

Summer 2013

Leveling the Playing Field: Developing an Expansion Strategy for a Professional Sports League

Christopher R. Herbel

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, cherbel12@msn.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp

Recommended Citation

Herbel, Christopher R., "Leveling the Playing Field: Developing an Expansion Strategy for a Professional Sports League" (2013).
Research Papers. Paper 411.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/411

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Papers by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD:
DEVELOPING AN EXPANSION STRATEGY
FOR A PROFESSIONAL SPORTS LEAGUE

By

Christopher R. Herbel

B.S., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2002

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
August 2013

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD:
DEVELOPING AN EXPANSION STRATEGY
FOR A PROFESSIONAL SPORTS LEAGUE

By

Christopher R. Herbel

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

Approved by:

Dr. Narayanan Iyer, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
June 7, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

CHRISTOPHER R. HERBEL, for the Master of Science degree in PROFESSIONAL MEDIA AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT, presented on JUNE 7, 2013, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: DEVELOPING AN EXPANSION STRATEGY FOR A PROFESSIONAL SPORTS LEAGUE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Narayanan Iyer

In what has become now a vastly diverse media landscape, marketing a product has become more challenging than ever, but at the same time perhaps, there has never been a better time to introduce a product to the marketplace. This notion can apply just as well to the much competitive sports industry. A large share of the market has been, and remains dominated by the “Big 4” major leagues, but with the advancement of social media and mobile technology, the barrier to entry for smaller leagues has become much more reduced. The aim of this paper is to examine the case of the National Lacrosse League, a league that has been in existence for over 25 years yet has remained small by most standards. By applying traditional principles of sports marketing as well as delving into the effects of new media, the future growth of the league is discussed giving way to an outline of a possible expansion strategy for the NLL in the United States.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
LIST OF TABLES	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1 – Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review	4
CHAPTER 3 – Methodology.....	16
CHAPTER 4 – Discussion.....	26
CHAPTER 5 – Future Research	39
REFERENCES	40
VITA	45

LIST OF TABLES

<u>TABLE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Table 1 SWOT Analysis	26

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Figure 1. League-by-League Comparison.....	22
Figure 2. Social Media/Attendance Comparison	23
Figure 3. Comment Categories	24
Figure 4. Facebook Site Fan Participation	25

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

From the child playing catch with his father in the backyard of their suburban home, to the victor of the world championship game proudly hoisting the trophy at the parade in the heart of downtown, sports have played an integral role in how we personally develop and come to communicate with others. Through a game we learn sportsmanship, fair play, how to win, and how to lose. But sports, over time, have also become a business, as they can exist to market products, yield profit themselves, and stand as a mere piece of the larger marketing mix paradigm. The subject of sports marketing employs many of the basic principles held in marketing strategies used to promote any public or privately owned product, business, or service. The focus of this study, the National Lacrosse League, will be the product that we aim to promote.

In the mid 90's, in Seattle, Washington, there was a debate on the funding of a new stadium in the area, designed to serve the Seattle Seahawks, an NFL team. Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft was in the midst of buying the Seahawks but only on the condition that the city builds a new facility as their home (Griffin, 1997). Allen and his partners gave this message, which embodies the economic role of professional sports, "Because of the revenue generated by professional football---\$5.4 million are contributed to the local and state general funds--- everyone benefits. The Seahawks total annual economic impact in Washington State is \$129 million. In King County alone, the Seahawks generate \$103 million per year" (Griffin, para. 9).

Professional sports have had a tremendously positive economic impact to the cities they have come to inhabit. With them they bring a robust, exciting atmosphere; unifying communities

behind a common goal, and creating a healthy environment for job creation. They also exist as a popular form of content able to attract audiences far and wide. It could stand to reason that current conditions, both in the economy and the media landscape, can create new growth opportunities for professional sports that have lacked the exposure seen by many of the major leagues. Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, and the National Hockey League, have all enjoyed the perks of exposure on a mass international scale. Though today, it can be recognized that less popular sports such as professional soccer, rugby, and lacrosse have all begun to organize in recent decades, and look to gain ground in popularizing their own game.

The National Lacrosse League has been an indoor professional sports league for just over 25 years but has been unable to warrant the attention that the major commercial sports have attracted in their respective histories. While the league's prominence has varied over the years, having as few as four teams, and as many as 13, there have been a number of constants that can be gathered over time. One of which has to do with the sport's popularity geographically. Due to the sport having origins in Canada and New England, the sport remains popular in these regions. But, while the sport of lacrosse seems to be growing across the country in certain areas, other markets seem to fail to be profitable for the league. For example, despite having winning teams in San Jose, Portland, and Arizona, all seemed to fail in drawing healthy attendance numbers, and they perished as a result.

A widely used term in market strategy known as the “product life cycle” or PLC, is used to describe the path a product takes from its introduction to its eventual decline in the marketplace. As applied to the NLL, it could appear by the current state that it seems to be declining or a bit flat. While the league has held steady at nine franchises for a number of years,

it is down from its peak at 13. In addition, a prime indicator of the fan base of the league can be determined by the average attendance numbers. In an article written at the conclusion of the 2012 regular season, it was stated that the regular season average attendance per game has dropped below 9,500 a game (Kojima, 2012). A vast majority of the teams in the NLL saw drops in their attendance from a year prior in 2011, a list that included some of the better performers overall. But as the season ended in 2013, the league as a whole, experienced just above a two percent increase (Kojima, 2013). So while the league over time has seen ups and downs, overall attendance appears to be flat or holding steady.

This study will serve to examine in further depth, current internal and external factors that can affect a professional sports league's performance; more closely, it will study new markets to develop for promotion of the league, attempt to predict future trends, and outline media strategy for utilization in the marketplace. From the examination of one of the league's most consistently, well performing markets in Denver, Colorado, market conditions and trends may be derived that are attributable to determining how well teams do in certain markets. A range of both traditional and new media channels, partnerships, and potential sponsorship opportunities, all fall within the scope of integrated marketing communication, and can serve to assist a smaller sports league once thought of as niche, reach a more mainstream audience.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lacrosse: It's History and Evolution

Historically, the game of lacrosse has been noted by some to be the original pastime of North America. It existed well before any of the more popular sports of our time dating back potentially hundreds of years ago. Originally, it was a game played by Native Americans, who for the sake of training their tribes, used it “to quicken and strengthen the body” (Morrill, p.3). Gameplay in the earlier years could hardly be considered “play” as competition was fierce, rules were few and varied, many players participated at once, and at times some were bloodied and lost their lives (Morrill, 1966). Lacrosse saw its regional roots sprout as the game first gained popularity in Montreal, Canada, around 1839 (Morrill, 1966). Rules became established decades later and the game began to take a more organized stance. As the game evolved and took shape, much of the gruff gameplay remained but more rules were becoming enforced.

Equipment used for the game is a bit unusual. The game could be compared much to hockey. Each team has a goal to shoot for made by two poles, a crossbar, and a net. Players use a stick with a net at the end of it with which to catch, pass, and shoot a ball into the goal. Today's competitors wear jerseys, shorts and padding for the upper body similar to that of football or hockey, as lacrosse very much is still a contact sport.

For many years the sport was played outdoors on a field. While this is still true today, the brand of lacrosse that is most relevant to this study is one known as “box” lacrosse, or indoor lacrosse. Box lacrosse is played in much the same manner, but with fewer players on the turf, higher scoring, and much faster gameplay; so much so that the game has been dubbed by many to be “the fastest game on two feet” (Williams, 2010).

The fact that lacrosse is such a regional game provides the major challenge to promoting the sport nationally, and analysis of this will be crucial in determining a winning strategy in promoting the National Lacrosse League. Certain trends of growth can be seen across the country. While there are pockets of growth, they still appear sporadically across the map. Another potential positive trend is that the game is appealing to younger audiences getting involved with the game at the high school and university levels. In an article out of Minnesota from 2010, the sport was growing so quickly, that there were simply not enough coaches for the job (Baden, 2010). “The number of youth and high school players in the U.S. jumped to 524,895 in 2009 from 225,925 in 2001, a 132 percent increase” (Baden, para. 2). This is a positive trend that can be used to the league’s advantage. While online public forums and articles such as these support previous notions about where the sport is most popular, it indicates that the sport has grown in popularity, is still growing and that over time the sport has a chance to become more mainstream as pockets continue to develop and younger audiences who grew up with the game become coaches, teachers, and promoters of the game in the future.

