Ambush Marketing: A study of strategies and legal responses

Abstract
Ambush marketing is defined as the unauthorised association by a third party with a major event, undermining the commercial function of official sponsorship. Established areas of law, such as intellectual property (trade mark, copyright), unfair competition or trade practice law, and the protection of Olympic Symbol under the Nairobi Treaty (1981) have left a grey area for ‘smart’ ambush marketers.

This paper will present the results of a study of ambush marketing instances since 1984, and consider the effectiveness of current legal responses, especially special events legislation.

Introduction
Ambush marketing is a threat to major sport events for it undermines the commercial function of official sponsorship and breaks the integrity of the events. There is no unified definition of the term (Hoek and Gendall, 2002). In this paper, we follow the definition of Richards (1998). Ambush marketing is taken as “implying an association with the sponsored event that does not exist”, understood widely to include the following ambushing parties (ibid. p. 116):
- “a competitor who is not a sponsor;
- non-competitor who is not a sponsor;
- co-sponsors that imply a more significant association than in fact exists”[1]

The knowledge of ambushing tactics is the basis for a proactive strategy against ambushers and this paper will categorize different ambushing strategies and examine the current legal responses (especially special legislations) to them.

Ambushing strategies
Meenaghan (1994) distinguishes five types of ambush marketing strategies: (1) Sponsoring the broadcast of the event; (2) Sponsor subcategories within the event and exploit this investment aggressively; (3) Purchasing advertising time around relays of the competitor’s event; (4) Engaging in major non-sponsorship promotions to coincide with event; and (5) Other highly
creative and inventive strategies. Though the first four have accurately captured some of the common ambushing strategies, the fifth one is obviously too broad, catching all the ambushing tactics which don’t belong to the first four.

The researchers have created a database of ambush marketing cases since 1984, when the first use of the term appears in connection with the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles: Fuji Photo Film USA was the official 35mm film of the Games, and Kodak countered by paying considerably less to sponsor the US track and field trials and ABC’s broadcast of the Games. 73 instances were archived, using key word searches on the electronic databases (ABI; Business and Industry), and cross references from a variety of publications. The study of the collected ambushing instances has revealed that such “highly creative and inventive strategies” often happened around some common subjects such as venues, athletes and intellectual property elements while different strategies were applied around the same subject. The examination of different ambushing strategies will be based on Meenaghan’s categorisation but replaces its fifth type with four more specific subject categories.

(1) Sponsoring the broadcast of the event;
The benefit of ambush marketing by this way is obvious considering that media audiences are much larger than on-site audiences.

This strategy was employed by fast-food company, Wendy’s in the 1988 Summer and Winter Games. McDonald’s was the exclusive fast-food sponsor of the U.S. Olympic Committee for the Games. Yet the rival Wendy had become “a proud sponsor of ABC’s television coverage of the 1988 Winter Olympics,” as the company’s napkins declared. And although Wendy was barred from displaying the five-ringed Olympic symbol, the company used a nearly identical ABC symbol instead. At the time, the restaurants of Wendy were plastered with Olympic-like symbols. Its storefronts were filled with ski-racing posters that proclaimed “We’ll Be There!” Its tray liners were printed with stories about the Olympics. And its napkins were embellished with what looked like the Olympic rings. Wendy’s said, “We found another way of getting the job done at considerably less expense.” (Goldman 1993)[2]

This strategy does not work well now since broadcasters in many countries will now either offer first option to the sponsor, or will refuse competitors to sponsor the broadcasting.

(2) Sponsor subcategories within the event and exploit this investment aggressively;
This strategy was widely applied for being cost-effective. Ambushers by paying much less money than main category sponsors have obtained legitimate sponsorship opportunity to get associated with the events. The research conducted by Sandler and Shani (1998) following the conclusion of the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games supports the conclusion arrived by Stotlar (1993) that considerable confusion over the different levels of Olympic sponsorship existed. Ambushers using this strategy are trying to take advantage of this confusion.

