



'We can do it': Community, resistance, social solidarity, and long-term volunteering at a sport event



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ABSTRACT

Much research on volunteers has focused on who the volunteers are, and what motivates them on an individual level. This study, however, aims to contextualize the long-term commitment found in a whole community of volunteers and to explain this pattern of collective volunteering not in terms of individual motivations but in terms of broader social processes. Data gathered from interviews with volunteers in Vikersund, Norway, and the analysis of local and national press coverage in the years leading up to the 2013 World Cup in Ski flying in Vikersund suggest that long-term volunteering can be understood in terms of (i) a high level of social integration (socialization, institutionalization); (ii) the creation of a collective identity focused around the ski flying hill; and (iii) the maintenance and reinforcement of strong community identity and social solidarity by local resistance to the perceived hostility of outside organizations. This focus on the broader community/social processes has implications for researchers examining sport event volunteers as well as managers of recurring sport events wishing to retain volunteers.

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1. Introduction

For almost four decades, Vikersund, a small community in Norway with fewer than 3000 inhabitants, has hosted major competitions in ski flying. The jumping hill is a major landmark of this small community, and the focus of much local pride, as it is currently the world's largest ski flying venue with a hill record and world record of 246.5 m. More than one-third of the people living in Vikersund volunteer whenever the community hosts an event. In the last three years, this community has hosted two World Cups and one World Championship; on each occasion, more than 1000 local volunteers have provided the core of the labor force for the event. Our interest in these volunteers was triggered by what appeared to be a relationship between, on the one hand, the high level of local volunteering and, on the other, a high level of social integration and a strong local collective identity associated with local community resistance to what were seen as attempts by outside bodies, most noticeably the Norwegian National Ski Federation (NSF) and the International Ski Federation (FIS), to undermine the position of Vikersund as a major venue for ski flying (e.g., Bratvold & Gullord, 2013; Kaggstad, 2011).

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The central objective of this paper is to contextualize the long-term commitment found in a whole community of volunteers and to explain this pattern of collective volunteering. To answer these questions, we initially took a traditional theoretical approach to volunteering in sports events, that of individual motivations (see the literature review in Section 1.2). However, as data collection and analysis continued in this exploratory study, we found that the existing literature, which focused largely around the psychology of individual motivation, did not adequately explain what was occurring (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Suddaby, 2006). In exploring alternative explanations, we drew upon a Durkheimian perspective which enabled us to shift the focus away from the individual level and toward broader social processes, particularly but not exclusively at the community level (see theoretical framework). We believe this approach contributes to the literature on volunteers by opening up a new and potentially fruitful area for investigation. We demonstrate the impact of broader social/community processes on individual behavior (volunteering) and volunteer retention/long-term volunteering. This approach highlights the key social processes (e.g., socialization, institutionalization) that helped create a collective/community identity based on pride and solidarity, which in turn was sustained and reinforced through continued engagement (volunteering) and resistance to perceived external 'powers' (i.e., the NSF and FIS). Our findings have implications for researchers, such as the fact that volunteering is a more complex topic of study than simply examining individual characteristics, and implications for managers, such as the need to understand the local context not only to attract volunteers but also to retain them. Before turning to these findings, we present the unique history of the ski flying venue and its place in the local community as an essential prelude to understanding volunteering in Vikersund.

1.1. Historical background

The first normal hill jumping competition in Vikersund took place in 1936, when the winner jumped 86 m (Drolsum, Flattum, & Lund, 1994). Thirty years later the first ski flying hill competition was held following a campaign by the local community, led by prominent people such as the founder of the hill, who was also the director of a ski factory (Hegton, 2011). The NSF, which was a very conservative organization, opposed attempts to modernize the traditional ski jump (Drolsum et al., 1994); despite this opposition, Vikersund built what was Norway's first ski flying venue (and the only one in the Nordic countries). Over the years, Vikersund has hosted the World Championship four times (1977, 1990, 2000 and 2012), World Cup events nine times (1980, 1983, 1986, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013), and five world records have been set on the hill.

The difference between ski jumping and ski flying is the inrun and the pitch. Ski flying hills have a hill size of over 185 m. In Vikersund, the hill size is 225 m. In comparison, normal hills have a hill size of 85–109 m (FIS, 2013). Building and updating such a venue is expensive. As such, there is a shared ownership of the venue; the ski jumping facility is owned by the Foundation Vikersund Jumping Centre, which in turn is owned by the municipality, the county and Vikersund sports club. In particular, the ownership by the sports club, of which all the different sports in the community are members, gives local people a sense of ownership in the jumping hill. Furthermore, any financial surplus from events is divided among the non-governmental organizations which the volunteers represent.

Hosting many sports events over several decades, Vikersund has assumed a position of international sporting prominence, which is unusual for a small town. Associated with this, the local community has developed what may be described as a ski jumping culture, while the ski jumping hill has become a focus of local community pride and identity. This became very apparent a few years ago when the status of the Vikersund jumping hill as the national venue for ski flying was threatened due to Oslo's application for the 2011 World Championships. Powerful groups within the Norwegian skiing community wanted to build a new national arena for ski jumping in Rødkleiva, just outside Oslo. The new plan was to build an ordinary jumping hill first for the 2011 World Championship, and then extend it out to the ski flying hill. The plan was that Rødkleiva would replace both Holmenkollen (the national pride and most visited tourist attraction in Norway) and Vikersund. This plan was adopted by the NSF in May 2005. However, after strong protests, especially from Vikersund, the decision was overturned in June 2008, and both Holmenkollen and Vikersund underwent extensive rebuilding instead.

The development of the Vikersund jumping hill has faced other challenges over the years. One of these relates to the economic costs, particularly for a small community, of keeping a venue such as Vikersund at the required level for international competition. Hosting a major event does not necessarily boost the local economy (Mules & Faulkner, 1996). Especially in the 1990s, major events generated little profit, even though labor costs were minimized by the large number of volunteer staff, as the major source of income – the TV revenues – went not to the local community in Vikersund but to the NSF (Kaggestad, 2011).

In addition, these local struggles have been further complicated by developments within ski flying at the international level. In recent years, several world records in ski flying have been set in Planica (Slovenia), which emerged as a major competitor to Vikersund as the world's best ski flying hill. The extended Vikersund jumping hill, it might be noted, was built out to the maximum length allowed and designed as a blueprint from Planica and, in 2011, a new world record of 246.5 m was set at Vikersund.

The development of this small town into an international center of sporting excellence has not been simple or unproblematic, but problems and obstacles have been met by everyone, from ordinary volunteers to the three symbolic and/or organizational leaders and contributors: the leader of the organizing committee of the event, a resourceful local entrepreneur, and the vice president of competition (Kaggestad, 2011). What is clear is that the local community has remained a highly integrated community with local pride and loyalty focused largely around the ski hill, and that this sense

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