National Lacrosse League

In 1986, it was a league that began with four franchises and was known as the “Eagle Pro Box Lacrosse League” (Thompson, 2011). In the face of the larger professional sports leagues, it didn’t seem to stand a chance; on the heels of the NBA, MLB, NFL, and NHL, it lacked media coverage and corporate sponsorships necessary to deem it worthy of the public’s attention. A professional outdoor league also exists, named MLL (Major League Lacrosse), but this league almost works in tandem with the NLL, rather than as a competitor, as their seasons begin when the other league ends, providing potential national exposure to the sport in general all year long.

Despite fluctuations in success, the league still lives on 26 years later, having had two name changes (Major Indoor Lacrosse League, 1988; National Lacrosse League, 1997) (Thompson, 2011). To its credit, it has been said to have a very strong fan base and a good business model, making the league able to survive. For instance, in an article from CNBC written during the great recession in 2009, the deputy commissioner of the National Lacrosse League, George Daniel, spoke the following which gave insight to the leagues survival over time, “Overall, we’re in a better position than some of these other leagues. We’ve always been a lean operation. I mean, we only have seven people in the front office” (Rovell, para. 3). Player salaries are also on a much lower scale than you would find in bigger leagues. Wertheim (2001) offers a contrast of note when speaking of NLL player salaries written in an article for *Sports Illustrated*: “At a time when teams in other sports devote half their expenditures to player salaries, an NLL team might spend only 20% of its budget on wages” (para. 5). Because of this, while the average point guard in the NBA or pro quarterback can use their sport as their full-time job for the year, the typical NLL player keeps a regular job elsewhere and sometimes can live in an entirely different city from which they play in, transporting themselves to their games during the season (Wertheim, 2001).

Given the current state of the NLL, with much lower revenues, this is a difficult but understandable situation. Thus, it’s easy to understand how the NLL has been able to avoid stoppage in play due to lockouts and labor disputes. The NBA, as recently as 2011 suffered a lockout resulting in the cancellation of nearly two months of the regular season, the first game played on Christmas Day. This of course causes not only the loss of revenues to owners and players alike, but also can create a dissonance with their fan base resulting in lost support of the league as a whole (Cowen & Grier, 2011). While there are many internal factors that determine

the strength of a league or its franchises, there are many external factors that can be examined as well.

Basic geography can be considered a factor that can highly influence the financial success of a professional sports franchise. The team, relative to the population size of its home city, affects its bottom line. As Scully (1995) states in *The Market Structure of Sports*, “The conventional wisdom is that, except for football, clubs located in small markets are marginal operations that cannot effectively compete with big city clubs” (p. 116). It’s been maintained that as a general rule, sports franchises that exist in large cities have the highest revenues, thus providing them with the winning formula to afford the best talent, increasing win percentages and keeping attendance numbers high. In the National Lacrosse League however, several cases exist that contradict the notion.

For example, in large markets such as Chicago and New York, NLL teams have been established but failed to prosper. At the same time, teams such as the Rochester Knighthawks have remained for many, many years. One could postulate the reason for this is because there is less competition for disposable income used for sporting events in Rochester; the markets of Chicago and New York of course have many other professional sports franchises that have a much more solid foundation and established following.

In addition to the idea of market size, another point of note concerns the idea of win percentages and its assumed relationship with attendance records. Two franchises on opposite ends of the country, the New York Titans (no longer in existence) and the Washington (State) Stealth have had consistent winning percentages, but relatively low attendance numbers compared to the rest of the league.

The Portland Lumberjax, also another relatively small market on the west coast, much like Washington, with very few professional franchises inhabiting its city, had only a short run in the league, surviving from 2006-2009 (Crossley, 2011). The subject of a later case study involving the Colorado Mammoth, and their success in the Denver market, has been a focal point for owners and markets to emulate; this evidenced by the actions of the future owner of the Lumberjax, Angela Batinovich. “Batinovich was a relative lacrosse novice, but was enamored by the indoor version of the sport after attending a Colorado Mammoth NLL game” (Crossley, para. 2). The team had several seasons of varied success over the course of its tenure; records ranged from 11-5 to 4-12. Attendance, though appeared to be flat, beginning strongly at around 8,000 plus on average per game, steadily dropping year after year (Crossley, 2011). An appearance in the 2008 NLL Championship game versus the flagship franchise in the east, the Buffalo Bandits, in front of 18,690 fans in Buffalo, couldn’t increase their financial statement, and they folded in 2009 (Crossley, 2011). Other teams in the west had a similar expansion fate: the Anaheim Storm, San Jose Stealth, Arizona Sting, all were very short-lived.

Attendance Numbers Comparison

A key indicator in the interest of a sports franchise is of course its attendance records. The two franchises that enjoy the highest attendance records from the east and west are the Buffalo Bandits and the Colorado Mammoth, each yielding 15,000 or more at an average home game. While they still reign in fan support, last year’s numbers for the league were a bit less than impressive. Steve Kojima (2012) of ILindoor.com writes:

“Under shared National Hockey League ownership, the Mammoth and Bandits respectively averaged more than 15,900 and 15,200 fans per home game in 2012. That is a decrease however, from the impressive 17K and 16K averages they respectively hit in

2011. Six of the nine NLL franchises in fact posted attendance decreases in 2012” (para. 1).

Some would suggest that the economy took its toll on the league’s attendance as fans would have less disposable income to spend at sporting events, but it remains a question which factors, externally and internally, have the greatest effects on the sport’s popularity.

In fact, the way the sport is organized internally within the league structure plays a role in the success and failure of teams. Fans obviously love winning teams, and while attendance in the NLL is inconsistent from market-to-market regardless of win percentage as noted above, winning teams also can produce much needed financial dividends from hosting playoff games (Kojima, 2010b). Scott Loffler, the Bandits Director of Operations said in an article by Kojima (2010b), “By hosting the championship game in 2008, which sold out, we grossed almost triple the revenue we would from a normal regular season game” (para. 3). But challenges come with the responsibility of hosting a playoff game including booking, promotions, and covering all expenses for both teams (Kojima, 2010b). Kojima (2010b) notes an interesting scenario:

“For a team like the newly relocated Washington Stealth, who league-wide sit first place in the standings, but last place in attendance at 3,000 fans per home game, that playoff setup could end up being a costly format resulting in financial losses” (para.11).

Though this scenario, and the anomalies contained within it, makes the challenge of marketing the National Lacrosse League even more difficult; as there are only so many aspects of the industry a marketer can have influence on, in the end, examining the internal and external factors that determine the success of a professional sports franchise can lead to creating an effective broad reaching campaign. The sport of lacrosse has burgeoning growth among high schools and universities across the country, though for the most part, it remains a regional sport.

But efforts have been made though by members of the lacrosse community to create a stronger national following.

Sports Marketing Overview

Thinking beyond the ticket, hot dog, and T-shirt you buy at the stadium lobby, is the key to understanding how all parts of the sports business tie together, and create cohesion throughout the local community. There have been studies done on various levels to demonstrate the profitability of a professional sports organization in a community. An article in the New England Law Review discussed various benefits to the home city of a sports franchise. Walker and Enz (2006) assert:

“Economists suggest that these direct economic benefits, including employment opportunities, tax revenue, and local spending, are no different from those provided by other small to mid-size businesses. Through the league structure however, professional sports have the unique ability to attract and sustain large numbers of visitors over a long period of time” (p. 153).

From the moment of the opening faceoff, the game has already brought thousands of spectators from surrounding areas to a concentrated location, which can serve the advertiser in reaching broader bases of consumers as well as local businesses serving the spectator before or after the game. And because organized sports are typically played over a season, repeat visitors to the area are likely and thus continue to bring in new revenues.