Kodak “ambushed” Fuji in the 1984 Olympic Games by sponsoring the US track and field trials. Fuji retaliated by sponsoring the US swimming team in the 1988 Olympic Games when Kodak was the official world wide sponsor (Meenaghan 1994).[3]
This strategy can be successful partly owing to the “clutter” of different tiers of sponsorship in the same event. It can be solved if the event organisers have structured sponsorship carefully and prevented brand competitors of an official sponsor becoming programme sponsor. Sears, Roebuck & Co. had hoped to sponsor two U.S. teams, figure skating and skiing, in the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway, and two U.S. teams, gymnastics and swimming, in the Summer Olympics in Atlanta in 1996 but was told “no thanks” for its rival, Home Depot Inc had spent $40 million to be the major sponsor of the Games. So Sears’s plans for in-store promotions and thousands of special Olympic pins were halted. (Goldman, K 1993)

(3) Purchasing advertising time around relays of the competitor’s event;
Sandler and Shani’s (1998) research revealed that about a third of the respondents believe that whoever advertised during the telecast was an official sponsor. This indicates that the use of advertising during the event telecast is a highly effective ambush strategy.

MasterCard International aired two new 30-second commercials on NBC during Super Bowl XXX, despite Visa’s role as the National Football League’s exclusive credit card. MasterCard gained near-equal ad time with Visa during the highest-rated sporting event of the year (Fitzgerald 1996).[4]

The simple solution to combat this ambushing strategy might be that sponsors buy out all advertising time around relays of the event to out-market the competitors. If impossible, the broadcasters should be at least be required by contract not to allow one person (other than sponsors) to secure more than a certain percentage of the advertising time during the broadcast to prevent competitors from monopolizing the advertising time (Richards 1998).

(4) Engaging in major non-sponsorship promotions to coincide with an event;
This type of ambushing strategy uses mainstream media advertising and/or below-the-line promotions to benefit from the publicity of the events (Meenaghan 1994). Kodak was sole imaging sponsor of the 1996 Games. Its arch-rival Fuji co-sponsored an elaborate display, honoring 100 years of track and field featuring past Olympic athletes alongside next year’s hopefuls. From New York in November 1995, the exhibit journeyed across the U.S. before landing in Atlanta in time for the 17-day Summer Olympics in the following year. Called Images of Excellence, the exhibit was heavy on photos.

Fuji, which advertised Images of Excellence on radio and in newspapers, insisted the promotion merely took advantage of the country’s heightened interest in sports. The photo giant also offered a poster series and desk calendar featuring athletes such as Dan O’Brien and Michael Johnson, both strong contenders for the Olympic team. The exhibit lasted two years, starting before the tryouts for the Olympic teams and continuing long after the games’ end.[5]

(5a) *Venue-related ambush marketing*
In the course of an event the venues for competition are undoubtedly the focus of audience’
Ambush marketing occurring in the venue will not only impact on the on-site audience but also media audiences through the broadcasting of the games. Trying to make the ambusher’s brand exposed in or near the venue is the distinct character of this subject category.

Buying advertising space in the host city of the event or “sneaking” in some items containing the ambusher’s brand are the traditional strategy. The following are the successful examples.

At the Atlanta 1996 Summer Olympics, despite Reebok being an official sponsor, Nike set up ‘Nike Town’, a tent city in a car park on the edge of Atlanta’s Centennial Park, and handed out Nike banners to spectators of the marathon. Nike billboards were also prominent around the city, bearing the slogan ‘You don’t win silver, you lose gold’. Similarly, in the Football World Cup Finals in France ‘98, Nike built a football village on the outskirts of Paris to which it brought its star teams, among them the former world champions, Brazil.

In Sydney 2000 Olympics, the flags bearing the name and logo of Wu Liang Ye, a Chinese Alcohol company, were waved by a group of Chinese spectators and gained global coverage. Wu Liang Ye did not have any sponsorship link with the Games at all, but just sent these ‘cheer squads’ to the key venues (Eade et al 2002).

Ambushers sometimes use a hot balloon to extend their ambushing message in the air space. In 2000, Major League Baseball Pepsi’s hot balloon was floating over the stadium despite rival Coke’s role as sponsor of the whole tournament (Terry 2000).

