

Tragedy offers lessons for event organisers managing volunteers



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Sporting disasters are rare but they catch the attention of the public. In Scotland and the UK there is a positive tradition of examining and learning from tragic events. From the 1971 Ibrox disaster to the Taylor report on stadium safety following Bradford and Hillsborough, each rare event remains in the memory not only because of the tragic results, but because they created opportunities to learn and make big steps to improve the safety of our sporting passions.

The summer of 2017 saw a first for Scottish court proceedings and for sport in the UK, with the holding of the joint fatal accident inquiry (FAI) into the deaths of four motor sport fans – Joy Robson, Iain Provan, Elizabeth Allan and Leigh Stern.

Held at Edinburgh Sheriff Court, the FAI was convened in order to carefully consider the circumstances surrounding one fatality (Robson) that occurred in 2013 at the Snowman Rally, as well as three fatalities that occurred just one year later at the 2014 Jim Clark Rally (JCR).

The determination issued by Sheriff Maciver is thorough and thoughtful and, although it is very focused on stage rallying, contains both recommendations and observations that are relevant to all event organisers in motorsport, in sport in general and beyond.

All sports events, but particularly the more significant ones, rely for their very existence on the availability of insurance, access to venues and support from medical services, the police and relevant authorities. Organisers and governing bodies will need to be seen by all of these to have considered this latest contribution to guidance on event management and how it might apply to them.

The role of the volunteer

Major sporting events rely heavily on volunteers, from the 600 marshals needed at the JCR, to the Olympic and Commonwealth 'gamesmakers', to the marshals holding up 'Quiet' boards at The Ryder Cup. Without this army of unpaid volunteers many sporting events would simply not happen. The JCR and Snowman fatalities were a freak

accident for the individuals affected, and with profound implications for their wider families. What, though, of the rally enthusiasts and volunteers?

These were individuals who had given up their time to attend organising committees, who co-ordinated the planning and execution of the rally, who acted as on-course officials, or who were deployed as safety marshals. They were enthusiasts whose initial expectations were to enjoy a day of motorsport rallying, and give something back to their sport, but who ended the event having to give statements to the police.

Enthusiasts who never imagined that decisions they had taken before, and during, the rallies would be investigated and examined, and who would then anxiously wait to learn whether civil or criminal proceedings would be commenced as a consequence of the circumstances leading to the four fatalities.

The FAI findings

The facts of the two accidents have been well rehearsed in the media and are considered in detail in the determination. In this note we will focus on Sheriff Maciver's findings where there are wider points for sporting events in general.

The Sheriff made 13 recommendations and separately identified 11 points for consideration by rally organisers. The majority of these are specific to organisers and governing bodies for rally sports but there are significant lessons for event organisers in a wider context.



The Sheriff recognised the work of the Scottish Government's Motorsport Event Review Group which was set up immediately following the JCR fatalities and many of his recommendations repeat and elaborate on the recommendations from that Group.

Volunteer training

In particular, the Sheriff focussed on recommendations made by the Review Group in relation to the training of volunteer marshals at events. The Scottish Government Review Group reported in late 2014, and the recommendations in relation to training and licensing of marshals were well on their way to being implemented by the start of the FAI. The governing body of four wheeled motorsport, the MSA, was commended by the Sheriff for the speed and effectiveness with which these changes had been implemented. Any sporting or other event which relies on volunteer marshals for 'on the ground' spectator control will need to consider whether a structured training programme should be introduced.

Planning and management

The FAI determination carefully explains that no one person or decision was responsible for the JCR fatalities. However, the Sheriff details a chain of small failures and errors that created what he calls a 'perfect storm progression' when combined with other circumstances resulting in spectator injuries being almost inevitable.

The Sheriff finds that, in relation to the JCR, there was a 'weak, ambiguous, and ultimately inadequate verification system for checking the proper performance of the work' of individuals who played a key safety role (in this case, the stage commanders and stage set up crews).

