

## Tales from a tub

the last word in contemplative comment on the leisure industry

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### The impact of stadiums great and small

My life seems to have been full of stadiums over the last couple of weeks, new ones and old ones. As my beloved Chesterfield FC have moved to the brand new B2net Stadium, I have been witness to both sad and happy times and talked to people with a range of feelings as the club has moved house for the first time since 1871, making Saltergate the longest-serving ground in the football leagues. I have also visited the Olympic Park in East London twice and fitted in brief visits to Barnsley FC and Huddersfield's Galpharm, which is shared by soccer and rugby league. In addition, and over a slightly longer period of time, I have visited stadiums around the world including the famous home of Brazilian football, the Maracana, which seats something in the region of 160,000 people. One thing I can tell you from experience is that stadiums, even 'little' stadiums, cost lots of pennies. Chesterfield's has just come in at over £12 million and that is before we add the community facilities; the fabulous venues in London cost much more. So what is the benefit to our communities? Are they worth the money? What is the benefit they bring?

In order to make the visit to the Olympic site I had to give up attending the very first match to be played at the B2net Stadium. I was genuinely torn about what to do as I had pored over the architect's plans, stood in the mud and watched the Chesterfield venue grow out of the rubble-strewn ground of an old factory site but I felt that I couldn't miss a chance to see the amazing facilities doing the same in East London. I have had a long connection with the 'event' happening in a couple of year's time as I had been involved in writing the volunteer strategy for the Games bid before the decision was announced in Singapore and I have worked with the Newham's Volunteers, a pre-bid project, since its inception in 2004. So although I haven't been in Stratford every day, I have been around the area frequently and have seen both the facilities start to develop and the increasing engagement of local people with the whole project. The Olympic site won my attention this time but I was at Chesterfield on the Friday and the Monday before the first game (can you feel my guilt?).

After the visit to London, which included a chance meeting with Mayor Boris Johnson as he scooted around town promoting his "two years to go" message, myself and Mr Tub called in at a local supermarket where, having seen my Chesterfield shirt (my token gesture of support since I wasn't at the game), a man enquired, "What was the score today?" Thanks to the internet I was able to confidently reply that Derby had beaten the Spirites 5-4 but then I chirped up, "But I wasn't there". This fellow, who it transpired was a fellow of the Rams, began to scowl and asked, "Why ever not?" I explained that I had just had the chance of a lifetime and been to see the Olympic Stadium being built and got a lecture about how much money was being spent on "them southern places" when the money should be being spent in the north, all capped with: "Call yourself a true supporter?" This tirade started me thinking about the impact these mega-venues have both at a national level and on a more local one. My friend in the supermarket seemed to be OK with the new stadium in Chesterfield but not with the ones in the capital.

So are these huge facilities useful and value for money? On the face of it, how can a stadium be worth the outlay with a standard football stadium hosting, at absolute maximum, 30 home games a year. Is it really worth



The B2net Stadium: the Spirites' new home

**"All stadiums, large and small, can be a central part of a community's, or even a country's life, and that they impact on 'folk' whether they attend the sporting activity which takes place in there or not."**

spending £12 million for 30 matches of 90 minutes a year? Do they need to be value for money? What I do know is that all stadiums, large and small, can be a central part of a community's, or even a country's life, and that they impact on 'folk' whether they attend the sporting activity which takes place in there or not. The Olympic Stadium, which is costing a fair bit more than £12 million, will probably be used less as a sporting arena than a local football pitch would be, although this will depend on what its "legacy" actually becomes. If I just look at the cost of building one of these structures my friend in the supermarket is probably right but a stadium is much more than the 30 first team games a year and even if we look at cost alone there may be an argument to say they are fairly good value for money. Chesterfield after all played at Saltergate from 1871, a total of 139 years .