Such ambushing strategies can hardly be successful now because of the event organizers’s prevention strategy, such as the Internation Olympic Committee’s clean venue policy[6]. Advertising space within the camera view around the host city is normally under the control of event organizers. Items containing competitors’ brand are generally not allowed to take into the venue.

However sudden ambushing stunts are still annoying the event organizers. For example during an Australian-New Rugby match in Sydney in 2002, two men covered in nothing but painted-on Vodafone logos streaked onto the playing field (BBC 2002).

Korean electronics giant LG also challenged ATHOC’s venue control policy at the 2004 Athens Games by its “ferry marketing”. LG was also reported as taking advantage of the Games outside Olympic sports venues. It took large intercity ferries, a main means of transport and popular tourist item, as key marketing venues. The vessels were equipped with LG Electronics’ upscale flat-panel displays, premium home appliances and camera phones.[7]

Equipment in the venue can sometimes offer an ambushing opportunity. At the 2002 Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Nike engaged in a clever move, outfitting the U.S. hockey teams with its equipment, complete with Nike logos, without paying for an official Olympic sponsorship that can cost many millions of dollars (Knight-Ridder Tribune Business (US) 2003).[8]

(5b) *Logo-related ambush marketing*

Ambush strategies in this category are relevant where key elements that can be used to associate with the events. Such elements are mostly under intellectual property protection. The
crucial point of such strategies is how to circumvent the legal protection bestowed in the elements.

One way of achieving this is to cleverly modify the protected symbols or slogan’s of the event or invent ambusher’s new ones.

In 1996, BellSouth was the official sponsor of the New Zealand Olympic team and official supplier of mobile phone. Its competitor Telecom New Zealand Ltd (“Telecom”), published a newspaper advertisement in the following format: the word “RING” in large letters appeared three times across the top line and twice across a lower line with the two lower “RING” words being beneath the gaps between the upper three. The colours were, working from left to right, upper line: blue, black, red; lower line: yellow, green. Beneath those words was printed the phrase “With Telecom mobile you can take your own phone to the Olympics”, which was followed in smaller-case type by a message as to the ability to use Telecom mobile phones if travelling to the Atlanta Olympics. Though the Olympic symbol of five rings is under the protection of New Zealand legislation the Telecom’s five “ring” has escaped an accusation of trade mark forgery for its distinction with the original Olympic symbol (Hoek and Gendall 2002).[9]

Sometimes cunning use of the original protected items can also achieve the same goal.

At the 1992 Olympic Games, considerable confusion arose over Subway Sandwiches using the five-ring Olympic logo in 1991 in their advertisements touting U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) sponsors Oscar Mayer Foods Corporation and Louis Rich Company. The USOC ruled that Subway’s advertisements did not encroach on McDonald’s, the official USOC fast-food sponsor. The committee said Subway had nothing to do with the Olympics and that the advertisements honoured the processed meat makers who were Subway suppliers.[10]

Similarly at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games in its sponsorship VISA passed-through its Olympic rights to the Prudential Bank (one of the VISA card issuers) by conducting the Olympic rings. Though the ACOP logo appeared in closer proximity to the Visa logo than the Prudential Bank logo, the typical viewers were not likely to make this distinction. So the sponsor, NationsBank, in banking category was affected in the ambush.

Ambushers sometimes use general name/indication instead of protected elements to associate with the events

At the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, Timex who sponsored athletes including diver Anne Montminy, produced out a brilliant multi-media campaign that ran in Canada during the Olympics. One of the print advertisements had a turquoise Indigo dot, marking Atlanta on a map of North America. There was no use of trade marks or anything else ‘official’, but Timex found a way in nonetheless.[11]

The most inventive strategies in this category should be creating some subtle titles for their products or companies themselves.

