

# **Sports Tourism: Marketing Ireland's Best Kept Secret – The Gaelic Athletic Association**



ADRIAN DEVINE \*  
FRANCES DEVINE \*

## **ABSTRACT**

**D**estination marketing has assumed heightened importance in the tourism industry as destinations are confronted with increasing competition from new and emerging countries. Kolter et al. (1993) employ the term 'place wars' to describe the cut-throat nature of modern tourism. Consumer profiles and preferences are constantly changing and this has implications for Irish tourism. In terms of development, the tourism industries in both the North and South of Ireland have reached a crossroads and to remain competitive they must diversify their product.

This paper examines the opportunities that exist for the island of Ireland in one of the world's fastest growing niche markets: sports tourism. The first section provides an update on Ireland's tourism performance and establishes the need for diversification and niche marketing. The second section analyses the sport tourism market from an Irish perspective and stresses the importance of promoting local sport as part of both the sports tourism portfolio in its own right and its contribution to the cultural tourism product.

The paper then deals specifically with the tourism potential of Gaelic Games and how they could be developed into an attractive and marketable tourism product. In order to establish whether there

---

\* *University of Ulster, Coleraine campus (Portrush Site)*

is a latent demand for Gaelic Games a survey was carried out on a sample of overseas visitors and the results are discussed in the paper. Given the positive response to the questionnaire the final section of this paper focuses on strategies that could be adopted by the GAA, Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to manipulate the cornerstone of marketing – the 4-P's – to develop, package, and promote Gaelic Games as a sports tourism product.

**Key Words:** Sports Tourism; Culture; Diversification; Product Development and Marketing.

### INTRODUCTION

In January 2002 Tourism Ireland, the new organisation responsible for marketing the island of Ireland overseas as a holiday destination, became fully operational. The company's primary role is to identify, anticipate and stimulate consumer demand for holidaying on the island of Ireland (Tourism Ireland, 2005). As a cross border initiative under the Good Friday Agreement (1998), the two national tourism organisations – the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Fáilte Ireland – work closely with Tourism Ireland, although it is important to note that both have retained their independence when it comes to product development and marketing domestic tourism in their respective countries.

The performance of Tourism Ireland can be gauged on the most recent tourism figures which show 2003 to be a record year with Ireland attracting 7.4 million overseas visitors. Tourism Ireland aims to increase this figure to nine million by 2008 (Tourism Ireland, 2005). This is an ambitious target given the recent trends in the international tourism market.

This paper examines the opportunities that exist for the island of Ireland in one of the world's fastest growing niche markets: sports tourism. A survey was carried out on a sample of overseas visitors to determine their awareness of the GAA. Given the positive response to the questionnaire the final section focuses on strategies that could be adopted by the GAA, Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to develop Gaelic Games into an attractive and marketable tourism product.

### **Irish Tourism in Transition**

Given its turbulent past it is not surprising that tourism in Northern Ireland is now in a transition phase. After three decades of civil war, the industry has the opportunity to reap the rewards of peace. 'But peace alone will not guarantee tourism growth' (Devine & Devine, 2004: 174). The 'Troubles' resulted in a small tourism base in terms of receipts and visitors and unsuitable tourist development because of a poor economic and social image and a lack of suitable infrastructure (Wilson et al., 1997). Much work is needed if Northern Ireland is to make up for what Baum (1995) referred to as the 'lost years' in tourism development.

The tourism industry in the Republic of Ireland has also reached a crossroads. 'The sustained sharp growth of Irish tourism throughout the 1990s is a well-documented success story' (Fáilte Ireland, 2005). In recent years however the operating environment for tourism business has become more turbulent and challenging. Market developments, both internationally and domestically, have given rise to a much more competitive environment compared with that which existed less than a decade ago.

The Republic of Ireland was extremely price competitive in the 1990s due to favourable exchange rates and a comparatively low inflation rate. In more recent years however, Irish tourism has been operating in a relatively high cost environment. For both domestic and overseas consumers affordability and value for money are increasingly important. Greater price transparency associated with the euro and the comparatively high level of inflation in Ireland's service sector has filtered through to tourists, who report declining satisfaction with value for money (Fáilte Ireland, 2005).

Another contentious issue for tourism in the Republic of Ireland is the growing concern that the spontaneity of the traditional welcome may be diminishing in a more pressurised Ireland. In terms of visitor trends, tourism professionals should also be worried about the decline in the length of the stay of overseas visitors. Statistics also show that holidaymakers to Ireland are becoming less likely to engage in touring, resulting in the benefits of tourism becoming increasingly concentrated in 'tourism honeypot areas', most notably Dublin and the East Region (Tourism Ireland 2005).

### **Diversification and Niche Marketing**

'The competitive set of destinations in which tourism on the island of Ireland now operates is growing and competition for market share has intensified' (Tourism Ireland, 2005). Advances in transport and the emergence of new markets, particularly in the Asia Pacific region and Eastern Europe, means that today's tourists are spoilt for choice and, as a result, are more selective, demanding and discerning. Considering its temperate climate and location on the periphery of Western Europe, the island of Ireland must differentiate its tourism product through diversification and the development of niche markets.

