Moving Off Campus: An Examination of NCAA Division I College Football Neutral-Site Games

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Facilities/Events - Event Marketing (College Sport)  
Poster  
Abstract 2017-110  
Friday, June 2, 2017  
10:15 AM  
Room: Sopris

“College football’s biggest ever.” That was the name given to the 2016 meeting between the University of Tennessee (UT) and Virginia Tech (VT) at Bristol Motor Speedway, which drew a college football record crowd of 156,990 fans (Moriarty, 2016). While the game was unique in its own right, it was just the latest in a trend of NCAA Division I college football games that have moved away from college campuses and to destinations ranging from Green Bay, Wisconsin, to Sydney, Australia. In 2016, the number of neutral-site games ballooned to 18 (NCAA.com, 2016), compared to just 10 a decade prior (Adjusted Stats.com, 2016).

Reasons for these neutral-site games include schools utilizing the national exposure for recruiting as well as the revenue the games generate for their athletic departments (Solomon, 2014). The University of Alabama, for example, is scheduled to make an average of $4 million for three neutral-site games played from 2015-17. This amount of revenue is roughly double the amount of money the school would generate if it instead played home-and-home games at campus sites over the same time period (Shuttles, 2015). The athletic departments clearly benefit financially from these games but fans also benefit from the games as they have the opportunity to travel to a unique location for a college football game. This study aims to examine the experiences of fans traveling to these destinations, and specifically these fans’ experiences and outcomes from traveling to the games.

Crompton (1979) identified novelty as a type of cultural motivation for tourism. The idea of experiencing new things in new places serves as a motive for many people to travel to certain destinations. Many scholars have investigated tourism using novelty-seeking theory (e.g., Bello & Etzel, 1985; Cohen, 1979; Jang & Feng, 2007). Jang and Feng (2007) highlighted the role novelty-seeking plays in individuals’ travel decisions as individuals vary in their desires for novelty-seeking and the level of novelty provided is unique to each destination. In their study of college football tourists, Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak (2003) suggested that fans may be more motivated to attend nonconference games due to the novelty of these destinations. With the number of high profile nonconference games increasing in recent years – many of these played at neutral sites – more research is needed on fans’ experiences of these games. Based upon this, the current study is constructed on the following research questions:

RQ1: What leisure activities do fans engage in while traveling to neutral-site college football games?
RQ2: What are the outcomes of these travel experiences?

While 18 neutral-site games were played in 2016, this study was specifically interested in novelty games. The research team conceptualized a novelty game as a game played at a location that the school had either never or not recently played (10 years). Therefore, annual neutral-site games such as the University of Florida and the University of Georgia in Jacksonville, Florida, were not included in the study. As a result of this and other similar games’ exclusion, four novelty games were included in the study. Two of these games were played internationally (the University of California vs. the University of Hawaii in Sydney, Australia; and Georgia Tech vs. Boston College in Dublin, Ireland) and two were played domestically (Louisiana State University (LSU) vs. the University of Wisconsin in Green Bay, Wisconsin; and UT vs. VT).

Data collection for this study is ongoing, and is occurring utilizing two methods. First, the research team has been collecting and analyzing traveling fan posts on Twitter. The research team utilized the official game hashtag as well as other popular hashtags for each school (i.e., “Geaux Tigers” for LSU and “GoBigOrange” for UT). In addition, specialty hashtags such as “CalBearsInSydney” were also utilized. Tweets using these hashtags were reviewed to determine if they were posted by fans traveling to the games, and upon meeting this qualification, were analyzed separately by both members of the research team to examine fans’ leisure activities. This method was utilized so that the research team could examine leisure activities of traveling fans, addressing the second research question.
second method of data collection occurred through solicitation of participants through Twitter. Fans who posted about their experiences traveling to one of the selected games were sent a link to an online survey consisting of eight open-ended questions. These questions are designed to learn traveler motives, details of leisure activities while traveling to their respective games, and the outcomes of these travel experiences. While data collection is ongoing, the goal is to collect between 20 and 30 total responses.

Themes from the tweets included landmarks (i.e., sport or other tourist destinations) visited en route to or from the game location, images of game day attire packed in luggage, and transportation-related photos. These themes, consisting of both text and images, were utilized to help create the open-ended survey questions to learn more about the novelty experience of these neutral site college football games. The data collected from these tweets and surveys will exhibit the leisure activities of fans traveling to these neutral-site games and their experiences and outcomes of traveling. From a theoretical standpoint, the results will add to the knowledge of the growing sport tourism area of study, building off the work of Gibson et al. (2003) and others. With novelty games becoming more popular, this study's results will also be of practical significance, providing schools with information regarding their fans' experiences and outcomes. In addition, with novelty games gaining popularity in other sports including the National Hockey League and National Football League, the results will provide a foundation for future research in other contexts.