

9

The Role of Events for Winter Sport Tourism

Spotlight: Skiing African-American style

Darryl Joseph, member of the Jazz Ma Tazz Ski Club, New Orleans, enjoying the National Brotherhood of Skiers Annual Summit

The scene: a brand new on hill restaurant and après ski facility with Prosecco patio heated by trendy tabletop fire-pits. The clientele: exuberant skiers and snowboarders relaxing in designer gear, sampling appetizers, quaffing beer and Italian champers, dancing exuberantly to professional DJ music. Sounds like a chi-chi ski resort anywhere in the world, possibly Europe with such a heady level of animation. But it was actually Elk Camp at Aspen Snowmass in February 2013 when the National Brotherhood of Skiers (NBS) brought high-spirited African American attitude to the trendy town's newest venue.



The fun-loving fanfare was all to celebrate the 40th Anniversary Summit of the NBS, established back in 1973 when black skiing was truly a minority sport. Contradicting typical skiing ethnic demographics for the week, the 3,000-strong cohort of black skiers and snowboarders from all over America held court on the snow-deluged slopes of Snowmass, in the chic shops and in hotels, condominiums and private homes dotting the extensive ski in/out resort. Taking a sabbatical from Mammoth, Big Bear and Tahoe were 11 Californian clubs including the All Seasons Ski Club, Oakland; Camellia City Ski Club, Sacramento; Fire and Ice Ski from San José; Snowbusters from Pasadena; and Winter Fox and Bladerunners from Los Angeles.

Lenore Benoit, membership director for Winter Fox Ski Association based in LA, joined the club after moving from New York in 1990. "One of the ladies at my new company befriended me and told me about Winter Fox. She said it was a great way to meet people as well as learn

to ski," said Benoit. She enjoys the club's year-round activities including camping, house boat trips, watersports, river rafting, concerts, wine tastings and, of course, several ski trips. "I've never been to Aspen so it is just an awesome experience to come here and see the beauty and the amazing runs," she said. The social scene is particularly important to her: "Each trip I get to see people I haven't seen for a while. They have become like family through the NBS. We meet skiing and then stay in touch, it's just a beautiful thing."

Fellow Fox, Ida Cochrane is a past president of the club and member since 1980. A veteran with the NBS, she has seen numbers fluctuate at yearly summits which reached a peak at Vail in 1993 when there were 4,000 registrants and another 2,000 hangers-on - every summit has its 'renegades', non-members who tag along for the party. Averaging 20 ski days per season, Cochrane meets up with friends from all over the States at NBS events including ski buddy, Georgia Odom who moved to Texarkana, Texas, but re-connects annually under the Winter Fox banner: "I have never missed a season, I'm afraid if I stop I'll never start again," she said at the mid-week picnic on the piste. "My motto is as long as I can walk, I can ski."

Odom has skied the Italian, French, Austrian and Swiss Alps as well as resorts from New Mexico to Canada. After taking instruction courses in North America, Italy and France, she is an accomplished skier who feels a resurgence of youth during every Summit. "I also join in with all the happy hours and really enjoy myself - you would think I was 30 years old," she said. After skiing Aspen Snowmass six times, it had become her firm favorite resort: "It's easy to get to and the lodging is mostly ski in/out. You don't need a car and everything is walkable. And the runs are wide open," she enthused.

The whole week of the NBS Summit, the party pulse was so persuasive that it made Snowmass locals and other tourists eager to join in the après action. "I worked security one night and saw so many non-members who wanted to join in all the fun," said Darryl Joseph, a member of the Jazz Ma Tazz ski club from New Orleans. "The resort staff were dancing more than us!" NBS sponsors Diageo had brought DJ Ike T and DJ B-Sharp from New Orleans to emcee the week's activities. Apart from the après ski, Joseph's main focus on NBS trips is the sport: "I am back on skis after surgery. I've been skiing three years and injury hasn't stopped me. I think Snowmass is wonderful, very welcoming, the mountain is great and the weather has been fantastic," he said. But it was the strength in numbers that was particularly gratifying for him. "When I ski outside the organization I don't see many African Americans. So it's great that once or twice a year I get to see so many African Americans enjoying skiing together," he said.

Original founders, Ben Finley and Arthur Clay were center stage that week, presiding over the opulent opening ceremony on the Westin Snowmass patio. Clay has been skiing since 1965 when he was often the only black skier on the slopes. Bringing together 350 skiers from 13 black ski clubs for the first NBS summit in Aspen, he has since helped develop the organization to encompass 60 clubs from 43 cities over 25 states. "It's a big family reunion," said Clay, who had to overcome considerable trial and tribulation to keep the NBS alive. "A lot of people have told me over the years you can't do this. But it is do-able although there's a lot of administration."

Featuring team colors and cheers, dances, prayers, national anthem, torchlight ski and fireworks, the opening ceremony heralded a host of diverse on and off snow activities through-

out the week. As well as ski and snowboard races, piste picnics, happy hours, concerts and comedy, there were also special events for tag-along non-skiers including a movie screening, gospel fest and shopping spree.

So many people assume that African Americans don't ski and it's true they are still a minority in winter sports. But just like every other recreational and professional sport, as black populations climb the economic ladder, so black athletes are gradually infiltrating every winter sport discipline and it won't be too long before they are topping the podium at Olympic and World Cup events.

