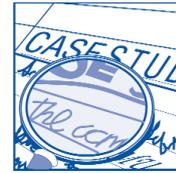


## DERBY RAMS FOOTBALL WEEKENDS

By Marion Nixon, Tourism Manager for Derby City Council, on behalf of the Rams Football Weekends Team\*

### Key facts

- Derby Rams Football Weekends is a partnership funded by Derby City Council's Tourism Unit, Derby County Football Club and Lonsdale Travel.
- The Rams Football Weekends package includes match tickets, stadium tour, accommodation and discount vouchers for attractions, restaurants and nightclubs.
- The packages are aimed at: Derby County fans, supporters of visiting teams and football fans in general.
- In 2001, the initiative won both the Heart of England Tourist Board and the England for Excellence 'Marketing in Tourism' Awards.
- 2001/2 will be the third season for the packages, which have brought visitors to Derby from both Britain and overseas.
- In its first two seasons, the initiative generated over £117,000 in economic benefits to Derby.



### How it all started

Rams Football Weekends is a unique initiative. The concept was simple but it needed the right environment and people to succeed. In Derby, the vital factor was the dedication of the main partners, all of whom were committed to bringing business into the city.

The project was a partnership initiative that has been coordinated by the Derby Tourism Unit, following an initial idea from independent marketing consultant, Steve Parker. The other two key partners were Derby County Football Club and Lonsdale Travel.

Steve is a football fan whose first love is actually a team from the other side of the M1. He knew that devoted fans would follow their chosen team as far as possible to support them, and saw this as a marketing opportunity. He surmised that, if the right package could be put on offer, fans would be prepared to stay at the destination for at least the full day, possibly overnight or even for the weekend.

During the 1998/99 football season, Steve piloted a package in Nottingham, combining match tickets and accommodation. Through this work, he established that there was a definite interest among fans in taking up this type of package, but that the greatest potential was in promoting Premier League games. As neither of the Nottingham teams were in the Premier League, Steve turned his eyes west. At the British Travel Trade Fair in March 1999, he approached Derby Tourism.

Derby is a relatively small city in comparison with other cities that have Premier League teams. This has advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that all the large organisations and businesses in the city work together under the banner of the Derby City Partnership. As Tourism Manager for the city, the author already had contacts at Derby County Football Club and was able to arrange a meeting with Graham Proudler of the Club's Business Development Team, at which the Football Weekends idea was introduced.

\* The Rams Football Weekends Team comprises: Steve Parker, Springwood Marketing; Marion Nixon, Maggie Tillson and Collette Vickers, Derby Tourism; Graham Proudler and Richard Clifford, Derby County Football Club, Business Development; Laura Thwaites and Sian McGuinn, Lonsdale Travel; Ian Weightman, Ian Weightman Media Services.

As the remit of the Business Development Team is to get 'bums on seats', both in the stadium and in the hospitality areas, and as DCFC are also committed to helping promote and generate business for the city in general, the idea was well received.

There was one major practical concern. Derby Tourism is a unit of the City Council and, due to local authority financial regulations, is unable to sell 'packages'. Hence, Lonsdale Travel, a leading travel agent based in Derby, who already did a lot of work for both DCFC and the City Council, was approached to take on the practical aspects of the organisation and was happy to be involved in planing the initiative.

It was clear that the initiative, once established, had to be promoted. Fortunately, Derby Tourism already contracted their press and PR work to Ian Weightman, who had a wide experience and contacts in the tourism industry.

Rams Football Weekends Team was now established.

### Ripe time for football

It was just the right time to promote football for a number of reasons:

- The face of professional football has changed dramatically over the last ten years, due to factors such as the creation of all-seater stadiums, extensive TV coverage, the involvement of major companies as sponsors, and the world-wide popularity of the Premier League.
- Football now appeals to a female and family market – 22% of Derby County season ticket holders are women.
- Football hooliganism (especially at club level) has declined and football grounds are now some of the safest places to be on a Saturday afternoon.
- Football has changed from being an almost totally working class male sport to a middle class family pastime – which opens up a large target market.
- The BTA were just launching their Sports Tourism campaign.



### Why Derby?

- Derby's location is ideal. As the most central city in the UK, it has excellent domestic and overseas communication links by road, rail and air.