'As far as the range and quality of products are concerned, we must adapt, improve and develop existing and new high-quality products so that Ireland can improve its appeal to existing and emerging consumers and provide a consistently high-quality tourism experience' (Tourism Ireland, 2005). Tourism Ireland has committed €200 million to its marketing programme for the next three years and both Fáilte Ireland and the NITB have targeted key niche markets, including business tourism, heritage/culture tourism, rural tourism and education tourism. The focus of this paper here on in is on another niche with potential for further development in Ireland: 'sports tourism'.

### **Sports Tourism**

The concept of sports tourism is problematic due to it resulting from a fusion of two separate terms, both of which are complex in their own right (Weed & Bull, 2004). As a result, attempts to articulate the domain of sports tourism have resulted in a proliferation of definitions. Standeven and De Knop (1999: 12) define sports tourism as: 'All forms of active and passive involvement in sporting activity, participated in casually or in an organised way for non-commercial or business/commercial reasons, that necessitate travel away from home and work locality'. Another frequently used definition of sports tourism is travel to play sports (active sports tourism), travel to watch sports (event sports tourism) and travel to visit or venerate famous sports-related attractions (nostalgia sports tourism) (Delpy, 1998).

Regardless of how sports tourism is defined, it is a rapidly growing market that represents a huge revenue generator at local, national

and international level. Sports facilities and events are now being used by a considerable number of tour operators, accommodation providers and destinations to 'add value' to their tourism offering (Standeven & De Knop, 1999). In 2000 a report based on a survey conducted by *SportsTravel* magazine estimated that sports travel in the USA is worth at least US\$118.3 billion per year (Higham, 2005). In 2001 a total of 1.8 million overseas visitors to the UK either watched a sporting event or participated in amateur sport during their stay. This is approximately 8 per cent of the total of 22.8 million overseas visitors to the UK in 2001. These visitors spent £1.4 billion during their stay, some 12 per cent of total spending of all overseas visitors (British Tourist Authority, 2003).

Several prominent trends in western societies serve to explain the modern phenomenon of sport-related travel. These include increasing participation in sport, interest in health and fitness and extended active and social participation in sports into middle age and beyond (Glyptis, 1989). According to Jackson et al. (2001) these trends have been driven by changing social attitudes and values and changing economic and political circumstances. They have also been facilitated by technological advances, such as satellite television broadcasting, that have influenced what Standeven and De Knopp (1999) refer to as the 'sportification of society'.

### **An Overview of Sports Tourism in Ireland**

In its simplest form 'sports tourism' involves sport as part of a general holiday undertaken on a casual, informal basis and this has been part of holidaymaking for many years. However, there is growing evidence to show that sport is now seen as a more important part of the general holiday, if not the most important part, and as a result many resorts, destinations and countries are specifically promoting sporting opportunities. Malaysia, China, Korea, Nepal, Barbados, Brunei, USA, Portugal and Australia are examples of countries that have incorporated sport into their national marketing plans.

#### *Northern Ireland*

In 1998 the Northern Ireland Tourist Board identified walking, cycling, angling, equestrianism and golf as key products which

would attract the more active visitor (NITB, 1999). Walking and cycling product marketing groups were established in 1999 and the NITB assisted in the development of two long distance coast-to-coast cycling routes and the launch of the Waymarked Ways Network. The angling and equestrian product marketing groups have also been active, producing product literature and organising familiarisation trips for tour operators and journalists. The golf product continues to be generically marketed and promoted by the NITB at international specialist shows and at major golf tournaments with the Golfers Passport Scheme now covering forty-five golf courses offering discounted fees. In 2001 Northern Ireland was awarded the title of 'Established Golf Destination of the Year' by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators.

The fact that five key activities have been identified and developed would suggest that the NITB does recognise the benefits that can be gained from the sport-tourism link. Yet, in terms of promotion and product development, it would seem that the NITB has failed to acknowledge that the sports tourist may be either participative or non-participative (Glyptis, 1982). In 2001 1.2 million visitors to the UK watched a sporting event, spending £832 million (British Tourist Authority, 2003), yet the only spectator sport that is mentioned on the NITB website is ice hockey! It could be argued that the NITB is naive and unaware of the benefits of attracting spectators to watch sport, but this is not the case as the NITB has supported a wide range of national and international events such as the North West 200 Motor Bike Weekend and the Irish Masters Golf Tournament. As with many issues relating to Northern Ireland, the reason for the NITB's reluctance to promote local spectator sports as part of the tourism product lies deep-rooted in the country's troubled political past.

Sport in Northern Ireland is used as an expression of cultural identity and the type of sports people participate in and the teams they support usually reflect their community background and perceived political and cultural allegiances (McGingley et al., 1998). Catholics are more likely to participate in sports which celebrate the Irish tradition (Gaelic Games) whilst Protestants are more likely to engage in sports which celebrate the British tradition (soccer, rugby, hockey and cricket). A survey commissioned by the

Northern Ireland Sports Council (1999) revealed that 67 per cent of people in Northern Ireland believe that sectarianism is rife in sport within the province. Almost two thirds of respondents (63 per cent) either 'agreed' or strongly agreed' that religious tension was associated with sport in Northern Ireland, whilst 66 per cent believed sport was troubled with spectator violence.