The FAI has painstakingly examined the evidence and identified contributing factors to the 'perfect storm progression' including apparently incidental issues like the retirement in the previous year of two experienced stage set up volunteers, a failure to pass on information about some incomplete set up work, incorrect interpretation of that incomplete work as being deliberate, the failure of checking processes to spot the incorrect set up, the delayed arrival of marshals impacting briefing, paperwork inadvertently not passed over on a change of marshals and a number of other apparently minor failures.

Put together, these failures led to the development of a dangerous situation for spectators over one stretch of about 300 yards in one stage of an 18 stage rally. That dangerous situation then turned to tragedy.

Event governance and management

Two main themes can be taken from the FAI Determination and Recommendations – how can the board or organising committee (however that may be formally described) properly control and supervise the event; and how can an

event be effectively (and safely) run with the assistance of volunteers?

If the event goes wrong, the investigation will likely first turn to the organising committee. Decisions will be scrutinised and individuals held to account. Areas of interest will be around:

- The planning and preparation for the event;
- Specific roles and responsibilities for office-bearers;
- How the event was due to be resourced (indeed, the Sheriff observed that for both Snowman and the JCR 'marshal numbers were at certain pressure points close to being insufficient');
- What policies and procedures were in place, both for the committee and for the volunteers;
- What was the assessment of risk, and what steps were taken to mitigate risk;
- What steps were taken to ensure compliance with the relevant laws and regulations (legal and sporting);
- What responsibilities are to be delegated;
- How were systems of reporting put in place and communicated;
- What was the committee's approach to ongoing supervision, monitoring and improvement?

The smooth running of an event, and spectator safety, may rely (in part) on volunteers; but, equally crucial is to ensure that the organising committee has found the right type of volunteers, the right number of volunteers to ensure correct and adequate resourcing, and that volunteers are deployed in roles that best suit their particular skills and strengths (as regards the FAI, the Sheriff described this as organisers understanding 'the need to locate the most experienced marshals in sufficient numbers to the most potentially difficult areas of spectator control', bearing in mind the need for a flexible approach on the day).

Whilst volunteers may be excited that they have a role to play in the event, and which may allow them to get very close to the action, that enthusiasm must be properly managed and controlled. The main challenge for the organisers is to ensure that those responsible for event safety properly understand the responsibilities they are taking on, what pre-event training that is expected of them, and the level of commitment required.

Ideally, this should all be properly documented (and signed) for two reasons – it provides those volunteers with clear guidelines and a proper understanding of the chain of command, and it provides the organising committee with an audit trail of the guidance, induction and training that has been implemented in the lead up to the event. It may also assist in flagging up areas of concern where volunteers



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are less clear on their duties, or may feel they don't have the necessary skills or training to properly discharge their function.

The question of insurance is also significant. Does the organising committee have adequate insurance in place for incidents arising at the event? Or is insurance provided by the sport's governing body? And has the organising committee properly assessed whether individual committee members are covered by insurance for legal costs should there be an investigation or, worse still, a criminal prosecution?

The events of 2013 and 2014 were sporting accidents that had very tragic consequences. The lessons learned from those accidents, and the FAI recommendations should be essential reading for all involved in the running of a sporting event and who are concerned with event and spectator safety. Any event organiser reading the evidence

in the determination will recognise and probably have experienced similar oversights and errors of communication. The wider lesson from the JCR tragedy is the need for all event organisers to be aware of the potential for apparently small oversights or errors by dedicated and experienced volunteers to compound and create the potential for tragedy. The need for robust cross-checking mechanisms is clearly set out in this determination, as well as the need to pay special attention to areas of change in an organisation, even at an apparently junior level.

This advice is not limited to motorsport or even to sporting events. Spectators and fans from motorsport to golf are passionate people, keen to have an exciting and fulfilling day out. Between excited fans and danger there is a thin line of volunteers, they deserve to be supported by robust organisation.



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