- It is a compact city, easy to get around on foot and not too daunting for the uninitiated.
- Although relatively small, it is still a major city with all the usual city attributes, including a wide range of shops, restaurants and accommodation.
- The city's main attractions include names such as Royal Crown Derby (a well-known china manufacturer) and Rolls-Royce.
- Derby is also renowned in the Midlands for its nightlife.
- The attractions tend to be busiest during the summer months, although all of the city's facilities are open throughout the year. Rams Football Weekends were seen by

the local industry as an ideal way to extend the season over the winter period and, therefore, they were happy to support the initiative.

- As well as having its own appeal, Derby is surrounded by the beautiful countryside and attractions of Derbyshire. Within easy reach of the city are attractions such as Chatsworth, the Donington Grand Prix Collection, the Crich Tramway Village, the Derwent Valley Visitor's Centre and Wind in the Willows. There was great potential to 'add-on' to the Rams Weekend packages.
- Good links already existed between Derby Tourism Unit, Derby County Football Club and Lonsdale Travel, all of whom recognised the potential of sports tourism and the Rams Weekends initiative.
- The Derby County Football team, the Rams, have a loyal following. The 1,300 season-ticket holders who live outside the Derby area provided an instant target market.
- Like all Premier League Clubs, Derby County has a number of foreign players, many of whom, especially those from Europe, appeal to a continental audience and bring their own fans. One of these players was crucial to the initiative.

### Why Rams Football Weekends?

It was decided to brand the packages as 'Rams Football Weekends'. There were several reasons for this decision, the most obvious being the name of the Premier League team. However, the City of Derby has several other 'Ram' connections.



- The original Derby Ram was a very large mythical beast that first appeared in folklore.
- The modern day Derby Ram is 'Private Derby', born on the Chatsworth estate and now the mascot of the Worcester and Sherwood Foresters Regiment.
- In the city centre there are two Derby Ram statues.
- The local radio station has a ram's head logo.
- The unusual carillon of Derby Cathedral plays a 'Derby Ram' tune every Saturday at noon for the enjoyment of passers-by and to encourage the footballers in the afternoon.
- These and other connections are linked in a Derby Ram Trail leaflet, available from the Tourist Information Centre.

### What was the initiative to achieve?

The main objective of the initiative was to capitalise on the interest in Premier League football, by encouraging fans to come and watch a match at Pride Park, then stay longer and spend more money in the city.

Specific objectives included:

- To raise the profile of both the City of Derby and Derby County Football Club.
- To generate additional economic benefits for the city in general and for Derby County Football Club.
- To encourage Derby Rams fans living outside the area to stay overnight in the city once they come to watch a match at Pride Park.

- To target fans from visiting teams travelling for more than one and a half hours and encourage them to come and support their team, then stay overnight in the city.
- To target European football fans to visit Derby for the weekend, using well-known international players as the hook.
- To increase the number of football fans in general, and specifically of Rams supporters.

### How did it work?

Steve Parker was the first point of contact for individuals or groups interested in the package. As a long-standing football fan, he has got lots of enthusiasm for the game in general, and is very loyal to Derby County. Through his personal approach, he does an excellent job in converting enquiries into hard business. Much of his communication, especially with overseas visitors, was done via email. This is quick and cheap, whilst still being chatty and informal.

Once customers have decided where they want to stay and exactly what they want to do, Steve passes the arrangements to Lonsdale Travel. Lonsdale have a specific Football Weekends allocation of tickets for every match and book these together with the stadium tours and accommodation. The Tourism Unit puts together welcome packs which include discount tickets to various attractions, eating places and nightclubs. The packs are then left at the relevant hotel for visitors to collect.

Media and travel trade enquiries and familiarisation visits were handled through Derby Tourism, with the assistance of their specialist PR consultant, Ian Weightman. Derby County FC generously supported familiarisation visits, as did the hotels and attractions involved in the initiative.

### What the package comprises

The Rams Football Weekends were designed to be flexible, and generally comprise match tickets, a stadium tour, accommodation and discount vouchers.

For the first season, three 'off the peg' packages were created for specific target markets. 'Rams & Ewes Weekends' were aimed at single sex groups, possible stag or hen parties, who wanted a weekend of good social activities. One of the hotels was happy to accommodate this type of group and was prepared to put on a 'hang-over cure' breakfast for the Sunday morning.

'Rammie Family Breaks' were aimed at the increasing number of families interested in Premier League football. Based in a lodge-style hotel, this package included free accommodation for children sharing their parents' room and tickets to the Wind in the Willows family attraction.