As a result of this link between sport and politics public bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Sports Council and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, found themselves in a very precarious situation, as they had to be very careful not to be seen as biased towards one particular sport.

Like the country in general, sport in Northern Ireland has benefited from the peace process. The nationalist and unionist communities are beginning to accept each other's culture, of which sport is an integral part. 'There appears to be a diminution of sectarianism in the sporting arena' (Tonge, 2005: 209). It could therefore be argued that given the more peaceful climate, the NITB and Tourism Ireland Limited are now in a stronger position to promote local sports without being accused of political bias.

### *The Republic of Ireland*

Fáilte Ireland, like its Northern counterpart, has developed and promoted active pursuits such as walking, cycling, angling, golf and equestrianism to great effect. In terms of sports tourism in the Republic of Ireland however, one landmark decision deserves special mention. In January 2000 the Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation launched the International Sports Tourism Initiative. The Minister's objective for the Initiative was 'to accelerate the building of Ireland's international reputation as a sports venue and, consequently, to increase sports-related tourism' (International Sport Advisory Group, 2001: 5). The Irish Government awarded €55.3 million to the project. Since 2000 it has sponsored a wide range of events, the most notable being the Special Olympics World Summer Games, Rugby's Heineken European Cup Final, the European Eventing Championship and the Smurfit European Open Golf.

Weiler and Hall (1992) argue that hallmark events are image builders of modern tourism, while Waitt (1999) suggests that the Olympic Games, as a spectacle, is the ultimate tourist attraction.

Although Ireland will not be bidding for the Olympics in 2016 the Sports Tourism Unit has recently decided to concentrate more on larger sporting events such as the Ryder Cup, which Ireland will host in 2006. Although there are potential economic, social and cultural benefits to be gained from staging large sports events (DCMS, 2002), there are also risks (Hudson, 2003). Higham (2005) would argue that the benefits of mega-event sport tourism have been oversold and the costs under-reported. Ritchie et al. (2004) recommend that countries involved in sports tourism should offer the tourist a range of sporting events, which should vary in size. Getz (2003) also refers to a 'balanced portfolio of events' that should include local sports.

### **The Tourism Potential of Local Sport on the Island of Ireland**

Before Fáilte Ireland and the NITB decide to include sport as part of their sports tourism portfolio they must identify what local sports could offer the tourist. The non-active element of sports tourism in particular may be a lucrative market but is also very competitive. In order to encourage the overseas visitor to come and watch a sporting event it must offer the tourist at least one of the following:

1. Excitement
2. Sporting excellence
3. A unique experience (Devine & Devine, 2004)

Hockey and cricket remain minority sports in Ireland. Crowds are small and the standard at both club and international level is rather poor compared to some countries. Since turning professional the standard of local rugby has improved and this was reflected in Ulster's and Munster's performance in the European Cup in 1999 and 2006 respectively and again in Ireland's favourite tag for the 2005 Six Nations. Unfortunately this success has not increased interest at club level. Consequently, the atmosphere at club matches is rather subdued compared to rugby stadiums in other parts of the British Isles. There are semi-professional soccer leagues in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland but the standard compared to the English and Scottish professional leagues is very poor



and this is reflected in the atmosphere and attendance at local games. In 2004 the Northern Ireland soccer team had the misfortune of setting a new world record in international football by not scoring a goal in 1298 minutes of play! This has certainly not helped the sport at grass roots level.

Despite the fact that it is still amateur the most professionally organised sport in Ireland is Gaelic Games. There are a number of reasons why Gaelic Games would appeal to the overseas visitor as a sports tourism event. The first is the sheer size and scale of the sport in Ireland. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is dedicated to promoting the games of Gaelic football, hurling, handball, rounders and camogie. Gaelic football is not only the most popular Gaelic sport but also the most popular sport in Ireland. At the elite level there is an inter-county league and championship. In 2003 the average attendance at the Ulster Gaelic Football championship game was 22,594 (Ulster Football Championship, 2004). According to Hargraves (1994), team sports such as soccer and rugby still embody masculine ideals and women are largely excluded from participating in these sports either as players or spectators. The GAA could not be accused of being sexist with a vibrant camogie and ladies football league and championship.

As a spectacle, Gaelic football embodies the type of fast-paced, skilled high scoring events that any sports fan will respond to. Local fans are passionate about their sport and at both club and elite matches there is intense rivalry that makes for an electric atmosphere. There is, however, a strong link between the Catholic Church and Gaelic games which ensures that there is a family atmosphere at matches and crowd control and hooliganism have never been an issue.

'Tourists are motivated by the search for the authentic' (MacCannell, 1976). Gaelic football is something that is unique to the island of Ireland and therefore should add value to the tourism offering. Besides seeking escape and a break in their daily routines, tourists also use sport as a means of relaxation and as an opportunity to discover something new. Weed and Bull (2004) refer to 'curiosity' spectators who are a feature at many league matches in sports such as American football and baseball in the USA, korfbal in the Netherlands and Australian Rules football in Australia.

Reeves (2000) and Train (1994) found that a significant group of tourists, mostly families with children, attend a sporting event while on holiday because it provided a unique and novel experience. Kick-boxing in Thailand, martial arts in Japan and bullfighting in Spain are examples of sport associated with a particular country and there is no reason why Gaelic football should not be promoted in a similar way in Ireland.