In brew producer Labatt sponsored Cabot 500 Anniversary Celebrations, Rival Molson ran print ads throughout Newfoundland touting its Black Horse beer as ‘the unofficial brew of Cabot’s crew.’[12]

Although Samsung was the official sponsor of the Athens Games, Rival LG launched a “Official
Sponsor of Life’s Good” campaign during the Olympic opening ceremony by proclaiming itself the “official sponsor” of benefits its products can bring such as “freedom” and “eye candy”. LG national marketing manager Paul Reeves said before the launch, “while we are not an official sponsor, what this campaign conveys is our official association with everything else that makes life good during the Olympics-and watching the most prestigious of all sporting events with LG only heightens the entire viewing experience.”[13]

(5c) *Athlete-related ambushing*

This is effective because famous athletes attending big events are seen by the audience as representative images of the events. Running an advertising campaign featuring high-profile athletes is the common ambushing strategy in this category. A typical example can be found in the 2000 Sydney Olympics. The Australian airline, Ansett, was an official sponsor of those Games but rival Qantas promoted itself using its sponsorship and endorsement of the high-profile Olympic athlete, Cathy Freeman, together with an intense print and television advertising campaign on the official broadcaster, Channel 7. A letter poll showed that a substantial number of people thought that Qantas were the official sponsors. Although event organisers can restrict participating athletes appearing in commercial shows through contractual dealings, such kind of restriction in most occasions is only valid in the course of event and there is still a large time loophole left for ambushers.

Athletes endorsed by the competitor of the sponsors can also help their endorser to gain the exposure of their brand or directly combat the sponsors.

At the Atlanta 1996 Olympic Games, Reebok was again an official sponsor. Linford Christie, the British 100 metres runner, appeared at a press conference wearing blue contact lenses with the highly recognisable Puma logo in white in the centre of each lens. The Puma logo lenses received worldwide coverage and were on the front page of most international newspapers.

In the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, Reebok was one of the official sponsors. When the US basketball Dream Team went up to the podium to receive their gold medals, two of its most famous players, Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, who had lucrative sponsorship contracts with Nike, covered the Reebok logo of their tracksuits with the US flag.[14]

(5d) *Hospitality-related ambushing*

Besides ambushing strategies in these three categories, ambushers sometimes run some inventive hospitality to get associated with the event. At the 1988 Olympic Games, Seagram’s developed a programme called ‘Sending the Families’ in which they paid the cost of sending 500 relatives of the team to Seoul. They became heavily linked with the Games without getting involved or paying any money to the Olympic Committee (Meenaghan 1994).[15]
Legal responses to ambush marketing

*Existing legal remedies*

Established areas of law to combat ambush marketing include traditional intellectual property law, such as trade mark law and copyright law; and alternative legal remedies other than intellectual property law such as unfair competition or trade practice law, contract law and the protection of the Olympic Symbol under the Nairobi Treaty (1981) (Senate Report 1995). Such laws have left a grey area for ‘smart’ ambush marketers. This can be evidenced from the five ring case[16] in New Zealand as described earlier in this paper.

The plaintiff sought an interim injunction to restrain repetition of the newspaper advertisement, relying on the three causes of action, namely mirepresentation under sections 9 and 13 (e) of the Fair Trading Act 1986 (N.Z.), passing off and trade mark forgery under section 16(1) (a) and (c) of the Fair Trading Act. The allegation of trade mark forgery was dismissed by McGechan J. for he found that in favour of Telecom that readers could easily tell that telecom’s use of the five words “ring” was not Olympic’s symbol of five circles. Regarding the allegation of passing off, McGechan J. made the following statement to explain how he came to the decision of the “serious question” of misrepresentation: “In the end it is necessary for me to make up my own mind, and within that to apply common sense. I accept those who read newspaper advertisements tend to browse. They will not be reading advertisements in a closely focused way, at least in the first instance. Those who notice the five coloured “ring” words, then drop their gaze to the next line picking up the reference to Olympics, and then refer back to the five “ring” words, and then make an association with the five circle Olympic symbol, will be mildly amused. It will then seem like a cartoon or a clever device. It is the sort of situation where one pauses for a moment to laugh, and acknowledge the lateral thinking involved. However, it is a long way from that brief mental process to an assumption that this play on the Olympic five circles must have been with the authority of the Olympic organisation, or through sponsorship of the Olympics.” Thus the passing off allegation was also dismissed.

*Special legislation*

To counter the diversified ambushing strategies, special legislation has been enacted to specifically protect a major sports event.