'The County Package' was for more up-market couples looking for greater comfort, so their package was based in a better quality hotel. It included dinner on the Saturday evening and entrance tickets to the Royal Crown Derby Visitor's Centre.

All of these packages could be offered to either Rams supporters, fans of visiting teams or general football fans. Tickets were offered as part of the package but anyone who already had a ticket could buy into the other elements of the package. Transport could also be arranged by Lonsdale.

Whilst these packages proved popular, customers often preferred to 'mix and match' their own weekend, and Steve became very adept at sorting out preferences.

## Marketing – the first six months

It was decided for the first season to concentrate on the domestic market and to undertake limited PR work overseas as appropriate. The initial budget was low. Each of the partners devoted staff time to the initiative, in addition to the following funds:

- Derby Tourism £500 plus promotional and PR support
- Derby County Football Club £500 plus design and print support
- Lonsdale Travel £500
- Royal Crown Derby £100

In addition, there was 'in kind' support from the local industry: the hotels gave free accommodation for press visits, and the attractions, nightclubs and restaurants gave discounted offers.

A plan of marketing activities was drawn up with an emphasis on using the existing websites and brochures of Derby Tourism and DCFC, and on targeting relevant media.

The main marketing activities were:

- Derby Tourism and Derby County Football Club included details of the packages on their websites.
- 500 leaflets were produced through DCFC's graphic design team for the beginning of the season, at a cost of £370.
- Package outlines were included in Derby Tourism's Weekend Breaks leaflet and Group Organiser's Guide.
- Three advertisements were placed in *When Saturday Comes* (a popular football fan publication) at the beginning of the season, for a total cost of £200.
- A launch press release was sent to a large database of domestic and overseas travel journalists.
- Generic press releases were sent to the local media in the cities of all visiting teams, prior to their match at Derby.
- Specific matches were targeted by making personal contact with the away team's local media to encourage familiarisation visits or develop competitions to highlight the packages.

## The Belgian factor

In January 2000, Derby's Manager, Jim Smith, signed a Belgian international player called Branko Strupar. While Jim's motive for this move was to strengthen the team, what he also did was strengthen the appeal of Rams Football Weekends in Belgium.

Later that month, Ian Weightman attended a BTA event, 'Meet the Belgian Press' and it was at this point that the BTA Brussels Press Manager, Christiane Vanroelen, joined the organisers team. Christiane introduced Ian to a Belgian journalist interested in football; Ian convinced him to come to Derby and the following weekend a familiarisation visit was organised which included a meeting with Branko Strupar. A few days later, a feature appeared about the Rams Weekends in *Het Nieuwsblad*, one of the main Belgian newspapers – and Steve's next phone call was a request for 300 tickets for a group of Belgians wanting to come and see Branko!

From this point, activities escalated. The BTA were just launching their Sports Tourism initiative, so the Sports Tourism Manager and the Chief Executive of the BTA were introduced to the package and became ambassadors for the project. The Heart of

England Tourist Board, the English Tourism Council and the British Tourist Authority press offices were all kept informed about the campaign and assisted with promotional activities. Belgian press were specifically targeted through Christiane, who has been invaluable to the cause and now avidly follows the Rams progress each weekend.

In April 2000, on the recommendation of HETB's Press Officer, the initiative was entered for the HETB 'Marketing in Tourism' Award.

### The second season

The success of the first season raised the profile of both the initiative and of Derby. When a new leaflet for the second season was being designed, several hotels expressed a wish to be involved in the packages. Six of them were selected, ranging from a good quality three-star hotel to a small family-run guesthouse, on the basis of offering customers a variety of choice but still keeping the organisation manageable. A specific 'group' package was also put together. Other local attractions came forward to offer discounts.

Encouraged by winning the HETB Award, the Ram Football Weekends were entered for the England for Excellence 'Marketing in Tourism' category. During the height of the rail problems, the team braved a rather fraught journey to London, spent a very pleasant couple of hours lunching at the Savoy...and came away with a trophy! The media coverage that this generated again did much to raise the profile of Derby and the Rams Weekends.