The association between a specific sport and a particular destination may be based on a variety of factors, the most powerful according to Hinch and Higham (2004) is the role that a given sport has played in a nation's heritage. The GAA was set up in the nineteenth century to nurture a sense of Irish identity and, although twenty-first century Ireland would be virtually unrecognisable to its founders, the local GAA club is still at the heart of the Irish community. It is not just a form of recreation but an expression of the people and their culture.

The commitment and the passion of the GAA members is not just confined to sport as they also promote the Irish language, music and dance. The Official Guide of the GAA Rule 4 states that: 'The Association shall actively support the Irish language, traditional Irish dancing, music, song and other aspects of Irish culture' (GAA, 2004). Through an organisation called Scór, which means 'large gathering' in Irish, the GAA runs talent competitions at various venues around the country. Although the Scór was introduced by the GAA in the late 1960s to encourage club members to enjoy other aspects of Irish culture, competitions are not exclusive to GAA members and therefore have tourism potential.

The appeal and reputation of Gaelic Games are spreading throughout the world. The GAA and the Australian Rules Association, for example, have organised an International Rules series combining the rules of the two sports which encourages fans from both countries to travel with the national team. Likewise in 2004, in an attempt to promote their sport internationally, the final of the inter-provincial football championship was played in Paris and the GAA arranged for the All-Stars teams of 2003 and 2004 to play an exhibition match in Hong Kong.

Technological advances and the wider scope of TV and radio communications, including the GAA's new website, allow Irish immigrants to watch inter-county matches and keep up to date with the latest club results. In many cases Gaelic Games serve as a tangible link with home for those who might otherwise drift away from their Irish heritage as they build lives in other countries and cultures. According to Getz (1997), much spectator tourism involves travel to watch a family member or friend compete. An old club playing in the county final or a brother or sister representing the county in a provincial final may be enough to persuade an expatriate to holiday in Ireland. There has been a tendency in the wider tourism literature to underplay the importance of the Visiting Friends and Relatives market (VFR), but the reality in Ireland is that it represents a large proportion of total visitors.

Weed and Bull (2004) have suggested that some people who visit a sporting event while on holiday may fall into the category of 'associated experience sports tourist'. Their primary motivation for participation/spectating relates to some aspect of the experience other than the activity itself. In the case of Gaelic Games overseas visitors to Ireland may be attracted to the social aspect of the game. The 'warm welcome' and the 'craic' which the Irish are so famous for is never more prevalent than in the local GAA club after the match and unlike some sports in Ireland, such as golf and rugby, access is not restricted to members.

#### TESTING THE DEMAND FOR GAELIC GAMES

In order to determine the appeal and reputation of the GAA among tourists to Ireland a survey was conducted during the peak tourism months of June, July and August 2004. The study involved direct contact with overseas visitors at four different types of venue: The Giant's Causeway in County Antrim; Cookstown Tourist Information Centre, County Tyrone; Mount Errigal Hotel, Letterkenny, County Donegal; and Hillrest Youth Hostel, Bushmills, County Derry.

Tourists were invited to participate on a voluntary basis in the self-completion of a questionnaire. The response was excellent. Four hundred and fourteen questionnaires were completed.

### **General Characteristics of the Respondents**

Of the 414 respondents 50.7 per cent were male and 49.3 per cent female. Almost 45 per cent of the respondents were aged 20–29, 25.3 per cent fell within the age group of 30–49, 15.1 per cent were 50 years plus and the remainder were 16–19. The majority of the respondents were European: 55.8 per cent. Other nationalities included British at 15.2 per cent and visitors from the Americas and Australia at 29 per cent. The main purpose of visiting Ireland was for a holiday (Table 1.6).

### **Awareness of the GAA**

Only a disappointing 12.3 per cent of the respondents stated that they were familiar with the GAA and the activities it organised (Table 1.1). British and American visitors were more aware of Gaelic Games than Australians, which was surprising considering the media attention surrounding the International Rules series between Ireland and Australia (Table 1.2).

Table 1.3 highlights the tourism potential of Gaelic Games with 68.8 per cent of respondents interested in either playing or watching a sport that is unique to the island of Ireland. 51 per cent of the sample would prefer to watch while 11 per cent would want to participate (Table 1.4).

Similar to what Gibson et al. (2002) found in his analysis of college football in the USA, an increasing number of females were including sport in their holiday itinerary either to watch (52 per cent) or participate (20 per cent) (see Table 1.5). It is also interesting to note that, although they represent a relatively small proportion of this study, 100 per cent of the business tourists surveyed stated that they would like to watch a Gaelic football or hurling match during their stay (Table 1.6).