But a stadium is much more than the 30 games played there every year. A town or city is often defined by its iconic buildings, with the stadiums playing a central part of that identity. The All England Tennis Club and Wembley Stadium are recognised around the world and the mere mention of Old Trafford results in knowing nods and smiles in the farthest and most remote areas of this planet. I am led to believe that four billion people will watch the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games and, be honest, if you think of Beijing you will probably be able to describe the Bird's Nest Stadium and the beautiful aquatics centre which lit up the nights during the 2008 Games but less able to describe much more about the ancient city in which these stadiums reside. Even in Rome, where there are more iconic buildings than you can shake a stick at, the Olympic Stadium is still a very important part of both the skyline and the city, and is home to two football clubs.

This leads me to the conclusion – and doesn't take Benedict Cumberbatch [The new Sherlock. Ed] to work this one out – that, at very least, our stadiums are tourist attractions. Even in humble Chesterfield we have people from around the world who visit the town to see the football ground and this has increased since Saltergate became Derby County's "Baseball Ground" in the film about Brian Clough, The Damned Utd. But we still couldn't justify a stadium just as a tourist attraction, could we? Although I welcome the use of stadiums as a way of attracting visitors, this can't be the only reason to back building stadiums.

A local stadium must be part of its economic community, creating business for pubs, cafes and catering suppliers, and work for a range of people from cleaners to ticket office staff to groundspeople. Increasingly, our new stadiums are 365-day-a-year operations that include hotels, office space, conference facilities, parking, leisure facilities, play areas, learning spaces, cafes, restaurants, retail outlets, even film sets. The very largest of these facilities create hundreds of jobs and facilitate even more for all the suppliers; even the smallest stadiums are vital for the local economy. Given time with a calculator, this would provide a financial justification for both developing new and redeveloping older stadiums.

For over a year now the people of Chesterfield have been looking forward to the lovely new facilities at the new ground; things like a roof on the loos. They have also been looking at the old ground and saying, "It's a shame" and, "I'm really going to miss it." On the day of the final match the community team hired the local Pomegranate Theatre and put on films of days gone by at Saltergate, selling 750 tickets and filling the venue. After the film show the assembled audience then formed a parade to make the last walk to Saltergate and by the time they reached the ground the numbers had grown to over 2,000 people. There wasn't a dry eye in the house by the final whistle. The community was losing an old friend. People ranging from youngsters to pensioners and even the Duke of Devonshire have recounted stories of their experiences at Saltergate. It is truly part of the community. As we settle into the new ground people are wandering around the outside looking for the brick they bought to help pay for the new ground and ensure the community have been built into the walls of the new stadium but, however laudable, this does not justify the new build. Local stadiums and the clubs that inhabit them are vital providers and supporters of a wide range of community activities including football (or rugby or cricket or tennis) but also health care and health promotion, education, local policing, fitness opportunities, play, heritage projects and arts activities. They often also provide the largest party venue in a local town. The professional sport element is a major attraction and allows us all to feel part of our local 'gang' but that is only a small part of the service the stadium and its home club provides. At the very least, it is a place where friends and families meet on a regular basis to watch the match – and moan about the result.

The Olympic venues in East London are on an altogether different scale to even Premiership football club stadiums and I am sure we will hear moans and groans about the cost of them for many years to come but if managed well they will become just as important to the communities of Stratford, Forest Gate and Bethnal Green as your local stadium is to you. In addition they will also be focus points for national events; they will be the country's 'home ground'.

We need both small and large sports facilities and shouldn't dismiss the local stadium as a white elephant only used for the local 'prima donnas' to kick a ball around once every two weeks in the winter. That local stadium is a focal point and of incredible importance to a lot of people, possibly people that you – yes, you leisure professionals – don't usually engage with. Additionally, if you have the opportunity to be involved with the redevelopment of a stadium, grab it with both hands. Most are well worth the money, particularly if they are designed properly from the outset to be a 365-day facility, and they are much more than bricks and mortar. For many they are part of the community, an old friend.

Finally, a message for the boards of professional clubs and even for LOCOG. Don't dismiss the community, however much money you may put in personally. Those facilities belong to the community and they will ensure they are well used, potentially for a century or more and long after the current investors have become memorial plaques on the wall.

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