The Belgian connection was starting to take on a life of its own. Ian Weightman, together with Graham Proudler and Richard Clifford from the Derby County Business Development team, visited Christiane in Brussels to meet various media and travel trade representatives. Graham and Richard also met up with colleagues at Branko's former team, Racing Genk, in order to establish a Belgian Supporters' Club for the Rams. Links were made with SeaFrance and Eurotunnel. Numerous press visits and competitions were organised to promote the Weekends. One particular travel trade contact, Pascal Struyve, who was keen to establish both weekend trips and day packages, started to emerge as 'our man in Belgium', and Belgian visitors became a regular and colourful feature of match days at Pride Park. The Football Club's continuing commitment to the project is reflected in the fact that Pascal has recently been appointed as the Club's official representative in Belgium.



Also during the second season, interest started to come in from other countries, notably Ireland and Scandinavia. With assistance from BTA Dublin's press office, the interest from Ireland was met with invitations to press trips and offers of competition prizes. The team was also approached by an agent interested in selling the packages. One advantage of working with a large and prestigious organisation, such as a Premier League football club, was that they have various sponsors. DCFC had a very good relationship with British Midland and BM run flights between Dublin and East Midlands airport, just down the road from Derby.

With regard to Scandinavia, the organisers were approached by Maersk Air, who were trying to develop their routes from Sweden and Norway. They were particularly keen to increase their weekend business, which fitted nicely with the football packages. There is mega interest in Premier League football in Sweden and, strangely enough, a residue of interest and support specifically for Derby County, which stems from when the Club was extremely successful during the '70s. Again the BTA were very helpful; the BTA Marketing Manager in Stockholm enjoyed sampling the product, even bringing along a couple of his friends who paid to be our Scandinavian guinea pigs. He gave the team some pointers about potential 'add-ons' to the package that would appeal to the Swedish market, including motorsports activities and luxury 'Ladies' packages.

As the initiative was still operating on much the same budget as the first year, the organisers started to look at how to develop the potential of 'new media' marketing. Discussions were initiated with lastminute.com, and special packages put together for them to sell through their website.

The DCFC and Derby Tourism websites also proved to be very useful in attracting interest in the packages and brought visitors from several countries, including Guernsey and Iceland.

In parallel with the standard weekend activities, the package was diversified into offering five-a-side football at the neighbouring JJB sports complex on Pride Park on the morning of match day. One weekend it was Belgium versus England versus Scotland. Domestic and overseas youth groups also showed interest in coaching/playing sessions and contacted the University of Derby to use their accommodation during the summer period.

### The uncontrollable factor



The one factor over which the project team had absolutely no control was the performance of the football team. Towards the second half of the first Football Weekends season the Rams struggled, and relegation loomed, fortunately to be avoided. 'It'll be better next season' everyone hoped. The beginning of the second season was worse – at one point they languished at the bottom of the table. Christmas saw a turn around of fortunes and the development plans for the third season started. By Easter they were back in the doldrums. With three matches to go, and those against the top three clubs, the Rams were only five points from safety. Yet, Derby survived in style! Against all the odds, they went to Old Trafford, achieved a 1-0 victory and came away with the three points that ensured their safety.

### The achievements of the first two seasons

Due to the structure of the project, it was relatively easy to monitor its progress. In his role as first point of call, Steve Parker recorded all enquiries either converted or not. Laura Thwaites at Lonsdale Travel recorded all match tickets and stadium tours bought from DCFC, together with all accommodation bookings made and the value of business placed in the hotels. Derby County Football Club tracked approximate increases in sales and catering at the stadium on match days. Derby Tourism oversaw the project, compiled and valued copies of all the media coverage, and estimated the general economic benefits to the city, using existing HETB data.

The specific financial benefits of the project were as follows:

- Over two seasons, the initiative generated approximately £117,500 of economic benefits to the city and the Club.
- Derby County Football Club sold an additional 1,043 match tickets, worth approximately £20,000.
- The income at the Rams Superstore increased by approximately 200% during one particular Belgian 'day-trip'.
- The additional visitors contributed to an increase of approximately 5% (averaged out over the year) at the catering outlets in the Pride Park Stadium.
- The hotels involved in the package benefitted from approximately £23,000 worth of accommodation bookings.
- The media coverage gained for the Football Weekends is estimated to be in excess of £1 million. This has included articles in major British, Belgian and Irish national and regional newspapers; a feature on *Vlaanderen Vakantie Land*, the Belgian equivalent of 'Wish you were here'; Belgian TV channel, VTM TV, filming a programme to follow a group of Belgian supporters on their trip to Derby; articles in the BTA's *Sports Tourism* newsletters; mentions on 'Match of the Day'; and regular coverage in the local Derby media.