Questions 11 and 12 of the questionnaire referred to the social-cultural dimension of the GAA – the Scór. An impressive 89.8 per cent

**Table 1.1: Awareness of GAA**

<b>Aware of GAA</b>	<b>Number (n=414)</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
Yes	51	12.3
No	363	87.7

Table 1.2: Nationality and Awareness of GAA

		What is your Nationality?				Total
		British	European	American	Canadian/ Australian	
Are you aware of the GAA	YES	29.4	47.1	17.6	5.9	100
	% within Are you aware of the GAA % within Nationality	23.8	10.4	27.3	3.4	12.3
	NO	13.2	57.0	6.6	23.1	100
	% within Are you aware of the GAA % within Nationality	76.2	89.6	72.7	96.6	87.7
Total	% within Are you aware of the GAA	15.2	55.8	8.0	21.0	100
	% within Nationality	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 1.3: Respondents Interested in Playing or Watching a Sport Unique to the Island of Ireland**

<b>Interested in Playing or Watching a Sport</b>	<b>Number (n=414)</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
Yes	285	68.8
No	129	31.2

**Table 1.4: Respondents who are Interested in a Sport**

<b>Level of Involvement</b>	<b>Number (n=285)</b>	<b>Valid %</b>
To Watch	144	51
To Participate	30	11
Both	111	38.9

**Table 1.5: Sex of Respondents and Interest in Sport**

			<b>If Yes!</b>			
			<b>To Watch</b>	<b>To Participate</b>	<b>Both</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Sex of Respondent</b>	Male	% within Sex	47.9	16.7	35.4	100
		% within if yes	47.9	80.0	45.9	50.5
	Female	% within Sex	53.2	4.3	42.6	100
		% within if yes	52.1	20.0	54.1	49.5
<b>Total</b>	% within Sex		50.5	10.5	38.9	100
	% within if yes		100	100	100	100

**Table 1.6: Purpose of Visit and Interest in Sport**

			What is the Purpose of your Visit?				
			VFR	Business	Pure Hol.	Other	Total
Would you be interested in watching, participating	Yes	% within Would you be interested	13.7	5.3	80.0	1.1	100
		% within purpose of visit	61.9	100	68.5	100	68.8
	No	% within Would you be interested	18.6		81.4		100
		% within purpose of visit	38.1	0	31.5	0	31.2
Total		% within Would be interested	15.2	3.6	80.4	0.7	100
		% within purpose of visit	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 1.7: Respondents Interested in the Scór**

Level of Interest	Number (n=414)	Valid %
Extremely	114	27.5
Very	147	35.5
Moderately	111	26.8
Not	42	10.2

of the respondents stated that they would be interested in attending a talent competition, which would include Irish dance, Irish music, story telling and Irish language. It was no surprise, however, to find that females would be more interested in attending the Scór than males (Tables 1.7 and 1.8).

**Table 1.8: Sex of Respondent and Their Interest in the Scór**

			Sex of the Respondent		
			Male	Female	Total
Would you be interested in Scór	Extremely	% within Would be interested	42.1	57.9	100
		% within Sex	22.9	32.4	27.5
	Very	% within Would be interested	44.9	55.1	100
		% within Sex	31.4	39.7	35.5
	Moderately	% within Would be interested	59.5	40.5	100
		% within Sex	31.4	22.1	26.8
	Not	% within Would be interested	71.4	28.6	100
		% within Sex	14.3	5.9	10.2
Total	% within Would be interested		50.7	49.3	100
	% within Sex		100	100	100

### MARKETING GAELIC GAMES AND THE SCÓR AS A TOURISM PRODUCT

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this survey was that overseas tourists would certainly be interested in the activities offered by the GAA. Unfortunately awareness of such activities is a problem. The remainder of this paper will address this issue by discussing how Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board could incorporate the activities of the GAA into their marketing strategy. A marketing mix consisting of the four basic elements – product, price, promotion and place – will be used



to help Gaelic Games and the Scór create a place image that will differentiate and sell the island of Ireland as a tourism destination.

### **1. Product**

The product decision involves deciding what could be offered to a group of customers and how this could be packaged. In the USA, for example, 26.9 per cent of members of the National Tour Operators Association provide spectator sports tours (Hudson, 2003). Some of these specialise in a specific sport such as baseball or American football and they arrange packages for tourists that would include the travel, match ticket, guided tours of the stadium, a visit to a hall of fame or sports museum and in some cases even a visit to the team changing rooms or a post-match drink with the coach and players. At present there are no tour operators which focus specifically on the Gaelic Games.

This link with tour operators should not only involve selling tickets for matches or visiting a GAA museum but should include a package that would provide the opportunity to learn how to play Gaelic sports. Tourists are now more active and are keen to learn new skills. Swarbrooke et al. (2003) for example, included training with Thai boxers in Thailand as one of the great adventure holidays for 2002. The GAA employs development officers in each county and their primary role is to develop Gaelic Games in schools. There is no reason why these development officers could not work during the summer months with tour operators and hold introductory classes for visiting tourists. Not only would this offer the tourist a unique and enjoyable experience but it would also provide the important foundation stage in the sports development continuum as outlined by Weed and Bull (2004).

For the dedicated fan at home and abroad the GAA should also consider organising fantasy sports camps. These provide an opportunity for adults to train with their favourite sports stars, with the coach of a popular team and/or at a famous sport venue. In the USA almost every major league baseball team offers a fantasy camp and in England retired premiership soccer stars are tapping into this lucrative market.

In an attempt to improve the spatial spread of tourism Fáilte Ireland has stated that Ireland must offer the tourist a more broadly

defined heritage-cultural tourism product (Fáilte Ireland, 2005). As various writers such as Bourdieu (1978) and Hargreaves (1982) have pointed out, 'sport is a culture form'. As an integral part of community life in Ireland the Gaelic Games should therefore be promoted with culture tourism. The Scór should also be promoted as part of this cultural package as it has played a significant part in the revival of Irish culture and is ideal for the tourist who wants to experience and learn more about the traditions and pastimes of the Irish people.

