

THE CHARACTERISTIC FEATURE OF TRAINING CAMPS IN A LESSER-KNOWN REGION: A CENTRAL EUROPEAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract: Sports-related training camps constitute a very dynamically growing branch of sports tourism. The aim of this paper is to examine training camps in the case of a Central European city, Debrecen, one of the most important settlements of Hungary in terms of sports, which hosted several sporting events of international significance in the past decade. There is a significant fluctuation in the number of training camps held, which is related to the economic crisis, preparation for the Olympics, as well as problems in public administration. As far as branches of sports are concerned, team sports play an outstanding role; in addition, swimming could also be highlighted. Regarding the timing of training camps the months of February, July and August play the most important role and distribution is closely linked to the nature of the individual branches of sports. Analysing the factors influencing countries of participants, geographical proximity plays a major role; besides the importance of personal connections could be mentioned.

Key words: training camps, branches of sport, monthly distribution, Debrecen

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism continues to be a growing focus of economic development policy in many regions (Ilies et al., 2013; Matlovcova & Pompura, 2013; Pénczes et al., 2014). Since 2008, international tourism makes up 8% of the total export incomes and 5% of the GDPs in countries worldwide (WTO/WTTC, 2013). The industry is considered as one of the most important economic sectors, providing opportunities both for

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economy and development. Since the 1950s we can witness a continuing growth with the expectation of some short economic recession. The tourist arrival rose between 1950 and 2013 from 25 million to 1 billion persons the growth exceeds the average of the global economy (WTO/WTTC, 2013).

States around the world are turning to tourism as a strategy for development and they are fiercely competing for international tourism receipts, which are forecasted to total over US\$2 trillion by 2020 and arrivals are predicted to top 1.6 billion (WTO/WTTC, 2013). Tourism is being used to generate foreign exchange, increase employment, attract development capital and promote economic independence (Britton, 1982). Others have also suggested that tourism can be a focus for local economic development tied into the maintenance of the physical environment (Wilkinson, 1992).

One of the branches of today's dynamically developing tourism industry is sport tourism (Gammon & Robinson, 2013; Hinch & Higham, 2011; Luo & Huang, 2013), whose receiving area is constantly expanding worldwide (Michalkó, 2008). There are several categories applied in the examination of sport tourism (e.g. Pitts, 1999; Pigeassou et al., 2003; Deery et al., 2004; Kurtzman, 2005a; Drózd et al., 2012; Bujdosó & Dávid, 2013), among which the most accepted one (Gibson, 1998) separates three types: active sport tourism, event sport tourism and nostalgia sport tourism. Active sport tourism means that participants take part in competitive or non-competitive/leisure sport activities during their trip. In the case of event sport tourism, the main objective of tourists is to visit a sport event, while nostalgia sport tourism refers to visiting sights connected to sports (e.g. museum, stadium, etc.).

Sport training camps are a rapidly developing branch of active sport tourism but as of today, only a few studies have been written on the topic of training camps (e.g. Koc, 2005; Michalkó, 2007). A common characteristic of all these studies is that they primarily concentrate on the Mediterranean region (e.g. Turkey, islands of the Mediterranean Sea) and Persian Gulf countries (e.g. Qatar), and that they mainly focus on football (mass media also concentrates mainly on these – e.g. the training camp of FC Bayern Munich in Qatar). Besides these, other regions and other sports have been unfortunately neglected so far.

Studies have analysed the positive effects of training camps from two main aspects so far. On one hand, the subject of examination was the positive effect of training camps on athletes; other analyses investigated the impacts of such events on the reception areas.

Regarding the aspects of athletes, there are different factors to be mentioned, many of which are in connection with each other. First of all, athletes are detached from their familiar environment while attending training camps (Hingham & Hinch, 2009). This kind of separation generates new impulses on one hand and also offers them the possibility to concentrate solely on their sporting activity.

Secondly, training camps may create an opportunity to get to know potential competition venues (e.g. swimming pools), which might be a factor in their future success (Kurtzman, 2005b). Thirdly, the advantages related to the natural environment of training camps are also important. Regions with mild winters (e.g. the Mediterranean) are very popular among training camps organised in January and February (Kartakoullis & Karlis, 2002), while high altitude training camps are useful when preparing to competitions held at greater heights above sea level.