### The third season

Plans for the third season began with thoughts about 'adding-on' to the package in order to broaden its appeal and continue generating media coverage.

The organisers had already discovered the potential of additional sporting elements – five-a-side football, golf, the Donington GP Collection and events at Donington Park. Moreover, activities for partners not necessarily interested in football were to be included, so the selection of hotels was reshuffled to include ones with health, leisure and golf facilities.

The FMD outbreak actually worked in favour of the initiative. Derbyshire's biggest name attraction, Chatsworth, decided to stay open until Christmas in order to try and re-coup some of their early season losses and help the local industry. The existing good links between Derby Tourism, Royal Crown Derby and Chatsworth meant that they were happy to join the package, so visitors could be encouraged to stay until Sunday, drive up the scenic Derwent Valley and visit this magnificent house. En route, they can stop off at another new package member, the Crich Tramway Village.

Two other aspects not explored so far were corporate packages and activities for school and youth groups. Ideas for both of these are currently being developed and are to be targeted at both domestic and overseas markets.

Marketing activities were stepped up for the third season. The original leaflet became a comprehensive 12-page brochure. Additional budget was generated and a package sponsor is actively being sought. A comprehensive marketing plan, including a wide range of PR activities, was drawn up.

It was decided to continue domestic marketing activities along previous lines, promoting the proven reliability and quality of the existing package and highlighting the new additions.

Overseas marketing will vary from country to country:

- The Belgian market is still on a roll with Pascal planning to extend activities and target more corporate business.
- SeaFrance are discussing proposals to market packages in Holland and France, as well as Belgium.
- A leading Swedish sports travel agent is looking at developing specific packages for the Scandinavian market.
- The BTA office in Dublin has helped to establish contact with several specific sports travel operators who are keen to develop packages from Ireland.
- Derby County has signed three Italian players, including Fabrizio Ravanelli, which has given Derby a profile in Italy.
- Other European markets, along with Iceland, Scotland and the Channel Islands, will be opened up gradually through existing contacts and in-coming enquiries.
- The Heart of England Tourist Board is helping to establish contacts with the Australian market.
- There are assurances from BTA Tokyo that there is interest in Japan in the 'Rams' and Derby, especially through the Royal Crown Derby china connection and the Derbyshire twinning link with Toyota City.

One important development for the 2001/2 season is the BTA endorsement of the Premier League. This presents both opportunities and threats. The opportunities are to build on the existing good relationships with the BTA managers in London and abroad, especially the Sports Tourism staff, and to tap into the funding, tickets and hospitality provided as part of this deal and use them to promote the packages.

One of the main threats is that BTA media and travel trade staff now have access (a number of complimentary tickets and hospitality) to all Premier League games, something few, if any, clubs other than DCFC were offering last season. Also, all other Premier League Clubs may now realise the potential of similar football packages – and some of those clubs have a much higher profile than the Rams.

The main objective of the organisers now is to hold the ground in face of the competition. Rams Football Weekends initiative has a proven quality package and a track record of delivering it. What is needed most this season is a good quality performance from the 'Rams' themselves.

## Conclusion

The Rams Football Weekends is a unique initiative. This is due to a very strong partnership between the Premiership Club, the City Tourism Unit and an established national travel agency. Added to this are the other members of the Team, all of whom contribute their own particular expertise – a marketing consultant, a specialist tourism PR consultant and representatives in countries throughout Europe who are dedicated to the project.

The initiative also capitalises on Derby's tourism appeal and is supported by major attractions both in and around the city, including Royal Crown Derby, Chatsworth and the Donington Grand Prix Collection. Moreover, the package offers a variety of accommodation, so that there is something to suit all tastes and budgets.

Winning both the regional and the national Tourism Marketing Awards gave the package a lot of credibility and a high profile, and went a long way in helping to enlist the support of BTA offices around the world. The support that the package has won overseas has been tremendous, as has the potential for generating future business.

In general terms, the initiative has contributed towards the main objectives in the Derby Tourism Strategy of generating additional visitors to Derby, extending the length of time they stay in the city, and increasing the amount they contribute to the local economy.

One of the main benefits of the project has been the excellent partnership that has grown up between Derby Tourism, Derby County Football Club and Lonsdale Travel, which has potential to be beneficial for many other initiatives.

Overall, a solid platform has been established for the Rams Football Weekends in the last two years. Now the organisers can adapt, improve and fine-tune an award-winning product, season after season.