In addition to the audience of the sport, as of 2005, there was estimated between 4.5 and 6 million jobs related to the sports industry, including marketing and media (Shank, 2005). The vendors needed for the events are also benefitted by the existence of the professional sports franchise. These include suppliers of food, uniforms, equipment, and any other product needed to

put on a large scale event of this size. Walker and Enz (2006) go on to say, “Because supplemental income is often returned to the local economy, part-time positions offered by professional sports venues add real value to the community” (p. 151).

Tangible and Intangible Factors

In essence, to every member of the marketing chain, from the spectator buying a ticket, to the advertiser purchasing ad space in the arena, and to the media covering the event, the existence of the professional sports franchise to the economy provides an attraction capable of drawing large numbers of attendees, and viewers at home. And this in turn is capitalized upon to keep the economic chain going. One of the most obvious indicators of how well a team is doing or how well they may do in the future, is by studying not only attendance levels at their games but the composition of the market which they serve. Schaff (1995) writes, “Mainstream acceptance ties communities and franchises together, in good times and bad, and helps solidify the financial structure of the team: the key objective in franchise management” (p. 219).

Concerning attendance, Shank (2005) offers a number of factors that can influence attendance in any given market; they are “self-esteem enhancement, diversion from everyday life, entertainment value, eustress, economic value, aesthetic value, need for affiliation, and family ties” (p. 161). These represent the basic motives fans have for wanting to become involved with or participate in the sports culture (Shank, 2005). These also can be considered intangible benefits brought about by the existence of sport in a community. But the examination of the market and its population can get more complicated when you look at more uncontrollable factors such as the economy of your target market as well as the collective economy of the state and nation. These include the average income of the target market, unemployment numbers, and

other trends that must be considered before you can choose target markets or implement a successful strategy (Shank, 2005).

If by applying the product life cycle to the National Lacrosse League, one realized the league were in a state of decline, then measures would have to be taken to extend the life of the product. In the case of marketing a league, the ways employed to do this would be to develop new markets based on new and existing research, increase the existing market, and changing or developing a new marketing mix (Shank, 2005).

The marketing mix can be altered in a number of ways to include not only creating a media plan utilizing all types of new and traditional media, but also in the world of sports, using stadium signage and sponsorships that will increase ad revenue to the league but also link the sport to a reputable source. While sponsorships represent a possible gain, they, in contrast represent a new challenge to the industry. Unfortunately, it has been written that sponsorship dollars have fallen in recent years. According to an article in late 2009, sports figures have seen their sponsorships decline, as companies aren't willing to pay as much for their associations, due to the potential bad behavior of the athlete, or simply not seeing the return they would like to see from their investment (Fitch, Ozanian, & Badenhausen, 2009). Though this is a potential challenge, using the marketing mix effectively to develop new markets must still remain our goal.

Navigating the New Media Landscape

Finding the best media strategy to reach your target audience has become in some ways, easier, and in other ways much more difficult. While online services provide easier ways of measuring viewership and reach, there are many new channels from which to choose to air or disseminate content, making strategy a bit more challenging. The importance of utilizing all

available options in the most efficient manner possible has never been more imperative because users of online technology have become more commonplace, and there is a wealth of content longing for attentive eyes and ears. Scully (1995) reaffirms, “Technological change in the broadcast industry potentially reduces the barrier to entry” (p. 29). As the media landscape grows exponentially year after year, the idea may be inferred as the business model continues to evolve: it might be fathomable to believe that smaller sports leagues may be able to reach new audiences never before attained. Indeed, while there is more competition in the media world now, there is more opportunity than ever to be seen. “The far-ranging and growing number of media choices make selecting the right media a difficult task” (Shank, p. 309).

A less than traditional form of media used to promote has been film. Film has been used as a vehicle to promote all kinds of people, products, and brands. This method doesn't stop short when it comes to sports, and it has been one of the more popular genres. In 2012, a truly lacrosse-centered film entered the fold when “Crooked Arrows” was released to the public. It was the first attempt at broadening the reach the sport has had through a separate medium, than mere broadcasting of the game itself (Smith, 2012). This idea of association is obviously not a new one, but this example does prove that there are people in positions of power that feel that the sport can be relatable to a more mainstream audience outside of the sport itself.

The 2012 London Olympics was an example of how a network was able to recognize and utilize the ways in which consumers use the media to view sports in society today. The broadcast of the 2012 Olympics was considered to be the “billion dollar lab” as some have called it, because it made social media, and mobile devices part of its broadcast strategy (Tartaglione, para. 4). This had never been done before with a sporting event of this size and may change the broadcast model of sports in the future. Despite the change in its broadcast, the Olympics

seemed to prove successful for the network. A mention of the opening ceremonies: “Saturday’s prime-time coverage drew the highest rating ever for the first night of competition in a Summer Olympics staged outside of the USA” (Hiestand, para. 3). With so many boundless avenues with which to present the sport to new audiences and target markets, new media can serve as a catalyst for its promotion.

In early 2012, it was announced that the NLL will continue to use Livestream, a service used by many industries to broadcast live events to an online public. George Daniel, commissioner of the NLL, noted, “The New Livestream is the only platform that allows fans to get a full view of NLL games, coupling HD Video with real-time Photo, Text, and Video clip updates” (NLL powered by the new Livestream, para. 3). With the service being free of charge, it could serve the existing fan base, as well as reach a viewing public growing increasingly comfortable with the idea of content on new technologies. The use of Livestream didn’t last however, as the NLL took a step to stream games via YouTube on the Lacrosse Network channel. The channel shows a variety of other lacrosse events as well, including NCAA, MLL, and sports talk programming.

On February 20th, 2013, The Lacrosse Network on YouTube held a live video chat event open to the public with the NLL Commissioner. The event created an open forum where fans could ask the commissioner questions about news in the league as well his thoughts on where the league was going. The video chat covered a variety of topics including both issues within the game itself as well as the trajectory of the league’s future growth. Commissioner Daniel noted highlights of the league that included the tremendous parity between teams, its presence on social media, and what individual teams are doing to increase visibility among their respective communities. For example, he mentioned the Toronto Rock and their construction of a new

training facility used not only for themselves but for youth leagues in the area (The Lacrosse Network, 2013).

With regard to the idea of expansion, Mr. Daniel mentioned the Canadian markets of Vancouver and Montreal as potential expansion areas (these being cities that have hosted preseason games as well as former franchises), and did not exclude the possibility of revisiting markets once inhabiting NLL franchises, as well as new markets where pockets of lacrosse popularity have been growing rapidly (The Lacrosse Network, 2013). Though expansion is an obvious goal for the league in general, Daniel stressed that growing too quickly without finding the right markets and best ownership deals would be a detriment, and that patience would be needed in the end to ensure success in the league (The Lacrosse Network, 2013).

Summary

Altogether, using analysis of market research, examination of the marketing mix, and anticipating both controllable and uncontrollable factors to the industry, a sports product can continue to serve its existing fan base and well as become more profitable utilizing a mainstream rather than niche audience (Brooks, 1994). Deciding upon the proper combination of media elements, determining the appropriate target markets prime for growth, and strengthening the existing fan base, will be crucial in the continuing success of the National Lacrosse League.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In order to determine prime markets most inhabitable for growth, two methodologies will be used to supplement other market data obtained through secondary sources. Both are designed to provide a closer look at the NLL audience. The first will be a case study of one of the most profitable NLL franchises: the Colorado Mammoth. This will provide broad demographic information about an area of the country where market conditions might be more favorable for the growth of an expansion franchise.

The second study will consist of a content analysis of the NLL's presence on a social media site. Observations will be made about fan participation and demographic makeup of the audience, and categorized to give some perspective in social media usage. These will be compiled to help better define our target audience and attitudes about the game as well as the league.

These methodologies combined with additional market research will help us define the geographic markets best suited to make an expansion franchise successful. They will also help streamline the most cost efficient, targeted marketing efforts used to reach not only the NLL's existing fan base, but to grow the league's prominence outside of its current boundaries.