Closely linked to culture tourism is the niche market of genealogy. In Ireland tracing one's roots is very popular, especially with the American, English, Welsh and Scottish markets, which are major generators of tourism in Ireland. These tourists are intrigued by the history of their ancestors, the traditional way of life, thatched cottages, mass rocks and, of course, the pastimes of their ancestors. For decades Gaelic Games have been the pivot around which community life evolves, especially in rural Ireland, and therefore they could be marketed alongside genealogy, and, in some cases, as part of the genealogy package.

## **2. Promotion**

Weed and Bull (2004) refer to the 'incidental sports tourist', those for whom sport is not the prime purpose of the trip but rather an opportunistic decision, often made on the spur of the moment while at a destination. According to Jackson and Glyptis (1992) the capture of potential incidental participants is largely about ensuring that information is available at the right place and at the right time. The results of this survey highlight that with only 12.3 per cent of overseas visitors being aware of the GAA and the activities it offers it still remains one of Ireland's best-kept secrets. This is not a major issue for the VFR market as they are more likely to be familiar with the sport and attend a match with friends and relatives but for the pure holidaymaker the lack of publicity is a problem in any country. If a tourist to Ireland visits a local pub they may see pictures of Gaelic teams, old match programmes, newspaper clippings and signed shirts on the wall but this is not enough to promote the games to overseas visitors.

There are tourist information centres located in every town in Ireland and as these are often the first port of call for overseas

visitors they should display a calendar listing Gaelic matches that are taking place in the local community plus contact details and directions to local pitches. Posters and leaflets should also be distributed to local accommodation providers and shops. GAA interpretative centres are another possibility, providing information about players, grounds, fixtures, results, the history of the GAA, the rules of the games and details and dates of Scór competitions. In some larger towns this could be part of or in addition to a GAA museum. In the south of Ireland there are currently GAA museums in Thurles, Tullaroan and Dublin with potential for more, especially in Northern Ireland.

Like many other sporting bodies, the GAA has recently set up a very professional website which will bring a new dimension of participation and interest in Gaelic Games to a world stage. It provides some very useful information for the tourist and therefore should be included under 'useful links' on the Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the NITB websites. Likewise, the GAA website should have direct links to the Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the NITB websites. The GAA has also launched two videos: 'What is Hurling?' and 'What is Gaelic Football?'. The video initiative is designed principally for consumption abroad so as to give people who are unfamiliar with Gaelic Games a basic understanding and insight into them. These videos should be promoted and available at the Tourism Ireland limited overseas offices. Tour operators should also have access to these videos and a Gaelic football or hurling match should be part of the familiarisation trips organised by the Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the NITB for incoming tour operators to Ireland.

Green (2001) highlights the advantages of co-operative marketing and recommends that each sport should see other sporting events as a prime marketing opportunity to promote their event. While co-operative marketing is a possibility in southern Ireland, it may be too early in the peace process to expect Gaelic Games to be advertised at a soccer or rugby match in Northern Ireland without political opposition. Nevertheless, the fact that the GAA, IRFU (rugby) and the IFA (soccer) have agreed to share the proposed National Stadium in Belfast is certainly a step in the right direction.

According to Chalip (2004) there is a strong link between a sporting event and its host destination. If promoted properly the link between the GAA and the image it portrays can be exploited to attract overseas visitors to Ireland. All Gaelic Games are amateur, drug-free and family orientated – admirable qualities in today's sporting arena. In terms of the physical attributes of the games Gaelic football and hurling in particular are fast paced, rugged, exciting – all qualities that encapsulate the image Tourism Ireland is trying to project overseas. Guinness has already used hurling to great effect in its international advertising campaign so there is no reason why Tourism Ireland cannot do the same. It would be mutually beneficial as it would reinforce Ireland's brand image overseas as a unique, authentic, rugged and undiscovered country while the GAA would receive international publicity.

### **3. Place**

Place involves decisions concerning the location of games and important elements include the availability and standard of accommodation, transport, ancillary attractions and tourist activities.

According to Boullton (2000) the process through which the economic benefits of sporting events are maximised is called 'leveraging'. Event leveraging begins by encouraging visitor spending and by retaining visitor spending within the host community. This can be achieved by fostering spending during the event, as well as by lengthening visitor stays.

The All-Ireland Gaelic football and hurling finals are played in Croke Park Stadium in Dublin. As a capital city, Dublin has an extensive transport network and can provide accommodation, restaurants, bars, clubs and various forms of entertainment for the spectators beyond the immediate attractions of the sport. However, at a provincial and county level leveraging is more difficult. In Ulster, for example, an increasing number of Ulster Gaelic Football Championship matches are played in Clones, a small rural border town in County Monaghan. Many of these matches attract in excess of 20,000 spectators yet the town has limited accommodation and leisure facilities to cater for overnight visitors. The GAA's recent decision to use the proposed National Stadium, which will be located in Belfast, should have positive repercussions for the

tourism industry. If properly marketed domestic visitors will be encouraged to stay overnight and overseas visitors will be encouraged to extend their stay in Northern Ireland's capital city.

