

## Understanding the drivers of a good sporting experience and how to increase participation in club based sport

### Background

Between January and May 2008, Sport England commissioned Henley Centre Headlight Vision (HCHLV) to undertake three qualitative research projects investigating:

### The quality of the sporting experience

- What aspects of sport are important to participants, what defines a good and bad sporting experience, what are the key drivers to a great sporting experience, and what is understood by 'reaching potential' in their sport?

### Lapsed participants

- What are the reasons for the drop-off in sports participation - why do people stop doing sport at certain points in their lives, and what might prevent them from lapsing?

### Increasing participation in club based sport

- What are the perceptions and appeal of taking part in organised sport - the triggers and barriers to club sport and sustained participation, and the responses to key communication and intervention ideas? This research was conducted among particular segments from [Sport England's market segmentation](#). Lifestyles within these segments were explored within the context of organised sport. Questions were also investigated around the perceived and actual barriers for people to 'join a club'.

### Why was this work commissioned?

This qualitative work was undertaken to help inform [Sport England's 2008-2011 strategy](#) (published in June 2008) which focuses on achieving a world-leading community sport system in England to achieve the outcomes of *grow, sustain, excel*. The system aims to ensure everyone who plays sport has a quality experience. The findings from this research have been used to inform the development of a survey tool to measure participant satisfaction with the quality of the sporting experience.

In 2007, Sport England conducted a market segmentation exercise. This research also aimed to further our understanding of the Sporting Market Segments.

### What was the methodology used?

The three projects used a range of qualitative research methods including depth interviews and group discussions, with a range of sports participants and lapsed participants. The methodology incorporated whether people were participating within a structured sport environment as well as more informal participants. The design ensured a geographical spread of respondents across England. A summary of the methodology is shown below (also explained in more detail within each project report).

- The quality of the sporting experience – Six group discussions (eight respondents in each) with ‘informal’ participants and ‘organised’ sport participants
- Lapsed participants – Two group discussions with ‘lapsed’ participants (people who used to play sport regularly but who had stopped in the last two years)
- Increasing participation – consumer diaries and scrapbooks, ‘join a club task’ and 12 face-to-face depth interviews among six sporting Market Segments. In the ‘join a club’ task, respondents had to trial the process of actually joining a club, documenting the barriers and the point at which they couldn’t go any further in the process and why.

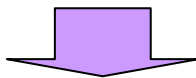
## Key findings

Highlighted below are summaries of key findings from the three qualitative studies, shown as extracts from the main reports. Full results of each study, presented as three separate documents, can be found on the Sport England website (see link at the end of this document).

### The quality of the sporting experience

The research illustrated that people who participate in sport are fundamentally satisfied with their sporting experience – enjoyment is the prime criterion for sustained participation. There are four key drivers of a good sporting experience – see below. These factors tend to be the more subjective or emotive drivers, with other factors such as coaching, organisation and service/hygiene factors being less of a driver of satisfaction.

Despite wide differences in sports being played, there is a high level of consistency in terms of what makes that EXPERIENCE positive.



This audience is fundamentally 'satisfied' with their sporting experience, as existing participants - simply 'voting with their feet' in the past when conditions have not been satisfactory.

As such, their understanding of *what* makes a satisfying sporting EXPERIENCE is perhaps DISPROPORTIONATELY less about conditions (facilities, infrastructure, access) vs subjective, emotional factors.

Despite differences in sports being played, there is a high level of consistency across gender, frequency and sport. Differences are nuanced and about *outliers*, beyond the 'emotional' essentials.

## Lapsed participants

Unsurprisingly, changes in life-stage or personal circumstances for example, a new job, moving house, getting married or having children, are the key reasons for lapsing. Only in few cases does a poor experience force people to drop out. Whilst life-stage is ultimately the key catalyst to dropping out, better access and organisation might help to retain participants for longer by being more flexible and making it easier for people to continue participating, for example, the development of workplace schemes.

Overwhelmingly, the ultimate cues for lapsing come from MACRO shifts in participants' lives: life-stage-driven lack of TIME and ENERGY and the sense of having *different* priorities.

EXPERIENCE alone rarely cues lapsing – rather than being a proxy. Poor ACCESS and ORGANISATION do however *accelerate* lapsing.

Lapsing is also self-perpetuating. Return to organised sport, particularly at past levels quickly feels unattainable without increments or a gear change.

## Increasing participation

The aim of this piece of work was to better understand the emotional needs of the Sporting Market Segments and how organised sport can respond to these needs. Sport faces the challenge of being one of many leisure activities available to people. To encourage people to take part in organised sport, offers need to be flexible and enable people to try activities before committing to something in a formal, long-term way. The research goes on to outline the sorts of messages and considerations for activation concepts which appeal to the different segments. For example, Alison, is a 'stay at home mum', in her late 30's. Alison's motivations centre on keeping fit and the need for some release/'down-time'. Activities allowing her to combine her activity with her children would be appealing, or something that fulfils the 'keeping fit' motivation, such as a social, informal running club.

Lifestyles may vary, but all tend to 'commoditise' their free time – and are often surprisingly reluctant to give it away

Organised sport needs to compete for this *free time* – there is no automatic 'white space' in diaries

Macro trends show consumers lack time and are shy of early commitment. Clubs can gain by allowing all segments to TRIAL, OBSERVE & EXPERIMENT. There is everything to gain by building such features into concepts.

#### Where can I access the results of this research?

The three project reports are available from Sport England's website, available for download in either PowerPoint or Adobe PDF format

[http://www.sportengland.org/index/get\\_resources/research/understanding\\_participation.htm](http://www.sportengland.org/index/get_resources/research/understanding_participation.htm)

#### How can I use this research to increase club membership within my sport?

The research provides actionable, practical insights to help better deliver sport. Included within the findings are:

- Practical examples of intervention ideas for lapsed participants
- Successful communication concepts and visual marketing ideas
- Feedback and possible concerns with 'joining a club' task, i.e. what can clubs learn from the experiences of the respondents who tried to join a club?

The research further investigates how organised sport can respond to the emotional needs of current and lapsed participants e.g. reassurance around 'club baggage'. It provides examples of how a club seeking new members can communicate its presence, its openness, its 'offer' and its level.

#### Further information

Please contact [research@sportengland.org](mailto:research@sportengland.org) for further information.