Case Study: The Colorado Mammoth

One of the more interesting stories in the history of the National Lacrosse League has been the rise of the Colorado Mammoth franchise in the city of Denver, Colorado. This is also one of the more puzzling anomalies found in the growth of the NLL. Unlike other areas in the West that have been slow to adopt the sport, Denver, Colorado has become a hotbed of fan support for both the indoor and outdoor games. Consequently, it is for this purpose that the

Colorado Mammoth will be the central focus of this case study, and serve as an example of how the league can regain its momentum moving forward.

In 2003, the City of Denver welcomed a new franchise in an already sports saturated Denver market. In addition to the Rockies of the MLB, Nuggets of the NBA, Broncos of the NFL, and Avalanche of the NHL, the Colorado Mammoth of the NLL would now be a new tenant. At this point in time, the NLL was 10 years younger, but on the cusp of a major growth spurt. It was yet unknown to executives how they would fare, but it soon became a leader in attendance league-wide. They were only one tenant of the larger scale arena, Pepsi Center, the largest arena in Colorado, sharing its home with the Nuggets and Avalanche. E. Stanley Kronke took ownership of the newly relocated franchise, and it was then added to his list of sports properties (Nuggets, Avalanche, and Rapids of Major League Soccer) making their home in the city of Denver, Colorado.

Colorado Mammoth: Denver, Colorado

While Denver is only a relatively mid-sized city in the list of most populated metro areas at just over 619,000 according to the US Census, it has an interesting geographic placement in the west region of the country, in that it is the largest urban center within a 600 mile radius (Home to Denver, para. 1). The population seems to be showing an upward trend, as the number has grown 3.3% over the last 10 years (US Census Bureau, 2013). Because geography has been such a factor in the success of the game, it's intriguing that Denver could serve as a potential gateway to the West. Though geography doesn't guarantee success in any business, it can serve as an indicator to marketers about how the popularity of the game is trending in different areas of the country.

Most statistics indicate that Denver is a mid-sized market. Its cost of living isn't too exorbitant; the median family household income is \$47,499 and the median cost of a typical Denver home is about \$243,000 (US Census Bureau, 2013). Economic indicators present interesting statistics for marketers to use because in the case of sports marketing, the amount of disposable income that a family can allocate for entertainment usage is crucial to the success of an area sports franchise. Despite the economic downturn late last decade for the United States, Denver's economic trend in recent years has correlated with the slow upswing of the country in general; unemployment in January of 2013 has been steadily declining and hovering around 7.4, which is slightly below the national average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

Denver is home to the University of Denver, the University of Colorado-Denver, and University of Colorado-Boulder. Nearby Fort Collins and Colorado Springs serve as the home of Colorado State University and the Air Force Academy respectively. Universities, as seen in earlier studies, serve as a foundation for the sport of lacrosse, reaching a younger population and building a stronger future fan base. It will be important to target new markets containing strong university populations and strong athletic programs, especially in which participation of the sport is high, and media attention is more prevalent.

For example, the University of Denver's lacrosse program enjoys a healthy amount of attention in the lacrosse world. According to their website, their program is ranked number six in Division I by Lacrosse Magazine in preseason polls, and three players from last year's program were selected in the MLL draft (University of Denver, 2013). An event known as the "Mile High Classic" is also held featuring games played by elite Division I lacrosse programs. There is also a radio program on ESPN radio featuring Bill Tierney, the head coach of their program (University of Denver, 2013).

In recent years, the city of Denver has made efforts in ramping up their downtown urban centers, increasing economic growth and beautification. These signs of growth taking place in the city have resulted in residential booms, and increase in business. The LoDo district (or lower downtown) is on the edge of the sports hub of the city; Coors Field, Sports Authority Stadium at Mile High, and Pepsi Center all were built in very close proximity of one another (Home to Denver, 2012). The area is not only a centerpiece for entertainment but also serves the local business community and residential communities as well.

Colorado Mammoth: In the Media

Because Denver is the largest city in the region, it is rich with media outlets that serve a greater geographic area within a number of different genres. Aside from the four major network affiliates and a few independents, the area is also served by a large number of magazine, newspaper and radio stations offering news and views about business, sports, and entertainment. One of the more notable offerings in the world of sports is Altitude Sports and Entertainment, a channel provided on satellite and cable systems, also owned by the owner of the Colorado Mammoth. This is a trend of cross-ownership seen more commonly now, and would most likely be a noteworthy indicator of future success.

The franchise has a team website, as all other teams do, with links to their twitter, Facebook, and YouTube accounts. Game broadcasts have been shown in the past in a number of different ways. Versus (a channel now named NBC Sports Network) was once a carrier of NLL action, and most recently CBS Sports Network and ESPN3 carried NLL action. Live NLL games for the 2013 season can now also be seen on YouTube as well via The Lacrosse Network. During such streams, fans are able to catch the action while posting comments with other fans viewing the game using their personalized accounts. Broadcasting sports online has become

more popular as fans have become more mobile while viewing content, as well as more interactive. The Colorado Mammoth also have an advantage in media coverage; a vast majority of their games can be seen on Altitude, a regional channel carried on cable and satellite systems.

Colorado Mammoth: In-Game Experience

Pepsi Center has become, to many NLL players, one of the more exciting places to play in the league, due to its in-game atmosphere. As mentioned previously, because fan support is so high, professional lacrosse players enjoy a full house of spectators every game night. Though most fans come to see the Mammoth win, most opposing teams don't mind playing in front of a potentially larger crowd cheering on the action.

One of the more attractive aspects to the fan experience is the price of a ticket. According to tickethorse.com, ticket prices are comparable to other venues in the NLL, ranging between \$10 and \$46 dollars. This range, compared to prices of other sporting events is extremely low and affordable giving families a wallet-friendly alternative to other venue attractions. Once fans are welcomed to the arena, they are met with up-to-date lighting and sound, "The Wild Bunch" dancers and a roaring P.A. announcer by the name of "Willie B" making comments aloud during game action. Seeming a bit unorthodox, but inventive and creative, the Mammoth's in game activities add to the lively atmosphere and keep fans attending the show year after year.

Colorado Mammoth: Branding

Branding the Mammoth or any other franchise in the NLL, has to do with sending the message that a fun, family friendly atmosphere has been created, yet at the same time, can be experienced at an affordable price to the average sports fan. Their slogan for many years: "Get in the Box!" gave their fan base as well as newcomers to the sport, a call to action in recognizing

the NLL as a sport worth watching. The word “box” of course lends itself to the brand of lacrosse that is being played indoors, but at the same time this phrase acts as a crowd chant when a player of the opposing team was sentenced to the penalty box during gameplay. More recently, they have adopted the slogan, “Amp it Up,” again urging fans to notice their sport and not only feel, but participate in the emotion of the game.

The Colorado Mammoth could be seen as a flagship franchise of the NLL as their attendance records average over 15,000 regularly since their inception into the league. It is this central point that begs the questions of why and how the fan base has become so strong in this area of the country and whether or not it can be duplicated in other regions.

Content Analysis: NLL Presence on Facebook

Because social media is so vital to the growth of niche products, and because the NLL has been actively participating in the social media world via Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, a content analysis was conducted to measure how fans of the NLL consume social media as well as their attitudes towards the league. The most popular social media site, Facebook, was used in this study. The NLL, as well as each of its nine franchises have their own official Facebook site.

The study was done at the midpoint of the 2013 NLL season. In this way, as opposed to the beginning or the end of the season, we can achieve a more accurate reading of the fan base.

Below there are two charts highlighting an aspect of the NLL’s presence on Facebook. The first chart is a league-by-league comparison of how the NLL measures up to other leagues in number of “likes.” First it is important to get a glimpse at how the NLL stacks up with the “Big 4” in terms of Facebook usage. Then we can more closely examining the NLL with respect to second tier leagues of popularity such as Major League Soccer and the NLL’s counterpart, Major League Lacrosse. Some interesting points are seen. First of all, it is noticed that the NLL still

has substantial gains to be made in comparison to the Big 4, but when looking at the second tier, the NLL seems to be more popular than its outdoor counterpart, MLL, but also is gaining on Major League Soccer.

