

EVENTS – A View of Reality from the Gallery

It is impossible to generalise about events in 1970s sports and leisure centres. In so far as any of the centres had a plan the role of 'events' in the programme would have very different priority in each centre. Events need to be considered in terms of two main groups – sports events or non-sports events.

Sports Events

The first centres, with limited exceptions (see Afan Lido Chapter 2 for example), did not plan their buildings for spectator or special events. Later an important part of the brief to the architects of any new centre would usually have been the level of sporting event that the facilities were expected to accommodate. Sometimes that decision would be influenced by an existing sports interest within the community (which would probably have been involved in lobbying for the centre to be built): OR it could just have been about copying that which had been provided somewhere else. Over time the Sports Council developed regional and national plans which it hoped would influence local authority decisions and their own grant aid processes. Much later came facility plans from sport governing bodies.

For the early 1970s centre manager it was about making the best use of their facility and responding to demand where they could. Sports hall sports usually were limited by what had been provided in terms of floor sockets, lighting, colour schemes and ventilation flow rates etc. Governing bodies had very little if anything that could be imported into a centre for a special sports event. For example for a table tennis tournament extra tables would have to be 'scrounged'; extra trampolines for their competitions and so on. Portable lighting was sometimes obtainable but the height of the ceiling could not be changed and nor the floor dug up for extra sockets!

Initially the majority of indoor sports were happy to have access to a competition venue. Again over time equipment on the market changed e.g. moveable basketball goals, as did the requirements of sports bodies. They became more demanding in a way that could not always be immediately met e.g. volleyball posts and nets. In the more densely populated areas hierarchies of centres developed so that, for example, a particular centre might be able to offer the latest judo mats while another might be better suited for competitive badminton tournaments. This was particularly true where there was demand for spectator events. Most sports centre events began at a level where it was just about accommodating the participants plus a few chairs or a small viewing balcony. In the late 1970s even an event such as England versus Scotland volleyball international would not attract spectators or any media interest. However, there were centres such as Bracknell and Deeside, which had managers with a strong involvement in the game and sought income from events. They supported emerging competitions which attracted spectators, such as national league and international basketball.

Developments in demountable or portable seating units by firms such as Audience Systems created more scope for accommodating spectators but the storage space for such items was often not present in community sports centres. In the 1970s most sports events (notable exception was boxing) were not subject to specific licencing requirements.

It was rare for an event to be televised. If it was it would usually be by the BBC. (see 'Sportstown' Ch 6). BBC outside broadcasts used large specialist vehicles that had to be parked close to the competition space. These included a mobile control room and a transmitter mast vehicle (if you want to know what they looked like search models 'BBC dinky' on eBay!). These resources needed a

great deal of power often from portable generators with everything, including cameras connected by cables. Unless the centre had a specially designed hatch through which to bring these cables into the building, the cables would compromise fire exits and create draughts for spectators! BBC technical managers were very helpful and keen to participate in any discussion on the specification for a new centre where TV events were expected. Later The Sports Council published guidance on broadcasting facilities for centres.

Non-Sports Events

Why would a sports centre accommodate a non-sports event? The simplest answer to that question is that it contained the largest indoor space available to the community. More income was an incentive for some centres, but the additional costs associated with staging a non-sports event were often prohibitive where no provision had been made in the design brief. For the first generation of centre managers a non-sports event was a one-off event on a 'suck it and see' basis. The less densely populated an area the more likelihood that the sports hall would be sought after for a non-sports event even if it were only a Mayor's charity ball, the election count or a dog show.

At Concordia part of the management brief was to put the new town of Cramlington on the map, encourage interest in newly built private housing and give the population with no other amenities something to do. The occasional 'headline catching' event was therefore important but had to be balanced with the demand for the sports programme. At Clickimin in Lerwick (Shetland) the centre has successfully operated its sports and non-sports events programme for over 30 years. They have created interest, helped to balance the books and the original maple floor has survived. (The potential for damage to the centre, especially sports floors, always figured highly in the planning of a non-sports event.)

To start with there was an absence of regulation of non-sports events. Usually arrangements for each event had to be approved and inspected by the fire officer. An essential process but its ad hoc nature created uncertainty which was not resolved to a late stage affecting issues such as how many seats could be sold! Dances were covered by Public Entertainment licences – each requiring a separate application to the magistrates' court. This process that was further complicated if temporary bars were used in the sports hall outside the permanently licenced areas and/or additional opening hours were sought. (If catering was also provided the organisation of such events became extremely challenging!).

Non-sports events in sports centres were new to everybody in the first instance and a considerable amount of initiative and problem solving was required. Experience helped ease the planning and preparations as did the introduction of more flexible licensing laws and Sporting Entertainment licences.

Summary

In conclusion, there are far fewer major events held in centres as other specialist venues have been developed in the last twenty years. However, the advantages and disadvantages of an events programme are probably much the same as they have always been, except that they now involve less of the 'unknown'!

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