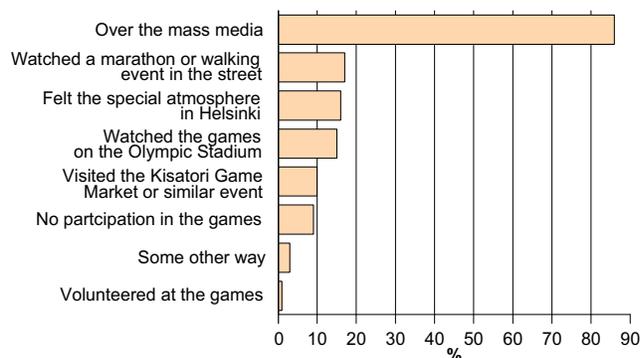
Our survey used structural telephone interviews to collect the data. A total of 1,000 interviews, of people aged 15 years or over, were conducted 16–22 August 2005 in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The survey and the questionnaire were planned by Mats Nylund and carried out by TNS Gallup Ltd. The questionnaire contained 25 questions or statements with ready-made answers. Two questions could be answered freely in one's own words. The methodological principle was that respondents should have the opportunity not to express an opinion and to answer "can't tell". To ensure statistical significance, the number of respondents in each of the municipalities Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa was calculated pro rata to the city's population figure. In addition, age and gender quotas were applied to the whole material. For this purpose, Helsinki City Urban Facts delivered the population figures needed to TNS Gallup Ltd.

Forms of participation

A large sports event today is not limited to the actual venue but filters out into the host city and even further beyond. This means the event may concern also people who do not go to watch the competitions. Hence, there are many forms of participation and audiences with different levels of interest and commitment. Figure 1 shows that according to our survey,

¹An evaluation of the economic impact and the place marketing effects is included in a research project led by Helsinki City Urban Fact's Urban Research Unit and the Finnish Ministry of Education. A comprehensive review of the findings of this project is to be published in spring 2006.

Figure 1. Participation in the World Championships among the inhabitants of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (%)



15 per cent of Helsinki residents, almost one in seven, went to see some of the events (CF. Kuokkanen and Nylund 2005).

Despite reasonably high ticket sales (339,000 over nine days), the World Championships were primarily a media event for most people in the Metropolitan Area. 86 per cent had followed the games over the mass media. This is a high figure considering only one-third of residents in the Metropolitan Area report that watching sports is important or fairly important to them (Nylund 2005). Again, the figure does not tell us how intentionally or actively people followed the championships.

So-called social watching may have been one important reason why some people watched the games on TV: you had to watch because someone else in the family wanted to. Knowing the massive media attention, we may also assume it was hard to avoid news about the championships. And yet 33 per cent of interviewees said they were very interested in them. This figure, too, is remarkably high considering the declining public interest in athletics in Finland (Liikkanen 2004:77).

The marathon and the walking events mainly took place outside the sports arena. The marathon route had been planned so as to cover a relatively small area in central Helsinki and to show spectators worldwide views of a "green and maritime" Helsinki

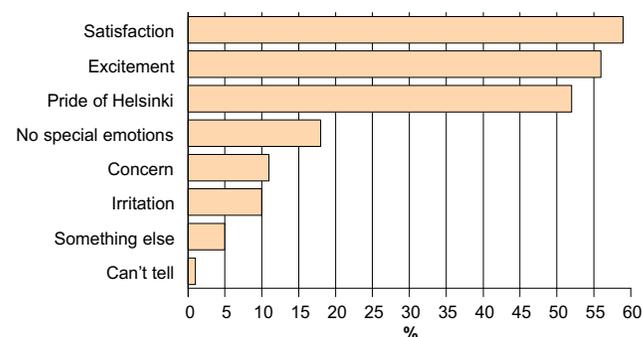
(Lehtonen 2005). From an urban studies point of view, these events were interesting also for the reason that anyone could catch a glimpse of the race somewhere along the course without having to pay for the entrance to the stadium, which was considered expensive (Meriluoto 2005). Thus, it was considerably easier to go and watch the marathon or walking events than the other events. And in fact, slightly more (17%) respondents reported they had watched some of these off-stadium events. One in ten had attended some event at the Championships Square outside the stadium.

In addition, the World Championships were seen and felt in the streetscape of Helsinki. 16 per cent of respondents reported they had felt the "special atmosphere" in Helsinki during the championships – whatever this may have meant to each and everyone personally. Nine per cent of respondents had paid no attention whatsoever to the championships.