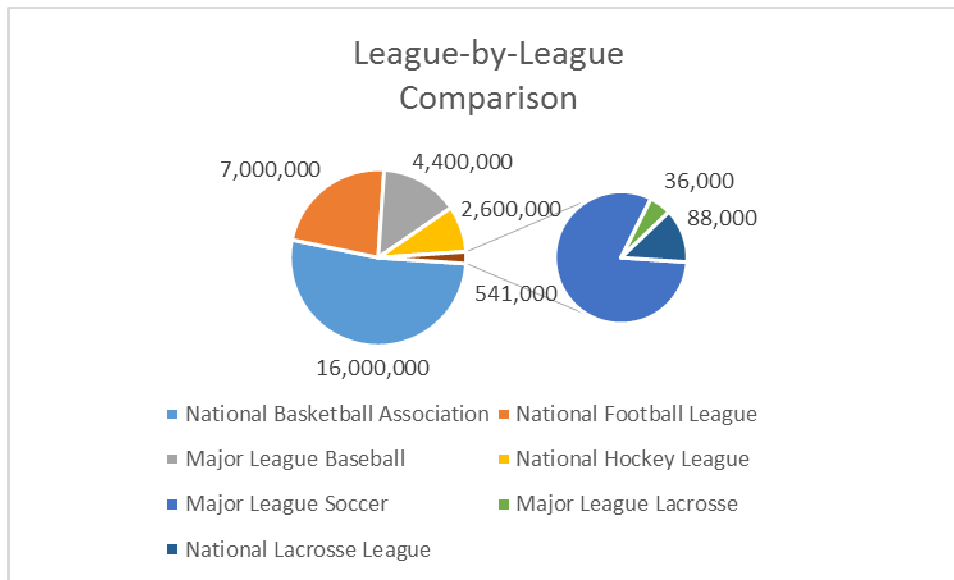


Figure 1. League-by-League Comparison. This figure shows the number of 'likes' on each league's official Facebook page.

The second chart outlines more closely each individual franchise's Facebook fan base and compares it to their average attendance for the 2012 season. For the most part, a team's social media popularity correlates to its attendance, except for a few inconsistencies. Note that in some cases, such as the case of Washington, their social media presence far exceeds their average attendance, and as fan presence on social media wanes, attendance begins to surpass it.

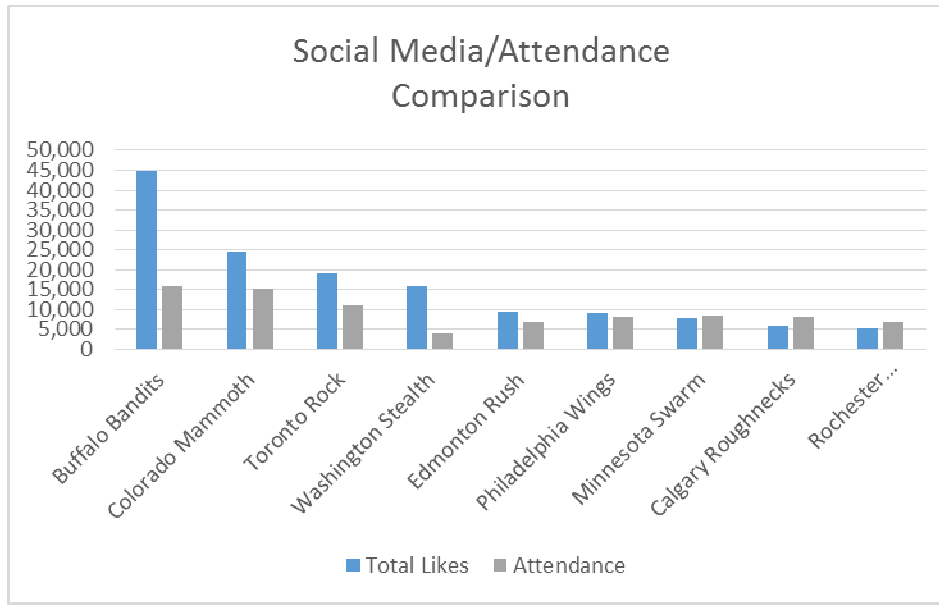


Figure 2. Social Media/Attendance Comparison. This chart compares the franchise average attendance per game with its number of likes on its official Facebook page.

The second part of the study had to do with fan commentary and attitudes toward individual franchises as well as the league in general. On each of the franchise sites, there exists a place to post general or more specific recommendations for what fans would like to see. As of midseason, there were a total of 73 posts made in the recommendation sections of all sites combined. The list below outlines what fans were concerned with in a number of broader categories. The categories established were as follows:

- Officiating- comments about officials or general rules of the game;
- Team play- comments about individual players or how the team played the game;
- Broadcast- comments about how the game is broadcast or the type of media stream from which the game was viewed;
- Arena/promotions- comments about in game promotions, entertainment or facility related issues such as parking or ticket prices;

- Other sports- comments in which other sports were mentioned in the conversation;
- Unrelated- comments that were completely unrelated to the subject matter.

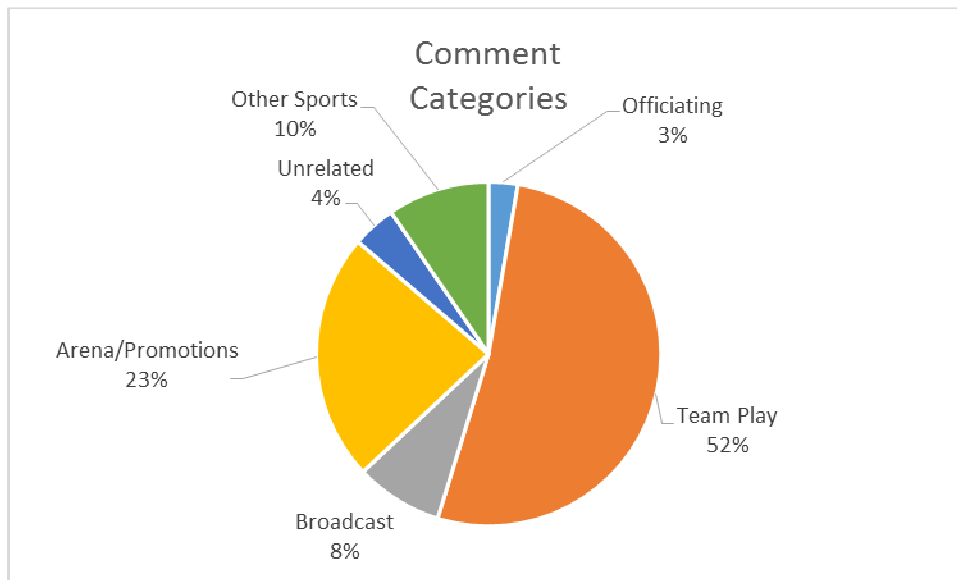


Figure 3. Comment Categories. This chart shows the kinds of comments as a percentage of the total number of comments.

While most fans shared views on their own home team and the facility issues that concern them, many did share views on how the game was broadcast as well. An interesting point of note is that 10 percent of comments cross referenced other sports in their geographic area.

The last chart below measures which fans were the most active on their team's sites with regard to recommendations.