For the receiving settlements, the most important advantages lie in the guest nights spent by athletes and their expenditures, both of which usually exceed the spending level of average tourists. Another positive factor is that training camps are often organised out of the peak season (for example, in the case of team sports, the preparation camps for the spring season), thus mitigating problems caused by seasonality (Koc, 2005).

With a view to the above, the aim of this study is to examine training camps in the case of a settlement situated in Central Europa whose region does not any climatic advantages. Our case study is the second largest Hungarian city (Figure 1), Debrecen (its number of inhabitants is about 205,000), which is one of the most important settlements of Hungary in terms of tourism (Dávid & Tóth, 2012) and sports (Kozma et al., 2012; Kozma et al., 2014).

Our research primarily focused on the following problems/questions:

- what factors had an impact on the number of training camps and their annual distribution within a given year
- what nationalities used the facilities of Debrecen, and which sports were the most popular.



Figure 1. Location of Debrecen
(Source: own work)

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the course of our analysis, we have used the development concepts of Debrecen drawn up in various topics, the statistics of Sport Hotel pertaining to guest nights and training camps (What greatly facilitated our work was that all training camps coming to Debrecen used this hotel).

In addition, we also conducted interviews with the staff member of Debrecen Sports Centre Ltd. in charge of training camps. All the obtained results were statistically evaluated by the method of descriptive statistics (%). The data were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences 14.0 (SPSS 14.0).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

If we examine the number of training camps held in Debrecen and the number of guest nights spent, a very significant fluctuation can be observed (Table 1). After the renovation of Sport Hotel in 2004, very few people were aware of this possibility, which may explain the low rates of utilisation in 2005 and 2006. As a result of the availability of more information and the infrastructural developments, and also related to the preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, there was a significant increase in the number of training camps in 2007 and 2008.

The economic crisis, however, made its effect felt in this area as well, since interest in training camps generally decreased in the period after the Olympics, and a major decline in 2009 and 2010 is obvious from the numbers. The year 2011 shows an increase, followed by another decrease in 2012, despite the Olympics held in that year. This fact could be attributed to two factors. On the one hand, in May 2012, Debrecen hosted the 31st LEN Long Course European Swimming Championship and preparation for this (e.g. the transformation of the swimming pool) limited the possibility of organizing training camps. On the other hand, several teams from Ukraine and Arabic countries (Pap, 2013) had to cancel their planned training camps due to visa problems (the Hungarian state issued their visas too late). 2013 - the year after the Olympics - brought another decrease, partly because of the aforementioned problems related to visas.

Table 1. The number of training camps held in Debrecen and the number of guest nights spent there between 2005 and 2013 (Data source: Debrecen Sports Centre Ltd)

| | Number of training camps | Number of guests nights |
|-------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2005 | 11 | 2,454 |
| 2006 | 13 | 4,523 |
| 2007 | 26 | 6,250 |
| 2008 | 27 | 9,434 |
| 2009 | 19 | 6,061 |
| 2010 | 13 | 3,525 |
| 2011 | 22 | 6,084 |
| 2012 | 17 | 4,931 |
| 2013 | 15 | 2,922 |
| total | 163 | 46,184 |

Table 2. The monthly distribution of training camps held in Debrecen (Data source: Debrecen Sports Centre Ltd.)

| | The number of training camps | The monthly distribution of training camps (%) | The number of guest nights spent in the training camps | The monthly distribution of guest nights (%) _i |
|-----------|------------------------------|--|--|---|
| January | 15 | 9.2 | 3,942 | 8.5 |
| February | 20 | 12.3 | 5,672 | 12.3 |
| March | 12 | 7.4 | 1,943 | 4.2 |
| April | 10 | 6.1 | 5,251 | 11.4 |
| May | 10 | 6.1 | 2,242 | 4.9 |
| June | 7 | 4.3 | 2,047 | 4.4 |
| July | 31 | 19.0 | 10,889 | 23.6 |
| August | 31 | 19.0 | 9,282 | 20.1 |
| September | 7 | 4.3 | 1,769 | 3.8 |
| October | 11 | 6.7 | 1,893 | 4.1 |
| November | 4 | 2.5 | 763 | 1.7 |
| December | 5 | 3.1 | 491 | 1.1 |
| total | 163 | 100.00 | 46,184 | 100.0 |

As far as the timing of the training camps according to months is concerned (Table 2), the outstanding dominance of the summer months can be observed: nearly 40% of all training camps (and an even higher percentage if we examine guest nights) took place in the months of July and August, which is primarily due to the fact that this is one of the most important preparation periods for sports with events in an autumn-spring schedule. Third in the order of busiest months is February, which is no doubt due to preparation for the spring season.