The NBS has already sent skiers to the U.S. National Championships, the Winter Paralympics and the Vancouver and Sochi Olympics. With over 3,000 members, the non-profit, volunteer-run association is one of the largest ski organizations within the industry. The Summit itself is the largest gathering of skiers and riders among all U.S. ski conventions. Although serious ski-related issues are addressed (such as introducing the sport to underprivileged inner city youth), it is all about skiing, snowboarding and socializing for most participants.

Sources: Both writers attended the 40th Anniversary Summit and interviewed the participants in February 2013

The growth of events

Events play a significant role in today's society, and for tourism destinations they are important due to their tourist, social and cultural functions (Getz, 2007), as well as their role in local and regional development (Wood, 2005). First and foremost, events are a great anchor for attracting tourism, providing tourists with a prime opportunity to get to know the local culture and experience the essence of the place. During an event, visitors have a unique chance to interact with the local community, gaining a deeper experience of the ambience, customs and local culture. Events can also help in improving a place's image, creating a window for positive media coverage. Finally, for the residents themselves, events are a unique occasion to celebrate the local culture and interact within the community – you can see examples of this in the opening Spotlight above.

According to Jackson (2013), three industries in particular are shaping the growth of the events sector (see Figure 9.1). Firstly, the hospitality industry - be it hotels, restaurants or venues - has viewed events as a way of encouraging new clientele or increasing the yield of existing customers. This is the case for the World Ski and Snowboard Festival held in Whistler, Canada every April in order to increase occupancy rates at the end of the winter season. Hotel rooms are fully booked during the event, which spans two weekends in order to maximize occupancy rates.

Secondly, tourism industry stakeholders, like DMOs, local authorities or trade associations, have turned to events as a means of either attracting tourists or enhancing the stay of visitors. Turkey is an interesting example of a country

planning to attract winter sports events in order to develop and promote its winter tourism product. “Turkey has more than 3,000 mountains, but we aren’t using them to their full potential,” said Erol Yazar, Chairman of the Turkish Ski Federation (TSF) (Mollman, 2014). In February 2015, one of Turkey’s developed ski areas at Kayseri hosted the Snowboard European Cup. But Turkey is aiming for even more events and is willing to invest 48 billion Euros over the next 12 years to achieve its goals. The federation is planning to bid for the organization of the 2026 Winter Olympics, despite five failed Summer Olympic bids. The eastern province of Erzurum is the current superstar in the country’s winter sport circuit having already hosted the 2011 Winter Universiade, as well as being named the official organizer of the Winter European Olympic Youth Festival in 2019. TSF Deputy Secretary, Necati Kaplan said: “Our goal is to have four million skiers in Turkey, either professional or recreational, within twelve years. This, and a boost in winter sports tourism, is going to happen organically, through the creation of facilities across the nation.” (Mollman, 2014).

Finally, marketing and public relations practitioners are using events as an opportunity to achieve their objectives. The sponsorship activities of Red Bull, profiled later in this chapter, are a good example, and other brands associated with winter sports events mentioned in this chapter include Swatch, The North Face, ESPN and BMW.

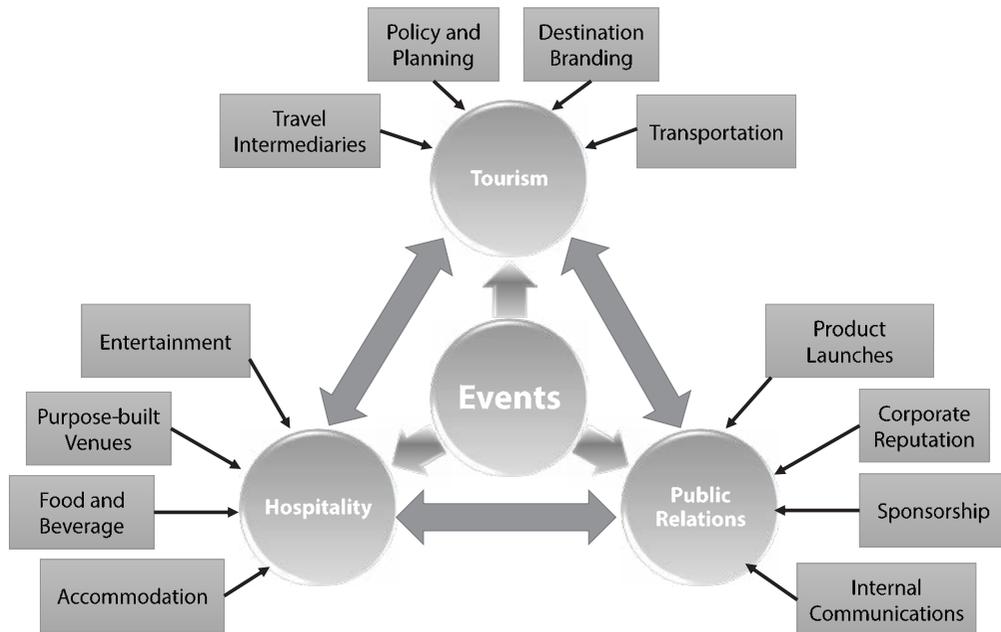


Figure 9.1: Three industries shaping the growth of events (Source: Adapted from Jackson, 2013, p. 7)