Sport Tourism in Malaysia: Opportunities and Challenges
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INTRODUCTION

As the world’s largest social phenomenon (McPherson et al., 1989), sport appeals to every civilized human beings. At the same time, the technological advancement in tourism have enabled people to travel beyond the realm of their residences to seek pleasures in sports (Gibson, 1998). This new trend of lifestyle has resulted a shift in tourism marketing strategy in many industrialized countries worldwide (Neirotti, 2003).

“Sport tourism activities have generated enormous economic impacts – not considering the social/cultural and intellectual benefits of tourism” (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 2003). In Malaysia for example, the country’s Tourism Promotion Board has revealed that a single international tourist who came for the 16th Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games in 1998, spent an average of RM307.64 per day or RM3,845.50 for the duration of 12.5 nights stay (New Straits Times, 8/6/1999). As for the F1 Malaysian Petronas Grand Prix, which has become the country’s annual event since 1999, has given from the total of RM500 million take to about RM1 billion to Malaysia (Utusan Malaysia, 17/3/2002). Another example is the 2002 Langkawi Ironman Challenge which saw the participation of 331 triathletes, had contributed RM5 million to the country’s sports tourism industry (Utusan Malaysia, 2/2/2003). These inspiring data are among the motivational reasons for this country to capitalize sport events as a good foreign income earner.

In this globalization era, new and exciting opportunities are opening up to “enrich touristic experiences through sport and enhance sport development through tourism” (Standevan and De Knop, 1999). The impact of this cooperation and integration of two disparate disciplines have been proven to be tremendous, especially to the economic regeneration of the country (Jennings, 1996). To achieve a maximum return from this relatively new marketing tool, it is thus very
wise to understand and appreciate the synergy of both the sport and tourism fields (Hudson, 2003). For this purpose, this paper will explore the literature of sport tourism and discuss its potential in the Malaysian context.

SPORT TOURISM – DEFINITION

Before sport tourism is being defined and explored, it is worthy of mentioning here, that “sport tourism” and “tourism sport” are two different subjects. Sean and Gammon (2003) explained that the tourists’ prime motivation is what distinguishes the two. If sporting activities are what inspire them to travel while the “touristic” element being the reinforcer of the overall endeavor, then this experience falls under the category of “sport tourism”. The opposite scenario is termed as “tourism sport”. This paper however will only concern with the former terminology and therefore, the discussion will be centered on the tourists whose main purpose of traveling is to experience sport related activities.

The interchangeable use of the terms “sport” and “sports” is another controversial subject that needs to be clarified. According to Parks et al. (1998), many academics agreed that “sports” refers to a list of separate and countable sporting activities such as tennis, football, hockey, volleyball and so on so forth. Meanwhile, “sport” is “an all encompassing concept”. It is a collective noun that incorporates all kinds of game-like activities and not just what can be placed in the list. With respect to this differentiation, the writer will use the later concept in her discussion. To be consistent with this decision, any documentation that uses the word “sports” will be changed into “sport”.

As a new scientific field of study, there are many ways to define and interpret “sport tourism” (Pigeassou et al., 2003). According to Standevan and De Knop (1999) “sport tourism” is;
“All forms of active and passive involvement in sporting activity, participated in casually or in an organized way for noncommercial or business/commercial reasons, in that necessitate travel away from home and work locality” (p.12).

The basic principle underlying sport tourism is the act of traveling which is initiated by the needs to directly or indirectly experience sport-related activities. Gibson (1998) divided sport tourism into three different categories, namely active sport tourism, which refers to people who travel to take part in sport, event sport tourism which implies travel to watch sport events and nostalgia sport tourism, which means travel to visit sport related places or be associated with sport personalities.

It does not have to take a genius to figure out where this subject is coined from. However, bear in mind that the uniqueness and identity of sport tourism are not derived from the sport and tourism discipline per se but rather the blend or the combination of both of them. According to Gammon (2003), the editor of the Journal of Sports Tourism 8(1), 2003, “sport tourism” is a field which “adds up to more than the sum of its parts”.

Although “sport tourism” is neither an extension of sport or tourism study (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 2003), it is highly imperative for anyone who wants to pursue this subject, to have a better understanding of the concept of sport and tourism individually. The objective is not to look at them as separate entities but to see how they nourish and complement one another resulting the existence of a new field of study called “sport tourism”. In this regard, the meaning and definitional issues of each sport and tourism will be analyzed so that “sport tourism”, as a very lucrative and culturally influential entity will be embraced in a more professional and scientific manner.
SPORT

Etymologically, sport is derived from the Latin word, “desporte” which means “a diversion” or “to carry away”. Edwards (1973) believed that the meaning of the word suggests “sport” as a kind of activity that aims to divert one’s attention from the “rigor and pressures of everyday life”.

