

The Art of Kite Commentary

George Webster and John Dobson

George Webster writes:

It has been suggested that I might write some thoughts on commentating at a kite festival.

I have my own way of providing a commentary (often based on ideas worked out with Andy King, whose current health problems mean that he cannot contribute to this article). So here are some very basic general points and a suggested check list.

1. Factors which influence a commentator.

1.1 What sort of kite festival is it? Big or small? Will the spectators be there for an hour or an afternoon or will they just drop in? Are there advertised parts of the festival which they will have come to see?

1.2 Is your role just commenting or will you be involved in producing a programme, or even perhaps running the programme? Will you be part of a group including other such as the organiser and a field director? If there is a programme, who changes it in response to wind, weather etc?

1.3 What does the organiser want the kite festival to achieve? Publicity? Attendance? Participation? etc.

1.4 Is the commentary largely announcements or continuous or interspersed with music? In addition to providing information you may be asked to give publicity, since unless there is a festival office you will inevitably be a contact point for the public concerning lost and found children, parents, dogs, car keys etc.

1.5 What is the sound kit like?

Never rely on only one microphone even if the backup for the radio mike is one on a wire.

When you try out the range yourself, be prepared to cope with any long delays. Try putting a hand over one ear, for the '60s folk group look. Or speak but don't listen — if you do you will drawl and sound drunk.

If the kit includes playing music, especially if this is the performers' tracks, have someone else to work it.

Commentating and organising and playing performer' tracks except on a very small and compact system is asking for trouble.

Check if a sound person will be there all day and if not how one can be contacted quickly.

1.6 Your location.

Can you see the kites, the fliers, the sound system? How clearly can you speak and be heard? What is your knowledge of the programme, the kites and the fliers and their routines?

1.7 Your personal qualities.

All the above points influence how you carry out your job which is primarily aimed at the public, letting them know where you are on the programme, what they are going to see and what they can see, not forgetting the sponsor and the fliers.

You have a real responsibility and primarily a pair of knowledgeable eyes. Your view on what is attractive, important, difficult is important. You might help to bring a spectator into kite flying, or be quoted as authoritative in a pub argument you will never hear of. So if you don't know something, admit it. The basic rule is that it is better to be roughly right than precisely wrong.

There are very few names that the public is really interested in, though kite fliers do like to hear their names mentioned in connection with the kites they are flying.

When describing a kite do remember firstly that even 'a box' may mean nothing to some spectators, and secondly that kites look different from different viewpoints, and thirdly that colour is the easiest way to differentiate between kites.

2 A checklist

2.1 Check the PA/sound system. Sound check yourself with the mike and spare. Have spare batteries.

Check availability of technical support.

2.2 Sort out the site — boundaries, special areas, local names etc.

2.3 Set up an 'office'. Minimally two chairs, something to put your papers on (a table helps greatly).

Know what you will do if it rains. Ideally you want to position yourself upwind of the kites and convenient to the sound system.

2.4 Sort out the programme: is there a fliers' meeting? Check policy on lost children and other objects, first aid, thanking sponsors and other contributors.

2.5 What are the start and finish times? Agree closure before announcing the end of the show with whoever is in charge. Make a last round of announcements (e.g. tomorrow, next year) before closing the show.

John Dobson adds

As someone who has heard George probably more than most, I would like to say something about what makes George's commentaries special.

3.1 He keeps on going, even when there is not much to say. Cricket commentators can do this too. It is important because it maintains the link with the spectators. Being able to improvise gets easier with practice,

though having been a university lecturer (as George was) helps with fluency. Having a ready wit is a great advantage, though this is a gift which it must be admitted not everyone has.

3.2 He knows a lot about kites. This is a matter of being interested in kite history, but also because he is old enough to be a part of that history too.

3.3 He also knows a lot of kitefliers. Again, that is a matter of having been around for a long time. There have to be some advantages in getting older, and I think that is definitely one of them.

3.4 He always says something about every kite he sees in the sky, not just the “interesting” ones. What is interesting or boring to the kiteflier may not be so to the spectators, who may be seeing a particular kind of kite for the first time, no matter how often the commentator has seen it.

3.5 Similarly for his personal preferences for kites he (dis)likes. We all know his opinion on rainbow deltas and Ostend birds, but he also recognises that they are both very good fliers and easy to fly, and always says so. It is quite unprofessional for a commentator to be totally dismissive about a kite or a kite flier. What makes George such a professional commentator is that he is never unprofessional, ever.