If we analyze the breakdown of training camps according to branches of sports (Table 3), we can observe a clear dominance of team sports, with more than 60% of all training camps related to such sports.

The favourable situation with regards to sports facilities in the cities (and specifically the area of the hotel) are primarily in the background of this phenomenon: a sports arena and an artificial turf football pitch are located in the direct vicinity of the hotel, which provide excellent opportunities for the branches of sports concerned. The outstanding position of swimming, which is the second among the branches of sports, is attributable to the indoor aquatic complex nearby.

Table 3. The breakdown of training camps held in Debrecen according to branches of sports
(Data source: Debrecen Sports Centre Ltd.)

| Branches of sport | Number of training camps | Percentage of training camps per branches of sports (%) | The number of guest nights spent in the training camps | Percentage of guest nights per branches of sports (%) |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---|--|---|
| athletics | 20 | 12.3 | 6,604 | 14.3 |
| judo | 2 | 1.2 | 250 | 0.5 |
| air balloon | 1 | 0.6 | 235 | 0.5 |
| handball | 30 | 18.4 | 5,600 | 12.1 |
| basketball | 11 | 6.7 | 2,073 | 4.5 |
| football | 44 | 27.0 | 18,434 | 39.9 |
| boxing | 3 | 1.8 | 1,100 | 2.4 |
| pentathlon | 4 | 2.5 | 1,048 | 2.3 |
| volleyball | 6 | 3.7 | 1,616 | 3.5 |
| swimming | 39 | 23.9 | 8,889 | 19.2 |
| water polo | 3 | 1.8 | 335 | 0.7 |
| total | 163 | 100.0 | 46,184 | 100.0 |

The monthly distribution of the training camps held in the individual sports (Table 4) greatly contributes to the understanding of the data in Table 2. The significant role of the months of July and August is clearly due to team sports; it should be emphasized, however, that while in July (similarly to June) football plays the most important role, in August (and also in September), indoor sports (handball and basketball), whose championship season starts later have a higher than average role.

With regards to sports, the most even distribution can be observed in case of swimming, which can be fundamentally explained by the fact that preparation for the 3-4 large events (national and international meets) requires year-round training. Behind the concentration of track and field athletics training camps in 2 or 3 months is the fact that the months of March, April and May provide the best opportunities for preparation for the summer outdoor championship season.

If we consider the distribution of training camps according to countries of origin (Table 5), we can state that participants arrived from a total of 21 different countries; in addition, there were also 5 mixed training camps also held (in statistics, participants

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arriving from Arabic countries were listed in a single group, therefore the real total number is higher than the listed values). An analysis of the data indicates that participants from 13 countries came to not more than 2 training camps, which means that the role of these countries is not significant.

Table 4. The monthly distribution of training camps held in the individual branches of sports (with those branches of sports highlighted in the table in which at least six training camps were held)
(Data source: Debrecen Sports Centre Ltd.)

| | Athletics | Handball | Basketball | Football | Volleyball | Swimming | other | □ |
|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|-------|-----|
| January | - | 3 | 1 | 4 | - | 4 | 3 | 15 |
| February | - | - | - | 10 | - | 6 | 4 | 20 |
| March | 4 | 1 | - | - | - | 6 | 1 | 12 |
| April | 7 | - | - | - | - | 3 | - | 10 |
| May | 4 | - | - | - | 1 | 5 | - | 10 |
| June | - | - | 1 | 5 | - | 1 | - | 7 |
| July | 3 | 5 | - | 16 | 2 | 5 | - | 31 |
| August | 2 | 11 | 6 | 8 | 3 | 1 | - | 31 |
| September | - | 2 | 3 | 1 | - | - | 1 | 7 |
| October | - | 5 | - | - | - | 4 | 2 | 11 |
| November | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| December | - | 3 | - | - | - | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| total | 20 | 30 | 11 | 44 | 6 | 39 | 13 | 163 |