Standeven (1998) liked to view sport as “a cultural experience of physical activity”. Since each society has a unique way of life, the likelihood of having similar interpretation of “sport” among societies worldwide, will not be very high. This could probably be one of the reasons why this subject has no universal definition. Neirotti (2003) substantiated this notion by saying that sport “can be defined in various ways from different perspectives”. One of the most debated issues ever since the word has become the focus of academic study, is the questions of how much and to what extent the element of competitiveness should exist in an activity called “sport” (Loy 1968).

According to McPherson et al. (1994), sport is often thought of “a set of competitive physical activities based on elements of play, games and contest”. On similar account, some sport scholars, particularly those from sociological and psychological backgrounds agreed with the following idea that sport is…

“an institutionalized competitive activities that involve vigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by individuals whose participation is motivated by a combination of personal enjoyment and external rewards” (Coakley, 1998).

Multi-sport competitions such Olympic, Commonwealth or Asia Games and specific sport meets such as World Cup football and Super Bowl are among examples of sport events that fit in this definition. All those events involve the
elements of competition that requires specialized equipments and formalized rules. Meanwhile, other non-competitive activities that exhibit the elements of playfulness and spontaneity such as biking, mountain climbing, jogging, sailing and windsurfing are not considered as sport. Instead, these forms of physical activities are called “play” or “recreation” (Chu, 1982). Even games like tennis, golf and badminton are not classified as sport if they are played for fun or as past time endeavors.

Some other scholars on the other hand, particularly from the contemporary sport management field, stipulated that sport and play are both part of a continuum, the level of seriousness being the discriminating factor. As such, according to Pitts et al. (1994), sport is “any activity, experience or business enterprise focused on fitness, recreation, athletics or leisure”. In this view, any kind of activity, either competitive or noncompetitive, should its purposes are to give pleasure, health and fitness to the participants, is classified as sport. With respect to the subject of sport tourism, which scope of sport is used then?

In her article entitled “Sport Tourism: A Critical Analysis of Research” Gibson (1998) has studied numerous number of sport tourism literature as it stood in 1998. From her analysis she found that despite the classic definition of sport, many researchers studied recreational and noncompetitive activities such as walking, bicycling, skiing, scuba diving, sightseeing and even fishing (Roehl et al., 1993) and health-spa (Wartenberg and Allon, 1978; Williams et al., 1996; Spivack, 1998) under the realm of sport tourism. Many researchers seemed to be more concerned with the identification of the needs and expectation of sport tourists rather than discussing on the classification criteria of the nature of the sporting experiences.

The Malaysian National Sport Policy has postulated that there are two types of sport in this country. One is called “high performance sport” the other one is “mass sport” (National Sport Policy, 1988). In general, it can be said that the
former type adopts the first definition of sport which is more rigid and specific while the later type falls under the rubric of play or recreation. Perhaps, the use of the word “sport” in both categories indicates that Malaysia is also flexible in its definition of sport. This notion is further reinforced by the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in his statement urging the public and private sectors to promote sport tourism in this country, has said that besides having the state-of-the-art sport competition facilities, Malaysia also has great destinations for deep-sea diving, go-karting and cross country cycling (New Straits Times, 26/1/2000). This implies that recreational activities are considered as parts of sport tourism in this country.

In a separate event, Ahmad Kamil Mohamed, the vice-president and chief executive of the Malaysian Sport Tourism Council (MSTC) in 2001, has cited abseiling, archery, bamboo rafting, hand-gliding, parachuting, rock climbing, top spinning and many other leisure activities, as examples of sport events that are listed in the tourism calendar of the country (New Straits Times, 25/4/2001). In short, it can be concluded that the term “sport” in the Malaysian “sport tourism” includes all kinds of activities that encompass …

“the whole range of competitive and noncompetitive active pursuits … in which human beings engage at their own level simply for enjoyment and training or to raise their performance to levels of publicly acclaimed excellence” (Standevan and De Knop, 1999, p.12).
TOURISM

Tourism stems from the English word “tour” and tour comes from “tonare” in Latin or “tonors” in Greek, meaning the movement around a central point (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 2003). Based on the original meanings of the words “sport” and “tourism”, it is thus commonsensical to assume that sport tourism is an activity related to moving away to a destination where one can have a break from his or her stressful life.