Sporting mega-events and emotions

In modern society, sports and emotions are linked in quite a special way. Particularly at sports events, it is allowed to express strong feelings and often even expected both among athletes and audience (see Eriksson 2005). In this context, it is important to un-

Figure 2. Emotions caused by the World Championships, % of interviewees*



*more than one option could be chosen

derstand the social nature of emotions. Emotions are not always as “natural” or “personal” as we may sometimes think, but instead, are formed in social interaction – and there are also deliberate attempts to influence them. At the Olympic Stadium music, tempo and rhythm, as well as the large video screen, were used to rouse emotions among the audience and keep up the atmosphere. If a city hosts a large sports event, it may also arouse emotion with the inhabitants, as shown by Waitt (2003) in his study on the social effects of the Sydney Olympics. Figure 2 shows that the Helsinki IAAF Championships even affected some of those people in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area who did not go to the events. Positive emotions, such as satisfaction, excitement and pride of Helsinki were considerably more common than irritation or worry. 18 per cent were emotionally indifferent.

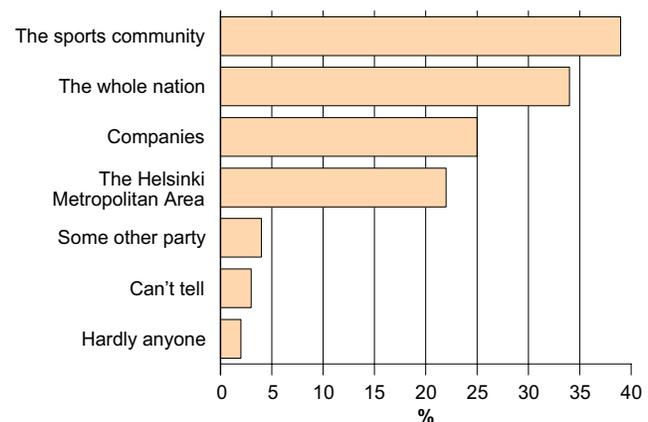
A remarkable thing with emotions, and with our findings overall, was that factors such as gender, age and socio-economic position caused relatively small variation. For example, we know that watching and taking an interest in sports is usually markedly more important to men than to women (while exercise is about as important to both, see e.g. Nylund 2005). There are, of course, differences between genders, but the foremost observation is, however, how similar the attitudes were. According to our findings, women were exactly as excited and proud of Helsinki as men. Satisfaction with the games, on the other hand, was slightly more common among men, the proportion being 65 per cent among men and 54 per cent among women. We found more significant differences when we carried out a separate study of people who exercised regularly and people exercised occasionally and, especially, people who did sports regularly versus occasionally. For these variables, of course, differences were expected. Among residents taking a regular interest in sports, 72 per cent found the games inspiring. Among occasional watchers, the proportion was 42 per cent, which is high if we com-

pare it with how much people in general follow sports (see previous paragraph). Irritation over the games was most common in Inner Helsinki (13%), i.e. closest to the Olympic Stadium. Yet among residents of Inner Helsinki, too, the overall impression of the championships was favourable.

Perceived advantages and disadvantages

The interviewees were also asked to characterise the championships in terms of pre-formulated as well as freely formulated answers. A great majority (81%) felt the games were a great sporting festival. Even more people (84%) considered them an occasion for ordinary sport viewing, rendering the championships no special status. Such characterisations as “big business” (57%) and “a kind of circus entertainment” (51%) probably indicate a somewhat critical attitude. These results also point at a change in sports culture. One in two interviewees thought the championships were an expression of urban culture, which may suggest that sports and other expressions of arts and culture are no longer seen as opposites, as sometimes used to be the case (see Aalto 2000:406).

Figure 3. Main beneficiaries of the World Championships according to percentages of interviewees*



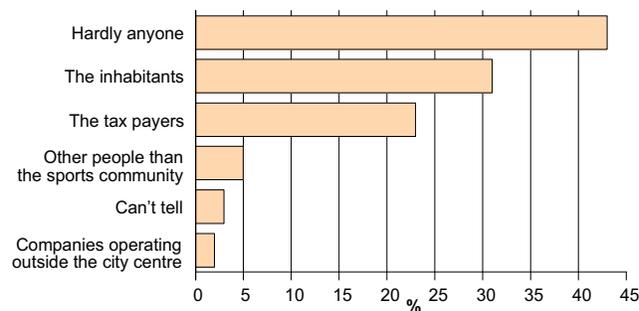
*more than one option could be chosen

Young people especially were inclined to regard the championships as urban culture.

The IAAF Championships were advertised as an event for “the whole society” (Kurki and Nylund 2005). Yet it is clear that the benefits and disadvantages of this partly tax-funded event do not befall everyone equally (see e.g. Cantell 1999:27). In our survey, respondents were asked to give their opinion about who benefited most from the championships (Figure 3). The advantage to the whole population is emphasised above all by those who follow sports regularly. The sports community were mentioned as the main beneficiary particularly by Helsinki residents, people with tertiary education, and women.