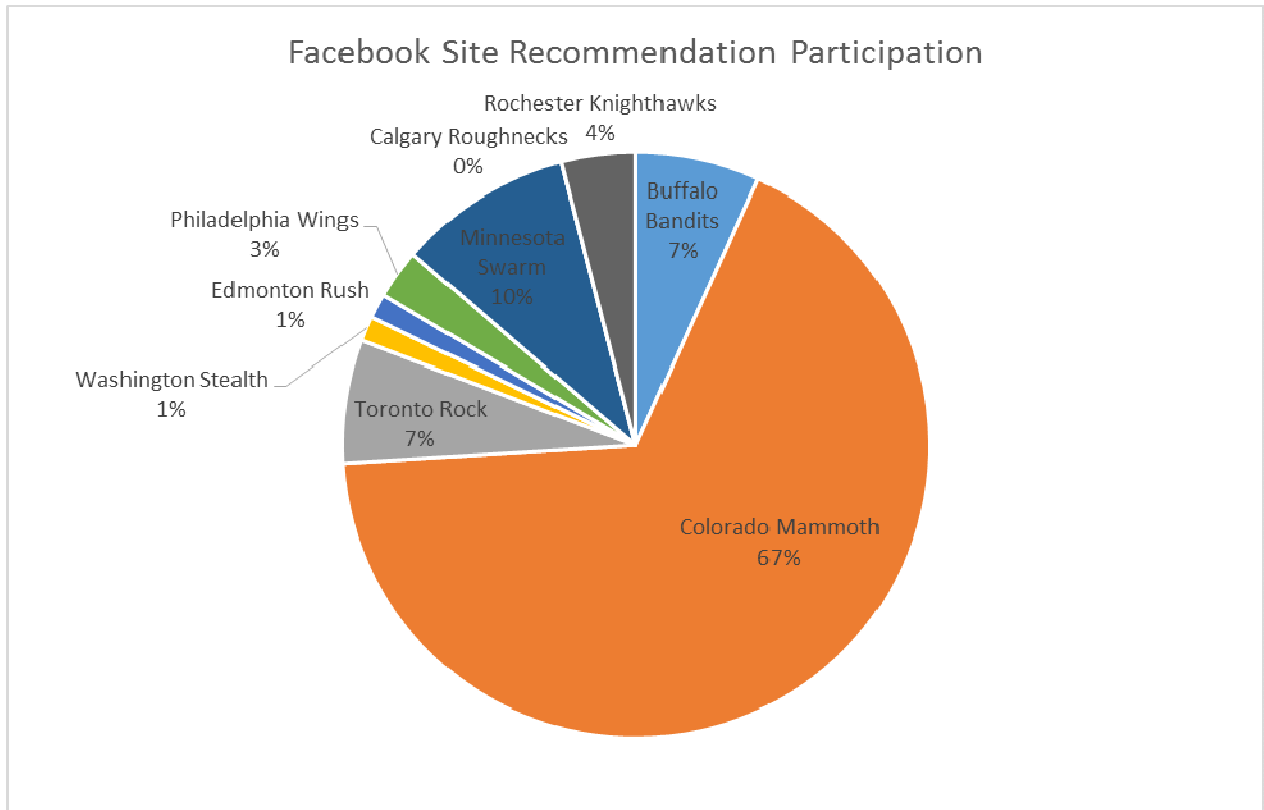


Figure 4. Facebook Site Fan Participation. This chart shows fan participation of each franchise site as a percentage of the total sample.

The Colorado Mammoth enjoy the highest amount of fan participation in the league and the majority of the comments made were positive. Another interesting point references the previous chart as many of the comments made referring to other sports also came from the Colorado Mammoth site.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

Implications for the Future Success of the League

The marketing plan created for the National Lacrosse League will consist of examining a situational analysis of the league, as well as a prospective look at four potential expansion markets in which the league could grow, followed by outlining ways the NLL can promote itself in these markets utilizing integrated marketing communication.

One of the major points this paper presents is the opportunity for smaller minor league sports to move from niche status to a more mainstream audience given current market forces and the new media landscape. While promoting the National Lacrosse League can be a challenge, there has been no greater time to take the sport to a new level. The chart below outlines the league's major challenges and opportunities.

Table 1. SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Good business model Loyal, devoted fan base Growing popularity of the sport
Weaknesses	Small market share for the league Still fairly niche Fewer resources
Opportunities	Proliferation of social media Cross-Ownership Potential merging
Threats	New leagues forming Competition from the "Big 4" Facility conflicts (competition for arena use)

Strengths.

- The league has a small front office, and was able to survive during lean years for the nation's economy.
- The fan base is known for their loyalty to the league and passion for the game.
- The sport of lacrosse is widely known as the fastest growing sport in the nation. The game has become extremely popular at the high school and college levels.

Weaknesses.

- The NLL commands very little of the national spotlight when it comes to media attention and share of the market.
- Though they play the fastest growing sport in America, the sport still remains fairly niche.
- Until the league gains a larger audience, getting broadcast rights on mass media and larger national sponsorships will be a challenge.

Opportunities.

- The social media boom has in large part, lessened the barrier to entry for interests competing for media attention. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter now have the ability to reach a broader audience with a mere fraction of the cost of mass media or possibly at no cost at all.
- Sports ownership groups have the ability to cross promote amongst their different properties, utilizing resources for multiple purposes. Having the right ownership can be a major advantage.
- Other smaller lacrosse leagues have started forming. While in the short term this can be considered a threat, in the long-term, this can provide a potential merge, doubling the size of the game's exposure.

Threats.

- As the previous point noted, not only does the NLL contend with the “Big 4” leagues that dominate media exposure, but competition within their own sport has been growing as well.
- Sports arenas serve a great many purposes besides hosting a sporting event. They are used for concerts, conventions, ice shows, as well as other private events. Not only does the National Lacrosse League have to deal with scheduling conflicts of these kinds, but must also deal with other sporting events. Finding the right venue with the right ownership will be crucial in neutralizing this threat.

The goals of the strategy are as follows:

1. Grow the NLL’s fan base, while maintaining the existing fan base by reaching meaningful audiences.
2. Create new revenue by acquiring new sponsorships.
3. Build and maintain relationships both in the corporate sector and community.

League Expansion: Potential Markets for Growth

Most clearly, a way for the National Lacrosse League to grow beyond its current fan base is to develop new markets. Conditions of each individual market chosen must have favorable market conditions and correct timing to ensure a franchisee’s best chance at a successful entry. Four potential expansion markets are listed below along with pertinent information regarding the city’s attributes favorable for growth. Though all of these markets have advantages and disadvantages associated with them, the popularity of the sport in all of these markets has grown over the last decade as indicated below by the maps created by GeoIQ/Esri DC Development Center and shown in the article from 2008, “Lacrosse: The Fastest Growing Sport in the

Country.” Research was done to show the growth in the number of high school and college lacrosse programs across the nation dating from 2000 to 2007. While the Northeast region of the country was shown as saturated heavily as expected, there were other pockets shown to be growing in regions such as the Great Lakes region, as well as southern California, the intermountain west, and Texas (Admin, 2008). It not only supports the idea of growth over time, but exemplifies the youth interest in the game at the high school and college levels.

The target market for the game of lacrosse tends to be more affluent, with about half of the fan base earning at least \$50,000 a year for the household and about a third earning \$75,000 a year; men outnumbering women by a ratio of two to one, and falling within all age groups (Vasquez, 2013). Statistics for each market listed are “Population,” retrieved from the US Census Bureau (US Census Bureau, 2013). “Metropolitan Statistical Area Population,” “Unemployment,” “Projected Annual Job Growth,” and “Median Household Income” were statistics retrieved from Forbes magazine’s list of “Best Places for Business and Careers” (Badenhausen, 2012).

Potential Market #1: Salt Lake City, UT.

- Population: 189,899
- MSA Pop.: 1,147,800
- Unemployment: 5.8%
- Projected Annual Job Growth: 3.2%
- Median Household Income: \$58,975
- Professional Sports Franchises:
 - Utah Jazz (NBA)
 - Real Salt Lake (MLS)

- Utah Blaze (AFL)

This market is a mid-sized city and has many positive attributes. Of all the potential markets on this list of four, Salt Lake City boasts the lowest unemployment rate paired with the greatest upward swing in job growth making it the most economically healthy in terms of bringing new business to the area. Geographically, it also lies nearest to the Denver market in the intermountain region of the country. The city has a strong fan base for sports, as the community is devoted to its teams, but they lack many major professional sports. For example, the Utah Jazz have maintained their fan base, win or lose, and have remained successful for 30 plus years. Good ownership with ties to the community can make the Salt Lake City market a prime growth opportunity for the league.

Prospective Market #2: Dallas TX.