In the case of tourism, Holloway (1994) goes as far as saying “…to define tourism precisely is an all but impossible task”. According to Urry (1990), the description of tourism varies by society, social group and historical period. Similar to sport, this “cultural” reason could be the cause behind the difficulty of having a common definition of tourism.

In 1937, the League of Nations had suggested that tourism involves “any person visiting a country, other than in which he usually resides…” (Mill, 1990). Clearly, this characterization of a tourist disregards the activity of domestic tourists in the scope of tourism. Later in 1981, the International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism had broaden the profile of a tourist by stating that “Tourism may be defined in terms of particular activities, selected by choice and undertaken outside the home environment.” (De Groote, 1995). This means that, as long as the trip is done beyond home and work locality, it is therefore part of tourism activity. Subsequently, more specific terms such as “international” and “domestic” tourists begin to appear in the tourism literature and they nonetheless, have been warmly accepted in most countries (World Tourism Organization, 1981; Mill, 1990; Boniface and Cooper, 1994) including Malaysia (New Straits Times, 25/4/2001).
Another topic of discussion is the one that concerns with the question, “how far does an individual have to be away from home in order to be involved in tourism?” According to Kurtzman and Zauhar (2003b), distance criteria may vary from country to country and from continent to continent. Some tourist authorities consider 7 kms as the determinant, others 25 and still others 60 kms or more. In the context of sport tourism, Australia has released a Draft Sport Tourism Strategy in 2000 (in conjunction with the Sydney Olympic Games 2000) that defines “international sport tourism” as “any trip to Australia, a prime purpose of which to participate in a sporting activity…” and “domestic sport tourism” as “any sports-related trip of over 40 kms …” (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 2003).

“How long do they have to be away from home to be considered as tourists?” is the next common issue discussed in the subject of tourism. As mentioned earlier, tourism or tour is “movement around a central point” and as such it is a circular journey of which the act of staying away from home must be temporary. This concept is further emphasized by Urry (1990) in his definition of a tourist, where he highlighted the importance of having a “clear intention to return home within a relatively short period of time”.

Still on the issue of the length of time staying away from home, in 1963, the United Nations and in 1968, the United Nations Statistical Commission had established a condition that a tourist is when a person who stays at least an overnight in his destination (Standevan and De Knop, 1999). Again, the International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism in 1981 came out with a more flexible definition by stating that “Tourism may or may not involve overnight stays away from home” (De Groote, 1995). In the context of sport tourism, instead of using an overnight staying as the measurement, Nogawa et al. (1996) recommended that a sport tourist must stays at least 24 hours and according to them, there is a difference between a sport tourist and a sport excursionist who is a day tripper.
As for the purpose of travel, some scholars such as Cohen (1974) and Yiannakis and Gibson (1992) proposed that the goal of tourism should be based on leisure. However, Urry (1990) and MacCannel (1996) ruled that the purpose of tourism is, anything under the sky, so long the intention of the traveler is to experience something which is not typically encountered in everyday life. Standevan and De Knop (1999) supported this concept by adding “the experiences might take place as part of a holiday or as an ancillary to business travel”. After all, according to Gibson (1998), business travelers such as conference attendees, corporate business personnel and professional athletes contribute to host communities in terms of hotel room nights, food, transportation, entertainment and so forth. In the light of this view, the tourism statistics in Canada and the United States define tourists as all types of travelers ranging from business to pleasure (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 2003).

SPORT TOURISM – A PARTNERSHIP

On April 27th 2000, in Barcelona, Spain, the world witnessed the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO) making an official recognition regarding their interdependency on each other’s strength. This mutual understanding has been manifested in the agreement to hold the first World Conference on sport and tourism on February 22-23, 2001 in Barcelona (Xinhua News Agency, 28/4/2000). Symbolically, it was indicated in the meeting that the close links that exist between sport and tourism should be exploited professionally and academically for the purpose of economic development of the country.

The relationship between sport and tourism in this decade is symbiotic. Illustrated by the following model (Standevan and De Knop, 1999), sport plays a role in the enhancement of tourism industry while at the same time, the interaction between the two of them open up more opportunities for sport participation and sport
infrastructures. In short, this partnership gives mutual beneficial impact on society, especially in terms of sustainable economic growth.