The Sydney 2000 Games (Indicia and Images) Protection Act 1996 was the first legislation enacted specifically for a major sporting event, seeking to minimise ambush marketing. Since then special legislations have all been enacted for the Summer Olympic Games in Athens (Article 3 of law 2598/1998 as supplemented and amended by virtue of article 2 of law 2819/2000 and article 16 para.2 and 3 of law 2947/2001 of Greece) and Beijing (PR of China Regulations on the Protection of Olympic Symbols 2002), and the Cricket World Cup in South Africa (Merchandise Marks Amendment Act 61 of 2002).

Special legislations for the three Olympic Games have one element in common: they offer intellectual property protection to the key elements that can be associated with the Games. Townley S etal. (1998) has listed this as the first factor which will govern the legal remedies available to the Games owners and sponsors.[17] Compared with traditional intellectual property law such as trade mark law and copyright law such laws altogether have made obvious
improvement in three respects.

1. They have created a long list of protected items most of which were not covered by existing laws. The names, mascots, slogans, emblems of the Games and the name of relevant organisations are all under the protection. The combination of the name of the host city and the year in which the Game is hosted such as Athens 2004 is also included in the protection list. In Sydney Games Act some phrases such as gold, medals, and summer which used to be safe terms were then also under the protection when used in combination with the words such as Olympics.

2. Legislations for the Sydney and Beijing Games have restricted the commercial use of such protected items. This restriction can help solve the problem which occurred in the UK in the Arsenal v. Reed case[18]. Despite the fact that signs applied to unlicensed merchandise sold by the defendant were identical, or similar, to the claimant’s registered marks, the claimant’s allegation for “trade mark infringement” was still dismissed by the Judge, Laddie J for the use of the signs was not in a “trade mark sense” (overturned on Appeal following a ruling by the European Court of Justice ECJ Arsenal Football Club Plc v. Matthew Reed [2003] E.T.M.R. 73 [2003] EWCA Civ 696 CA ).

3. The legislation for the Athens Games has offered more efficient procedures in dealing with disputes. It has become a trick for ambushers to keep the period of ambush short to minimise any serious damage, for it takes time to prepare and file a lawsuit, even a preliminary injunction.[19] To avoid this, the legislation made it clear that the seizure or confiscation of goods would be invariably ordered, regardless of whether the accused is eventually convicted or not.

However it is also obvious that if ambushers don’t use the protected items in the restricted way, legislations as such will have nothing to do with them. In addition some important elements such as the image of an athlete did not fall into protection scope of these legislations.

The Merchandise Marks Amendment Act 2002 in South Africa was enacted against the background of staging the 2003 World Cricket Cup. This legislation has adopted different, more radical remedies. It protects the publicity of the event by way of restricting competitive companies from abusing their trade mark rights. According to 15A(2) of the Amendments, “For the period during which an event is protected, no person may use a trade mark in relation to such event in a manner which is calculated to achieve publicity for that trade mark and thereby to derive special promotional benefit from the event, without the prior authority of the organiser of such event.” According to this the ambushing instances talked above will be caught by this law if it can be proved ambushers have used their trade mark in the prohibited manner. However the point is, there’s no test in legal precedent to reveal what manner of use amounts to the prohibited standard. In addition the protection of publicity of an event and restriction on abusing trade marks are very far-reaching, in that they abandon the traditional trade mark test of customer confusion.

Finally all these legislations have left a time loophole for ambushers who have started their marketing campaign before the legislation came into force or after they were terminated. The Rules of Beijing Municipality on the Protection of the Olympic Intellectual Property (2001) have tried to solve this problem through a retrospective application of the law. However that is only a
local rule and valid only within the administrative area of Beijing. In addition all the special legislations whose jurisdiction reach is limited within one country can only offer limited help to global sponsorship package such as TOP (The Official Partner) of the International Olympic Committee.
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[1] Sandler, D. and Shani (1998) argue that ambush marketing can happen when there is no competition. [2] There are some other occasions where such strategies were applied. At the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics, General Motors bought the TV sponsor rights from CBC, and ran a TV commercial showing the athlete Bobby Orr playing hockey on an outdoor rink with a group of kids (Daw 1998). When Adidas sponsored 1994 Football World Cup, Reebok committed to a $2 million broadcast sponsorship of World Cup coverage on Uninvision, the U.S.’s largest Spanish-language TV network. It became exclusive footwear marketer on Uninvision’s World Cup telecasts, starting in a year, as well as the broadcaster’s ongoing lead-in event series, ‘The Road to the World Cup’ (Grimm 1993). In 1991 Heinz signed up in a multi-million pound deal to sponsor the Rugby World Cup. However, the company didn’t secure the broadcast sponsorship rights, instead bought by Sony. Before, during and after each game, the name on TV screens around the world was Sony. Commentators even started referring to the event on air as ‘The Sony Rugby World Cup’ (Brewer 1993).