- Population: 1,223,229
- MSA Pop.: 4,356,500
- Unemployment: 6.5%
- Projected Annual Job Growth: 2.9%
- Median Household Income: \$58,974
- Professional Sports Franchises:
 - Dallas Cowboys (NFL)
 - Dallas Mavericks (NBA)
 - Dallas Stars (NHL)
 - Texas Rangers (MLB)
 - FC Dallas (MLS)

Dallas, Texas may seem an odd choice for expansion for the NLL, as well as the game in general, but the market has seen much growth in popularity of the sport. It also represents many of the same positive economic indicators as Salt Lake City; its unemployment number is below the national average, and it maintains a healthy job growth outlook. It is a larger city on the map, and while this may represent enough disposable income to support another franchise to the city, it does represent a lot of direct competition from other sports. Adding another winter sport would present a scheduling challenge with the Mavericks of the NBA, and the Stars of the NHL.

Prospective Market #3: San Diego, CA.

- Population: 1,326,179
- MSA Pop.: 3,145,400
- Unemployment: 9.2%
- Projected Annual Job Growth: 1.8%
- Median Household Income: \$60,767
- Professional Sports Franchises:
 - San Diego Padres (MLB)
 - San Diego Chargers (NFL)

Historically, teams on the west coast haven't fared well for the National Lacrosse League; in the middle of the last decade, Anaheim played host to a franchise for a season. Portland and San Jose either relocated or stopped operation. But according to the map, over the last ten years, the California coastline has shown an upward trend in lacrosse popularity, and southern California reveals the strongest growth of all. The City of San Diego doesn't host many sports that are played indoors for obvious reasons, but this could present an advantage to entering this market. As the Padres of the MLB play in the summer, and the Chargers of the NFL play in the

fall, this would make competition in the winter and spring within the market near non-existent.

There are some drawbacks to this market though, as its unemployment number remains stubbornly high at 9.2% and its job growth outlook is much less than the previous two markets.

Potential Market #4: Cleveland, OH.

- Population: 393,806
- MSA Pop.: 2,067,300
- Unemployment: 6.9%
- Projected Annual Job Growth: 1.1%
- Median Household Income: \$46,838
- Professional Sports Franchises:
 - Cleveland Cavaliers (NBA)
 - Cleveland Browns (NFL)
 - Cleveland Indians (MLB)
 - Cleveland Gladiators (AFL)

Of course, while Cleveland, Ohio isn't considered to be a part of the west region, it can stand as a market where league expansion can take place, thus helping to sustain the league's current fan base. The map indicates massive growth in and around the Great Lakes region, not only in upstate New York (historically a stronghold for the game), but also in surrounding states such as Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. The MLL currently has a franchise in Columbus, named the Ohio Machine, and the NLL can possibly capitalize on this growth in popularity for the state. The city has a strong sports culture and a devoted fan base. Drawbacks do include weak economic indicators though. While the city is growing economically, the unemployment rate is hovering around 6.9% and its job growth is lowest on the list of potential markets. In terms of

facilities, tenants of Quicken Loans Arena are large in number, as an NLL expansion team would have to find a place in the schedule amongst the Gladiators of the AFL, the Cavaliers of the NBA, and the Lake Erie Monsters, the minor league hockey team. It is a mid-size, livable market for its inhabitants though, and the popularity of the game has grown immensely in this area over recent years.

Sponsorships and Partnerships

The acquisition of new sponsorship deals are crucial for any sports league to grow and maintain. Currently, Reebok has been serving as an official sponsor of the NLL since 2005, and provides all athletic gear and uniforms for NLL players (What is Reebok's relationship with the National Lacrosse League?, 2013). While this partnership could continue into the future, additional potential sponsorships can be sought for more revenues. Under Armour could be a possible sponsor for the NLL, as it is up-and-coming and gaining ground in popularity. The NLL faces challenges though, with acquiring large sponsorship deals as they are currently a niche sport sensitive to its geography, and lacks major national media attention (Kojima, 2010a). The following list of sponsors though, appear to target a similar demographic as the National Lacrosse League and could be seen as advantageous for both parties.

Old Spice. Old Spice traditionally has been targeted to older men, but has in recent years turned its attention towards a much younger audience, that being in the 18-24 range (Pawade0484, 2012). The advantage of using this type of product association doesn't end with the college lacrosse player in the age range above, but because we're looking to attract families to take an interest in the sport and the league as well, Old Spice can cater itself to be used by older men as well. Fans of the sports are predominantly male, outnumbering women in a 2 to 1 ratio, and the game spans a large span of age groups where "thirty percent of fans are ages 18-29, 28

percent of fans are 30-44, 34 percent are 45-64, and 8 percent are 65 and older” (Vasquez, para. 21). As of March 2011, they had a 37% market share in men’s deodorant, and participate in a number of socially conscious environmental programs (Pawade0484, 2012). This brand lends itself to a wide array of product lines for various consumers, and in particular, our target market for the league.

Sports Authority. Many sports retailers exist, but not all of them sell lacrosse equipment. Some specialized retailers focus solely on that. With the goal of this overall strategy being to reach a broader audience, we would need to associate the league with a retailer that sells to a broader base of sports fans. According to research found from an article in Sports Business Daily from 2012, sports fans are more likely segmented not by sport, but by the type of fan and lifestyle they have (Broughton, 2012). This translates that fans may not be married to just one sport, but enjoy many, and shouldn’t be segmented as such. Sports Authority is a nationwide retailer headquartered in Colorado. It has locations in 3 of the 4 potential target markets listed above (with the exception of Cleveland), and targets as aforementioned, a broad base of consumers aged 18-50 (Misonzhnik, 2010). It also in recent years, has opened up a smaller version of the store, named S.A. Elite, which is designed to serve upper-class consumers with higher-end merchandise not found in the big box (Misonzhnik, 2010).

Vitamin Water. Vitamin Water owned by Coca-Cola Co. has become since its inception in 1998, a major competitor in the energy drink market (Dean, 2011). This market is especially popular in the United States and growing. Marketed as a “healthy alternative to soda”, it competes directly with a number of other energy drinks targeted towards males 18-24 (Dean, para. 12). But unlike counterparts such as Red Bull or Gatorade, Vitamin Water can reach broader audiences as well that include other members of the family other than the college athlete

participating in a game. The sport of lacrosse is abundant in upper-class communities, and Vitamin Water lends itself to the health-conscious individual and family.

Public Relations

Because the National Lacrosse League lacks the revenues of an NBA or MLB, advertising on mass media such as television or radio, with the kind of frequency necessary to build a lasting brand image in the minds of the audience, can be daunting at best. For this reason, the use of public relations should be practiced at its utmost effectiveness. The importance of relationship building within the community is paramount. Franchises in the NLL have for many years had ‘meet and greets’ with players after games, where fans can meet with their favorite players on the field. Building a relationship with not only a team but its players helps build brand loyalty and nurtures fan support.

Some other examples within the league include Sticks2Schools, a program by the Washington Stealth that has introduced the game through school physical education programs. The program, in existence since 2005, not only enriches a culture of being physically active to fight obesity, but also gets young people involved with the game at earlier ages (Sticks2Schools, 2013). On the Sticks2Schools website, one explanation of why lacrosse is a good sport for instruction: “As parents discover that lacrosse is more exciting than soccer, cheaper than ice hockey and not as dangerous as football, the game is getting a closer look,” says Alexander Wolff, a journalist for Sports Illustrated magazine (Sticks2Schools, para. 5). In addition, 2013 saw the Rochester Knighthawks join with Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services to launch the “End the Violence in the Community” campaign (Knighthawks partner, 2013).

Campaigns such as these build a franchise’s relationship with the local community and also show the national audience at large that the National Lacrosse League cares about the

community it is serving. By raising awareness of these issues and partnering with large sponsors, the NLL can both build credibility with their fan base, and drive support for the league by building relationships in the business community as well.