Segment of Tourism Industry

Based on the literature review of sport tourism which was studied by Gibson (1998), sport tourism is flourishing in many countries around the globe. The reasons for this new marketing shift are as follows:

1. *Increased urbanization* - where a wider variety of active leisure pursuits are open to all (De Knop, 1990)

2. *Civilization process* - where people learn to express emotion in a “controlled emotion” (De Knop, 1995) or in a “socially acceptable setting” (Elias and Dunning (1970)

3. *Means for economic development* – where apart from sport and tourism sectors, sport events encourage spillover benefits to other related industries (Jennings, 1996)

4. *Concern with health and well-being* – where education and knowledge have led people to adopt more healthy lifestyles (De Knop, 1987; Kurtzman and Zauhar, 1995).

5. *Advancement in “high tech” sports equipment* – where sport experiences are enhanced by the more updated usage of modern technology (Redmond, 1991).
6. *Advancement in communication and technological development* – where travel is no longer a time-consuming and costly pursuit to people of different walks of life (Kurtzman and Zauhar, 1995)

Perhaps, all those mentioned ingredients that contribute to the development of sport tourism also exist in Malaysia. Otherwise, the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister (DPM), Datuk Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, would not have said the following statement, “sport tourism should be encouraged in Malaysia for the benefit of the country’s economy” (Utusan Malaysia, 2/10/1999).

**SPORT TOURISM IN MALAYSIA – OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

The spirit of sport tourism in Malaysia has been evidenced through the establishment of the Malaysian Sport Tourism Council (MTCB) in 1994. The principle responsibility of the Council was to explore and develop sport tourism in the country, particularly to help the government prepare for the 16th Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games (New Straits Times, 20/6/2001). Sport tourism however only gained official recognition in this country after the hosting of the Games. This was admitted by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism, Datuk Kadir Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, when he said the success of the Games had become “the turning point” for sport tourism in the country (Utusan Malaysia, 7/6/1999).

The government’s first commitment in venturing into this new industry is reflected through its effort in building the world class sport complex in Bukit Jalil which was completed in 1998 and the state-of-the-art Formula 1 International Circuit in Sepang which was first utilized in 1999. The resounding successes of hosting two top notch events (the Commonwealth Games 1998 and F1 Malaysian Petronas Grand Prix 1999), at the respective facilities had sparked renewed interest from the government to further develop this sector. This motion has been mentioned in the keynote address given by the Ministry of the Culture, Arts and
Tourism, Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir at the Sport Tourism seminar held in 1999 (New Straits Times, 8/6/1999). In his speech, he announced that Malaysia would promote sport tourism and staging more international sporting events to attract international tourists would be one of the main agenda.

The subsequent years after the Commonwealth Games and the first F1 Championship, sport tourism activities have been aggressively pursued by the Malaysian professionals and practitioners. More international high profile events such as Le Tour de Langkawi, Langkawi Ironman Challenge, Golf World Cup, Kart Rotax Max, World motorcycle GP and X-Games have been offered to sport fans all around the world and some of them have been made “permanent fixtures” (Utusan Malaysia, 4/6/2002) in the country’s sport calendar. Sports such as yachting is also being highlighted and as said by the Minister of Youth and Sports, Datuk Hishammudin Tun Hussein, “sport has been our money earner lately and if that can really benefit us, there is no reason why we can’t promote sailing to be one of our products” Utusan Malaysia, 14/3/2003).

Our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had once said that the government will give its support to any organizer of any event that aims to promote the country positively (19/8/2002). Hence, in 2002, the government has increased the Special Tourism Fund from RM200 million to RM400 million and sport tourism was said to have its share in this fund (Utusan Malaysia, 20/9/2002). In the same year, the Sports Advisory Panel was set up by the Ministry of Sports and Youth with the task of formulating strategies for the development of sports, including sport tourism (Utusan Malaysia, 6/1/2003). The first national conference on sports tourism with the theme “Destination Malaysia – Formulating Strategies and Action Plan for Sustainable Growth” was held in June 2002 (New Straits Times, 10/5/2002). This conference gathered all interested participants from the public and private sectors with the aim to plan for collective strategies to develop sport tourism to its fullest potential.
All those efforts, shown by the government and practitioners alike, was an indication that sport tourism has its potential and it is the responsibility of every related agency to make it economically beneficial to the country. According to Ahmad Kamil Mohamed from the MTCB, “although no studies have been made to determine the number of sport tourists in this country or number of domestic tourists, we are confident the Malaysian sport tourism sector is at least on par with those in developed countries” (New Straits Times, 25/4/2001).