Table 5. The distribution of training camps on the basis of the countries of the participants
(Data source: Debrecen Sports Centre Ltd.)

| | Number of training camps | The number of guest nights spent in the training camps |
|------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Romania | 40 | 13,855 |
| Hungary | 38 | 10,616 |
| Arabic countries | 35 | 7,766 |
| Germany | 16 | 3,037 |
| Ukraine | 6 | 1,228 |
| mixed | 5 | 1,530 |
| Czech Republic | 3 | 2,559 |
| Italy | 3 | 512 |
| The Netherlands | 2 | 140 |
| Latvia | 2 | 996 |
| Austria | 2 | 148 |
| Israel | 2 | 640 |
| USA | 1 | 48 |
| Cyprus | 1 | 480 |
| Finland | 1 | 48 |
| Lithuania | 1 | 255 |
| Angola | 1 | 325 |
| United Kingdom | 1 | 51 |
| Kazakhstan | 1 | 224 |
| Slovenia | 1 | 312 |
| Denmark | 1 | 171 |
| total | 163 | 43,262 |

From among the countries that consider Debrecen as a significant base, fundamentally three must be highlighted. First, naturally, the proportion of Hungarian athletes is high; second, the significant role of athletes from Romania can be explained by the geographical proximity. The third significant group are Arabic countries, in the background of which is the fact that there is a large number of Arabic students at the University of Debrecen, and upon graduation some of them, working as sports organizers or sports physicians recommend the city to representatives of different branches of sports (the significance of this is inherent in the fact that Arabic athletes dominantly choose the location based on such personal connections). Major differences can be observed in the breakdown of the individual countries according to branches of sports (Table 6). In case of Romania and the Arabic countries, an outstanding role is played by ball games: in case of the former it is football, while in case of the latter group it is handball that can be regarded as dominant. In the group of Hungarian athletes, the most important role belongs to swimming, and the same applies (although in a much more concentrated way that in the case of Hungary) also to Germany.

Table 6. The distribution of training camps according to the countries of origin of the participants and branches of sports (with countries highlighted from which athletes participated in at least three training camps in Debrecen and branches in which at least six training camps were held)
(Data source: Debrecen Sports Centre Ltd.)

| | Athletics | Handball | Basketball | Football | Volleyball | Swimming | Other | □ |
|------------------|-----------|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|-------|-----|
| Romania | 3 | 4 | 4 | 29 | - | - | - | 40 |
| Hungary | 3 | 5 | 3 | - | 2 | 19 | 6 | 38 |
| Arabic countries | 2 | 14 | 4 | 8 | 4 | 3 | - | 35 |
| Germany | 4 | - | - | - | - | 12 | - | 16 |
| Ukraine | - | - | - | 6 | - | - | - | 6 |
| Czech Republic | 3 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3 |
| Italy | - | 2 | - | - | - | 1 | - | 3 |
| Mixed | - | - | - | - | - | - | 5 | 5 |
| other countries | 5 | 5 | - | 1 | - | 4 | 2 | 17 |
| total | 20 | 30 | 11 | 44 | 6 | 39 | 13 | 163 |

CONCLUSIONS

The most important findings of the study could be summarized as follows:

- There is a significant fluctuation in the number of training camps held, which is related to the economic crisis, preparation for the Olympics, as well as problems in public administration (in the case of some target groups, the existence of the latter means a serious threat to the city's competitiveness).

- As far as branches of sports are concerned, team sports (and within those, especially football) play an outstanding role; in addition, swimming could also be highlighted, due to the outstanding facilities of Debrecen.

- If we examine the timing of the training camps within the year, the months of February, July and August could be highlighted, and this distribution is closely linked to the nature of the individual branches of sports.

- As regards the countries from which participants of training camps arrive, geographical proximity plays a major role (a high proportion of Hungarian and Romanian athletes); in addition, the importance of personal connections could be underlined (e.g. athletes from Arabic countries).

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