

# SPORTING ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND THEIR TOURISM POTENTIAL

SPORT AND DEVELOPMENT, BY ANTHONY HARFORD

The potential for Trinidad and Tobago to become a booming sport centre is great, but it requires a strategic approach that includes all stakeholders

It's a complete surprise when a dream comes true and none of it looks the way you dreamed it would. November 1990 is a memory of red; a nation at the ready, their collective breath held waiting to unleash the perfect storm of victory. But none came. Sixteen years later a mere handful of pilgrims witnessed Trinidad and Tobago qualify for the 2006 World Cup. A long-awaited dream, hard won by the smallest nation to ever make it to football's most prestigious competition, and yet a victory marred by anger and disappointment as we faced the wrath of the Bahrainis. The tableau etched in my mind saddens and yet uplifts my spirit.

Today I cannot look at a steel pan without being reminded how our national instrument, shielded us that night from the missiles thrown. The instruments belonging to Woodbrook Playboyz played an heroic role in ensuring the empty bottles and stones being thrown at us on all sides did not hit the younger Trinis among us. Never has a day in sport spoken more for who we are as a nation.

A simple glance into our country's past reveals an abundance of proud moments, like Lystra Lewis' visionary hosting of the world netball championships in 1979 and our consequent win. The heroics of Dwight Yorke, Haseley Crawford, Brian Lara. Surely we are ready to welcome the world to one of the world's gems.

Sport has always been a part of who we are. Tropical days are made to be outdoors. Many of our great sportsmen and women honed their skills in fields and on beaches. It's a natural mix. It's the reason why Barbados sees as many as 200 visiting teams annually. Their first stop may be the batting nets but the visit always ends on sandy shorelines. We need to emulate this. Our topography is ideal for Adventure racing, Coast to Coast multi-sport events, and of course that great healthy lifestyle pursuit, Hiking. The winter months abroad see the most pleasant climate here. That's a natural fit for sport tourism. More

than that we are a friendly people; we exude authentic warmth that is easily seen and felt. Germany 2006 is proof of that. During the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany, I recall a CNN News anchor saying "My favourite is the team from Trinidad and Tobago. They don't seem to know when they are losing, they are friendly and know how to show it". That is our competitive edge! How we use that now is critical.

Our 50 years of nationhood have been punctuated by great successes; in fact the majority of our national heroes derive from the area of sport. We continue to build on this rich tradition with our young athletes excelling in ever-widening sporting disciplines. Over the last decade we have made great strides in building our sport infrastructure and boast now of four stadia. We already have the experience of hosting a number of international events. Within recent years a variety of university programmes have been designed and put in place to fill the growing opportunities for employment in the field of sport tourism.

Government policies and investment moving forward must be designed to support these advances. That will necessitate a strategic approach that includes all stakeholders and a clear understanding of all, about their roles in this collective effort. Opportunities need to be clearly identified. On the ground, communication and coordination between sporting organisations and the tourism authority must be established and actively maintained. Since sporting associations traditionally organise events, these bodies need to be educated and trained to maximise the tourism potential of their activities. Event calendars for sport and tourism must be coordinated in order to achieve this.

Masters games and sporting festivals created solely for their entertainment value have grown around the world and attract a plethora of aficionados. Dubai stands out in this, building its brand through a variety of manufactured

and well-packaged sports events. Our local associations have the enthusiasm and creativity to develop comparable events. To support these efforts government must address difficulties these sporting associations experience in accessing funding for planning and executing such events. They must remain focused on the long term benefits to the country.

Government must also commit itself to research and data collection. Presently none exists. Projections made by sport associations and other organisations in planning events are usually based on past experience. Formulating viable strategies to grow sport tourism can only be accomplished with accurate and relevant information. Post-event research must also be undertaken and the long term benefits of events tracked. To guarantee the efficacy of these strategies a standardised approach to evaluating events must be formulated and best practice guidelines set out. Great reserves of patience is also required as results are not instant, the brand has to grow.

In addition, we must ensure capacity utilisation of our existing facilities and, importantly, we must develop community facilities to link our visitors with our people. I recently hosted an Australian cricket team and arranged a game at Preysal, a local hotspot for cricket. At about 8pm, I received a cry for help. The bus driver was unable to return the team to their hotel. The team was nestled in an open area beneath a home, eating curry and unwilling to leave the camaraderie and hospitality that so warmly embraced them there! This I guarantee happens no where else in the region. I am also reminded that through sport we may be exposing another great aspect of national life, our unique cuisine!

In my 30 odd years in the sporting industry, encompassing my travels and endeavours in the field, often I have thought of Trinidad and Tobago's vibrancy and how beautifully it could lend itself to the superior development of the sport tourism product. There is an ever-growing presence of supporters, innovators and talented athletes. The potential for Trinidad and Tobago to become a booming sport centre is great. This year we celebrate our 50th anniversary of Independence and continue to make bold statements about who we are and our vision for the future. In October 2012, our country will proudly host the 30th Commonwealth Sports Awards in keeping with the vigour and purposeful strides of our nation-building. This celebration of 50 must be the platform to start selling ourselves. ■

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Photograph by Stephen Broadbridge



Trinbagonian sports fans are as much a part of the spectacle as the players themselves