According to Dr. Kurt Svrcula, the managing director of Malaysian-dot sport company, Malaysia has a year-on-year growth potential of 8 to 10 percent. This will enable it contribute up to one-third of total tourism receipts within the next five to eight years. However, he believed this can only be materialized if all industry players “put their acts together” (Business Times, 2/9/2003).

Putting “their act together” might be the country’s biggest challenge in promoting sport tourism. The Minister of Youth and Sport, Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein has expressed his concern towards the lack of publicity and sponsorship from various agencies in giving their helping hands to support the organizers which are organizing sport events (Utusan Malaysia, 17/1/2003).

In his study, Pigeassou (1997) observed that the progress of sport tourism in many countries around the world is often hindered by a lack of integration at various levels. Gibson (1998) agreed with this findings and suggested to overcome this problem by:

1. introducing a policy development between the agencies from both sport and tourism sector
2. carrying out more inter-disciplinary research that incorporates these two distinct bodies of knowledge (sport and tourism)
3. removing a sense of academic territoriality between sport and tourism studies
There may have been activities going around on those three problem solutions recommended by Gibson (1998). However, since the activities are not made known to the public or not highly publicized yet, it could be said that so far, very little actions taken to coordinate sport and tourism fields at the realm of policy, research and education in this country. Thus, integrating the sport and tourism areas at the three mentioned levels is the first challenge faced by the Malaysian sport tourism practitioners and educators.

The next important task is to be sensitive to environmental issues such as water, cleanliness, river pollution, landslides and illegal logging when planning for the development of a particular sport tourist destinations. Besides having great infrastructures for world standard sport events, this country is also blessed with beautiful landscapes such as found in Pulau Sipadan, Mabul, Kapalai, Perhentian, Tioman and Redang. In fact sport like scuba-diving and windsurfing can be organized and can even turn out to be the first motivational reason for international tourists to come here. Therefore, as advised by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, anyone intending to market nature as sport tourist attractions must have a principle of “sustainable development” or “adopt a responsible attitude and be sensitive towards environment conservation” (Utusan Malaysia, 26/7/2000)

Other challenges that needs to be highlighted with regards to the promotion of sport tourism are some of the uncontrollable factors which had occurred in this country such as the financial crisis in 1997 and 1998, haze in 1998 and recently, SARS epidemic. Although those incidents are beyond the power of any sport tourism experts, it is however highly imperative for any involving individuals to be aware of these potential dangers so that they become more prepared, dynamic, realistic and innovative in their management of sport tourism industry in this country.
CONCLUSION

We are living in an age where sport has become a culture in our societies and traveling from one place to another, particularly for the purpose of searching for sport-related experiences, is not much a problem anymore.

Coined from the sport and tourism disciplines, sport tourism professionals currently are aggressively pursuing this market niche. According to Hudson, the editor of “Sport and Adventure Tourism” book (2003), sport tourism is estimated to increase at about 10 percent per annum and as such, it has become one of the fastest growing industry in the world. The growing popularity of sport, health and fitness as well the advance in travel and communication technology are among the contributing factors of this staggering statistic.

As a relatively new industry and as among the latest scientific field of study, sport tourism is a subject without an exception of debatable issues. The major concern regarding this subject is the tendency to be one-sided, that is to view it more comprehensively from the perspective of either sport or tourism. This is almost inevitable since sport tourism emerges from these two separate disciplines, sport and tourism. Having no universal definition to describe each of them is another issue that makes any definition of sport tourism questionable. However, as what has been emphasized by Gammon (2003), sport tourism is “not so much about the ingredients used, but rather the blend of ingredients which gives sport tourism its uniqueness and identity”. He further added that, sport tourism …

“is firmly grounded in not only its ability to encourage and inspire theoretical cross fertilization but also in developing and sustaining unlikely partnership – especially between the two usually disparate fields of sport and tourism” (p.5).

Of late, sport tourism is also highly recognized in Malaysia. Besides having great
tourist destinations, it can be concluded the growth of sport tourism in Malaysia is nurtured mostly by the support given by the government, morally and financially. The sport tourism phenomenon is increasingly pervasive due to its potential in yielding lucrative returns and benefited not only the organizers but also the country (Utusan Malaysia, 26/7/2000).

Although there are some obstacles standing in the way of the success of this industry, the industry players as well as the sport tourism academicians should perceive the problems as challenges which in turn inspire them to be more committed and creative in the process of capitalizing sport as one of the profitable products in this country.

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