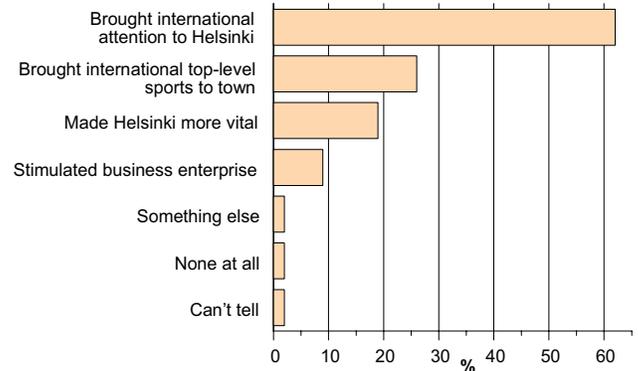
Most interviewees found that the championships hardly caused any harm to anyone (Figure 4). Yet one in three felt that they harmed people in some way and one in five thought that at least taxpayers suffered. However, in this context we should mention that within the sports community, too, there are differing opinions about the blessings of the championships. Former top runner Ari Paunonen, for example, has criticised both the championship project and the Finnish Athletics Association. According to him, the resources spent on the championships should have been invested at the grass root level, in the development of clubs and fieldwork (Jaakkonen 2005).

Figure 4. Main sufferers from the World Championships according to percentages of interviewees*



*more than one option can be chosen

Figure 5. Main beneficial effects of the World Championships according to percentages of interviewees



We should also note that mega events usually imply extensive public investment in the form of, for example, construction (Hall 2005). The Helsinki championships were carried out without larger construction projects. The biggest projects, amounting to a total of €10 million, were the partial covering of the spectator stand and some other renovation work on the Olympic Stadium. Furthermore, we could mention that the chief beneficiary of the games was not a Finnish group or organisation, but instead and undoubtedly the IAAF, which owns all the rights to the World Championships and which cashes the cheques for international TV broadcast agreements and sponsor contracts (Soini 2004:93, see also Tajima 2004).

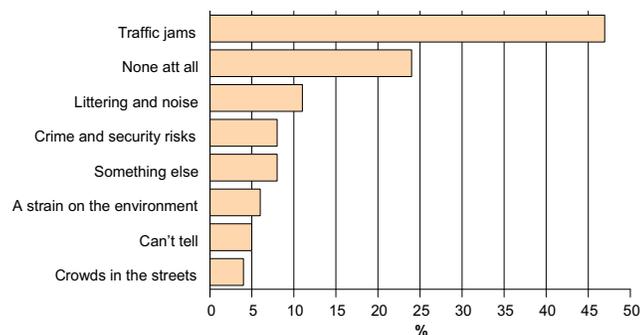
So, why bother to bid for events like the IAAF Championships? Figure 5 shows that citizens believe the greatest benefit of the championships to be the international publicity for Helsinki. Bringing top sports to Helsinki to animate the city was mentioned as an advantage clearly less often than publicity was, and even fewer believed that stimulation of the business community was the chief benefit to the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

Before the championships, too, international publicity was the most common reason for arranging the championships mentioned in the media (Kurki and Nylund 2005), and it has been an important argu-

ment for other large sports events, too (E.G. Soini 2004:94). The publicity advantage for the city is, however, a matter of conviction in the sense that it has seldom been measured – which would, indeed, be difficult to do with any accuracy. For the Helsinki championships, Helsinki City Urban Facts analysed the coverage in leading British, German, US, Swedish, Russian and Japanese newspapers. We found that the publicity attributable to the championships can be regarded as considerable, but the newspapers reported almost uniquely on the sports events, leaving Helsinki as a city to very limited attention (Nylund et al. 2005).

Clearly the greatest perceived disadvantage was unsmooth traffic and traffic jams (Figure 6). Littering and noise, strain on the environment, and crowds in the streets were mentioned more seldom. Crime and insecurity were seldom mentioned, too, although the media frequently mentioned this aspect, including the threat of terrorism. One in four persons thought the championships did no harm at all.

Figure 6. Main disadvantages of the World Championships according to percentages of interviewees



Discussion

Judging from our interviews, the overall attitudes towards the championships among people in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area seem quite favourable. If we consider the real advantages of the championships, such as publicity, we may even ask whether people's assessment of the importance of the games was not too optimistic. And how much were attitudes influenced by the favourable media coverage beforehand (see Kurki and Nylund 2005)? On the other hand we may note that the championships were perceived equally favourably, sometimes even more favourably outside the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (Kuokkanen and Nylund 2005).

When assessing the social impact of the championships a crucial aspect is of course how permanent these effects finally turn out to be. What happens, for example, six months after the circus has left town? Foreign newspapers described Finns as a nation of athletics fans. And yet as we saw earlier, the popularity of athletics has slowly been declining in Finland. Would the World Championships have contributed to reverse this trend, or would any attempt of that kind have been in vain?

Also, it is important to realise that the championships were not only about sports. In fact, preliminary results from face-to-face interviews conducted at the Championship Square support the hypothesis that the audience took an interest in the World Championships primarily as an event, and only secondarily as an athletics competition. This would indicate, among other things, that there are several ways of creating attractive urban sporting events. Obviously, one way is to bid for global mega-events, such as the IAAF World Championships. Another way, arguably important too, is to promote local, less institutionalised, and perhaps even seemingly weird, initiatives on how to combine sports and other forms of urban life.

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