[3] At the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, McDonald’s was the global sponsor of the Games. Rival Burger King was allowed to sponsor the national Olympic team of the UK (Nealon 1996). During the 1990 Football World Cup, Pepsi sponsored the Brazilian team while CocaCola was official sponsor of the tournament (Meenaghan 1994).
[4] Another example occurred during the first televised match of the pre-season Australian Football League competition which was sponsored by Ansett Airlines. The first advertisement during the first commercial break was for rival airline Qantas (Richards 1998).
[5] Other examples are the following: At the 1992 Olympic Games, AT&T were the official sponsor. Rival MCI run a commercial that featured the image of a runner with an Olympic-like torch and also introduced a promotion offering customers the chance at a trip to Barcelona in late July-in time for the start of the Summer Games (Brandweek 1992). Another famous example is General Motor’s ‘Golden Holdens’ case at the 1996 Olympics. While Toyota was an official sponsor, General Motors ran a highly visible ‘Golden Holden’ promotion whereby it promised to give a golden Holden car to any gold medal winner. Market research showed that many people mistook General Motors as the official sponsor (Senate Report 1995).
[6] Clean venue policy was originally designed to keep commercial messages out of stadiums in an effort to keep the focus on the athletes. It also helps in restricting the exposure of ambushing messages in the venue.
[8] In 2000 Olympics non-sponsor Yamaha’s name was clearly displayed on musicians’ instruments during the opening ceremony, an accepted loophole because the international Olympic committee classifies musical instrument equipment.
[9] Another example happened in the 1988 Olympics, where a T-shirt manufacturer designed a logo ‘Body & Seoul’ in honour of ‘the Summer Games’. (Feld, F., 2002),
[10] Olympic committee officials themselves and trade mark specialists disagree on the USOC’s decision to permit Subway to use the Olympic logo in its aforementioned advertisements.
[11] Another famous example is Amex’s ads, “if you are going to Norway this winter, you don’t need visa” which was designed to ambush its long-term rival Visa who was then the official sponsor of 1994 Lillehammer (Norway) Winter Olympics. “Norway” was cleverly used in stead of name of the Games.
[12] In the 2000 Olympics, Tooheys New claimed to be the ‘beer of choice’ at Stadium Australia, one of the key Olympic park venues. In fact Tooheys New was the official beer at the stadium but for non-Olympic events.
[14] Reversely, in the Sydney 2000 Games, Ian Thorpe, who was sponsored by Adidas, stepped up to the podium to receive a gold medal for the 400m freestyle with an Australian flag draped over his official Nike track suit. Thorpe denied that the cover-up was intentional.
[17] Altogether Townley S etc. (1998) has listed three factors which will govern the legal remedies available to the Games owners and sponsors, i.e. “1, the extent to which emblems/logos/mascots, photographs, film, TV material, images of participants and other material capable of intellectual property protection including, possibly, the event itself are protected in law and controlled by the sports body itself. 2, the availability of alternative legal measures, other than trade mark/copyright law, to deal with instances of unfair competition, misleading advertising, false trade descriptions, street vending, and appropriation of goodwill.3, the ability of the governing body to control contractually or otherwise the activities of those participating in the event, including the sportsmen and women, their associations/federations; the media, including TV, press, and photographers; and the venue, surrounding areas, and airspace.”

[18] Arsenal Football Club Plc v Reed (No.1) [2001] 2 C.M.L.R. 23