It is noteworthy at this stage that the author is not suggesting that only Gaelic Games played in cities have tourism potential. The GAA has roots in the rural community and clubs are the life-blood of the GAA. Although they may not have the atmosphere of Croke Park, club matches will provide the tourist with an equally distinct experience and insight into Irish life. Moreover, by promoting the activities of local GAA clubs the regional tourist boards will help bring about a more balanced spread of tourism which at present is a key objective of Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland (2005).

To achieve this regional spread it is important for services and facilities to be placed in locations that tourists can easily travel to. Obviously it is not possible for local GAA clubs, which are parish-based, to move their sports grounds to a more accessible location. The clubs and the local tourism organisation must ensure that there is adequate signposting, as this is an issue that continues to frustrate all types of visitors travelling in rural Ireland (Fáilte Ireland, 2005)

#### **4. Price**

Pricing is another important factor in the overall marketing strategy, especially since Gaelic Games are relatively unknown outside of Ireland. Standevan and De Knop (1999, p. 34) make reference to the 'casual spectators who simply enjoy watching a sport and who usually happen to come across it rather than plan their visit to attend it'. For this particular visitor the price and the simplicity of the booking process will have a major bearing on whether they will make the effort to come and spectate.

The general cost of living and holidaying in Ireland remains one of the highest in Europe and a recent survey by Fáilte Ireland (2005) found that French, German and, for the first time, US visitors are commenting on it. The GAA must therefore consider cost and offer discounted rates for tourists, especially families which according to Train (1994) and Reeves (2000) are more likely to attend a sporting event while on holiday. A sponsorship deal with an airline or a tour

operator could be a feasible option with free publicity in return for reduced ticket prices for overseas customers. This could be a lucrative venture for companies catering for business tourists who have time to spare while in Ireland and have shown a keen interest in Gaelic Games.

### CONCLUSION

In order to attract the overseas tourist in an increasingly competitive environment each destination must differentiate their tourism product and develop niche markets. Sports tourism is a lucrative market but only if properly developed and promoted. Gaelic Games in Ireland are an example of a tourism product with latent potential. They are exciting and unique to the island of Ireland but unfortunately this study has shown that although overseas tourists would be interested in the activities offered by the GAA awareness is a pressing issue.

One of the official conclusions of the Sport and Tourism First World Conference (2001) was the lack of formal collaboration between sport and tourism organisations. Although sport and tourism can both do well managed as separate entities, substantial co-ordination and cohesion between the two areas are needed if sports tourism is to prosper at any destination. Gaelic Games have never featured prominently in a tourism marketing strategy document in either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. The GAA has launched a new marketing strategy but it does not mention tourism. If Gaelic Games are to become a sports tourism event in Ireland the GAA must forge closer links with Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the NITB and together manipulate the 4-P's to their mutual advantage.

### REFERENCES

- Bairner, A. (2000) 'After the War? Soccer, Masculinity and Violence in Northern Ireland', in J. McKay, M.A. Messner and D. Sabo (eds) (2000) *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport*, California: Sage.
- Bairner, A. (2001) 'Sport, Politics and Society in Northern Ireland – *Changing Times, New Developments*', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly*

- Review*, Vol. 90, No. 3590 (Autumn), pp. 283–290, available at <http://www.jesuit.ie/studies/articles/2001/010903.htm#Bairner> [Accessed 2 November 2004].
- Baum, T. (1995) 'Ireland – the Peace Dividend', *Insights*, July, pp. 9–14.
- Boulton, R., Libert, B. and Samek, S. (2000) 'A Business Model for the New Economy', *Journal of Business Strategy*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 29–35.
- Bourdieu, P. (1978) 'Sport and Social Class', *Social Science Information*, Vol. 18, No. 6, pp. 820–833.
- Boyd, S.W. (2000) "Heritage" Tourism in Northern Ireland: Opportunity Under Peace', *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 150–174.
- British Tourism Authority (2003) *Tourism Intelligence Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 65–70.
- Chalip, L. (2004) 'Beyond Impact: A General Model for Sport Event Leverage' in B. Ritchie and D. Adair (eds) (2004) *Sport Tourism: Interrelationships, Impacts and Issues*, Clevedon: Channel View.
- Delpy, L. (1998) 'Editorial', *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 4–5.
- Devine, A. and Devine, F. (2004) 'The Politics of Sport Tourism in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Sport Tourism*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 171–182.
- Fáilte Ireland (2005) *Summary of Activities 2005*. Dublin: Fáilte Ireland.
- GAA (2003) *Official Guide – Part 1*, GAA website, accessed at [www.gaa.ie/files/gaa\\_official\\_guide2003.pdf](http://www.gaa.ie/files/gaa_official_guide2003.pdf) [Accessed 16 March 2004].
- GAA Museum, General Information (2003) available at <http://www.gaa.ie/museum.mission/main.htm> [Accessed 15 October 2004]
- Getz, D. (1997) 'Trends and Issues in Sport Event Tourism', *Tourism Recreation Research*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 61–62.
- Getz, D. (2003) 'Sport Event Tourism: Planning, Development and Marketing' in S. Hudson (ed) (2003) *Sport and Adventure Tourism*, New York: Haworth.
- Gibson, H., Wiiming, C. and Holdnak, A. (2002) 'Small-Scale Event Sport Tourism: College Sport as an Attraction' in S. Gammon and

- J. Krutzman (eds) (2002) *Sport Tourism: Principles and Practice*, Eastbourne: Leisure Studies Association.
- Glyptis, S.A. (1982) *Sport and Tourism in Western Europe*, London: British Travel Education Trust.
- Glyptis, S.A. (1989) 'Leisure and Patterns of Time Use', Paper presented at the Leisure Studies Association Annual Conference, Bournemouth, England, 24–26 April 1987. Eastbourne: Leisure Studies Association.
- Green, B.C. (2001) 'Leveraging Subculture and Identity to Promote Sport Events', *Sport Management Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 1–19.
- Hargreaves, J. (1982) 'Sport, Culture and Ideology' in J. Hargreaves (ed) (1982) *Sport, Culture and Ideology*, London: Routledge.
- Higham, J. (2005) *Sport Tourism Destinations: Issues, Opportunities and Analysis*, London: Butterworth and Heineman.
- Hinch, T. and Higham, J. (2004) *Sport Tourism Development*, Sydney: Channel View.
- Hudson, S. (2003) *Sport and Adventure Tourism*, New York: Haworth.
- IIHF News Letter (2003) 'Zeller's Next Mission Impossible – To Make the Eagles Fly in Glasgow', *International Ice Hockey Federation*, available at <http://www.iihf.com/news/iihfpr5402.htm> [Accessed 29 September 2004]
- Jackson, G. and Glyptis, S. (1992) *Sport and Tourism: a Review of the Literature*, Report to the Sports Council, Recreation Management Group. Loughborough. 2–3 April.
- Jackson, S., Batty, R. and Scherer, J. (2001) 'Transnational Sport Marketing at the Global/Local Nexus: The Adidasification of the New Zealand All Blacks', *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 185–201.
- Leslie, D. (1999) 'Terrorism and Tourism: The Northern Ireland Situation – A Look Behind the Veil of Certainty', *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 38, pp. 37–40.
- Loverseed, H. (2001) 'Sports Tourism in North America', *Travel & Tourism Analyst*, Vol. 3, pp. 25–42.
- MacCannell, D. (1976) *The Tourist*, London: Macmillan.
- McGinley, M., Kremer, J., Trew, K. and Olge, S. (1998) 'Socio-cultural identity and attitudes to sport in Northern Ireland', *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 464–471.



- Northern Ireland Sports Council (1999) *Sectarianism in Sport*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Sports Council.
- Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) (2004) *Tourism Facts: 2003*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Tourist Board.
- O'Neill, M. and Fitz, F. (1996) 'Northern Ireland tourism: what chance now?', *Tourism Management*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 161–163.
- Reeves, M.R. (2000) 'Evidencing the sport-tourism interrelationship', Paper presented at Sports Conference, Loughborough University, 20 August.
- Standeven, J. and De Knop, P. (1999) *Sport Tourism*, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Sugden, J. (1995) 'Sport, Community Relations and Community Conflict in Northern Ireland' in S. Dunn (ed) (1995) *Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Sugden, J. and Harvie, S. (1995) 'Sport and Community Relations in Northern Ireland', Report to the Centre for the Study of Conflict, Belfast, 6 January.
- Swarbrooke, J., Beard, C., Leckie, S. and Pomfret, G. (2003) *Adventure Tourism: The New Frontier*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Tonge, J. (2005) *The New Northern Irish Politics?*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tourism Ireland (2005) *Challenge: Focus: Action – Marketing the Island of Ireland Overseas in 2005*, Dublin: Tourism Ireland.
- Train, P. (1994) 'Tourism and Economic Impacts of Staging a Special Event: the European Cup', Unpublished MSc thesis, Birmingham: Loughborough University.
- Ulster Council GAA (2003) *Strategic Plan 2003–2006*. Published by Ulster Council GAA.
- Ulster Football Championship (2004) available at [www.gaa.ie/ulster](http://www.gaa.ie/ulster) [Accessed 15 December 2005]
- Waitt, G. (1999) 'Playing Games with Sydney: Marketing Sydney for the 2000 Olympics', *Urban Studies*, Vol. 36, pp. 1055–1077.
- Wall, G. (1996) 'Terrorism and tourism: An overview and an Irish example' in A. Pizam and Y. Mansfeld (eds) (1996) *Tourism, Crime and International Security Issues*, Chichester: Wiley and Sons.
- Weed, M. and Bull, C. (2004) *Sports Tourism: Participants, Policy and Providers*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

- Weiler, B and Hall, C. (1992) *Special Interest Tourism*, London: Belhaven.
- Wilson, D. (1993) 'Tourism, Public Policy and the Image of Northern Ireland since the Troubles' in B. O'Connor and M. Cronin (eds) (1993) *Tourism in Ireland: A Critical Analysis*, Cork: Cork University Press.
- Wilson, M., Smyth, S., Murray, A. and Black, M. (1997) 'The Future of the Northern Ireland Accommodation Sector', *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 25-30.

Copyright of *Irish Journal of Management* is the property of *Irish Journal of Management* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.