Media

With full scale mass media advertising being an expensive option, the NLL's use of social media has become imperative in their strategy for reaching larger mainstream audiences. As aforementioned, they currently broadcast all games on YouTube's Lacrosse Channel, as well as some games on CBS Sports Network, and ESPN3. While this doesn't always give them the largest audience, these modes of content transmission were impossible in days of old, and social media and online presence do provide a lesser barrier to entry to the sports marketplace never before seen for the league. For this reason it is important to utilize social media for all its effectiveness, not only for broadcast and promotional purposes, but also in terms of audience research and information gathering. In this way, the NLL's media use can maintain its current loyal fan base, as well as reach a broader mainstream audience.

A new endeavor in terms of mobile media was the release, in February of this year, the NLL app for mobile platforms. The audience is increasingly mobile and able to view content on many different platforms, and an app is a complement to an already growing use of new media by the NLL. According to an article by Natalie Burg in Forbes magazine, as of 2012, "49 percent of smartphone and tablet users are finding apps to find local information" (para. 2). The NLL app can keep fans posted on news, scores, and updates around the league. The Forbes also notes that the goal of the app is also important. The CEO of Mobile Roadie, Michael Schneider stated, "Whether or not an app is successful depends on the goal. Is it the number of downloads, or how often people are coming back?" (Burg, para. 8).

Social media such as Google+, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as noted earlier, are all being utilized by the league, and some of these sites are being used for research purposes as well as promotion, to provide up to date attitudes and opinions of the fan base. In addition, Facebook will soon relay valuable information to users with analytics such as Graph Search. The advantages from this feature are outlined for businesses big and small in an article from Search Engine Journal. Features of the Graph Search allow businesses to keep track of how they are being viewed online, as well as get to know their customers in more detail. For example, a highlight noted had to do with the idea of customer conversion rather than mere awareness.

Noman Ali (2013) writes:

“The Graph Search shows users to which of their friends have checked in to places, liked the pages or reviewed the listings. In short, it will show them exactly how popular you are within their circle of friends” (para. 5).

Altogether, the Graph Search could be an effective tool for the National Lacrosse League to help find their audience as well as other products or services their audience has ‘liked’. This could serve as a link in establishing partnerships as well as new sponsorships. Noman Ali (2013) continues:

“Businesses will have to put in some effort to utilize its full potential, though. For starters, contact and about information should be highly accurate and up-to-date. Next, you need tangible likes, reviews, shares and check-ins to rise higher in the search results. Last, but not the least, your content should be focused on converting leads to sales” (para. 9).

Though for the most part, the NLL’s media plan would most likely utilize social and online forms of use, through cross-ownership in new markets, the NLL could be promoted through other

sports, stadium signage, and a variety of sales promotions within the franchise. These could all help build an audience within not only the market of expansion but the nation at large.

Gaming is another popular form of media that can help promote the league as well as the sport of lacrosse in general to a younger fan base that has begun to take an interest in the game. In 2011, Crosse Studios released the first NLL video game for Xbox Live, and in recent months, released Lacrosse Dodge, a game for mobile devices. The Crosse Studios press release (2013) states of its features, “Lacrosse Dodge delivers true-to-life dodging and shooting gameplay with the added twist of mach speed turbo bursts and obstacle fields not found in any other sports video game” (para. 1).

CHAPTER 5

FUTURE RESEARCH

The subject of sports marketing within the new world of how content is provided, sold, and transmitted to its audience is a broad subject with many implications for the future. Many different aspects can be drawn from as future research is conducted and evaluated. The National Lacrosse League is one in a mere plethora of new leagues abound within the sports business stratosphere. This paper served as an overview for how an example of a sports product with a niche audience can be brought to the mainstream. It outlines an expansion strategy for the league into new markets, highlights potential sponsors and partnerships, and re-introduces the idea that barrier to entry into this marketplace is lessened by the prevalence of new media. But the final outcome of new media use, not only as a marketing tool, but gatherer of information, is yet to be seen. Future research can be done as these new tools being introduced to the marketplace become more widely used to serve a broader public.

Further research can be done with the areas of social media and the analytics it provides; not only to sports marketers but businesses in general. Other sports leagues could also be studied as they are introduced to the public, or grow to serve a larger audience. Developments in social media, online and mobile technology can be studied to examine their impact in how they change the way products are sold, marketed, perceived, and evaluated by a mass audience within the scope of integrated marketing communications.

REFERENCES

- Admin. (2008, January 24). Lacrosse: the fastest growing sport in the country. Retrieved from <http://blog.geoiq.com/2008/01/24/lacrosse-the-fastest-growing-sport-in-the-country/>
- Ali, N. (2013, March 26). What Facebook's graph search can offer brands. Retrieved from <http://www.searchenginejournal.com/what-facebooks-graph-search-can-offer-brands/61135/>
- Baden, D. (2010, August 10). Popularity of lacrosse increasing so fast, there aren't enough coaches. Retrieved from <http://www.threesixtyjournalism.org/article/2010-08/popularity-lacrosse-increasing-so-fast-there-arent-enough-coaches>
- Badenhausen, K. (2012, June 27). Best places for business and careers. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2012/06/27/the-best-places-for-business/>
- Brooks, C. M. (1994). *Sports marketing: Competitive business strategies for sports*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Broughton, D. (2012, July 23-29). Research segments fans not by sport, but by lifestyle. Retrieved from <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2012/07/23/Research-and-Ratings/Team-Epic.aspx>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013). Denver-Aurora-Broomfield CO Economy at a glance. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.co_denver_msa.htm
- Burg, N. (2012, December 7). Building a mobile app for your business is easier than you think. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/capitalonespark/2012/12/07/theres-an-app-for-that-building-a-mobile-app-for-your-business-is-easier-than-you-think/>

- Cowen T., & Grier K. (2011, October 31). Two economists explain the NBA lockout. Retrieved from http://www.grantland.com/blog/the-triangle/post/_/id/8300/two-economists-explain-the-nba-lockout
- Crosse Studios announces “Lacrosse Dodge.” (2012, October 17). Retrieved from <http://insidelacrosse.com/category/tags/crosse-studios>
- Crossley, A. (2011, April 28). 2006-2009 Portland Lumberjax. Retrieved from <http://www.funwhileitlasted.net/2011/04/28/12-portland-lumberjax/>
- Dean, G. (2011, June 11). Vitamin enhanced water could make a bigger splash. Retrieved from <http://marketography.com/tag/vitamin-water/>
- Denver – the city. (2013). Retrieved from http://www.hometodenver.com/Stats_Denver.htm
- Fitch, S., Ozanian, M., & Badenhausen, K. (2009, December 31). Sports sponsorships hit the skids. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/0118/outfront-tiger-woods-golf-sponsorships-hit-skids.html>
- Griffin, T. Pro sports impact on the economy is closer to a bunt than a homerun, but there may be other reasons to keep teams swinging at home. Retrieved from <http://www.washington.edu/alumni/columns/june97/game1.html>
- Hiestand, M. (2012, July 29). NBC saves prime Olympic action for primetime. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/london/story/2012-07-29/NBC-Olympics-TV/56580380/1>
- Knighthawks partner to ‘end violence in six nations.’* (2013, January 14). Retrieved from <http://www.knighthawks.net/node/2360>

- Kojima, S. (2010, January 22). NLL seeks new sponsorships, Reebok deal expires in 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.ilindoor.com/2010/01/22/nll-seeks-new-sponsorships-reebok-deal-expires-in-2010/>
- Kojima, S. (2010, February 19). The financial impact of the National Lacrosse League (NLL) Playoffs. Retrieved from <http://www.ilindoor.com/2010/02/19/the-financial-impact-of-the-national-lacrosse-league-nll-playoffs/>
- Kojima, S. (2012, May 3). NLL: 2012 regular season numbers dip again, under 9,500 on average. Retrieved from <http://www.ilindoor.com/2012/05/03/nll-2012-regular-season-attendance-numbers-dip-again-under-9500-on-average/>
- Kojima, S. (2013, April 22). 2013 NLL regular season attendance numbers, Colorado and Buffalo top again. Retrieved from <http://www.ilindoor.com/2013/04/22/2013-nll-regular-season-attendance-numbers-colorado-and-buffalo-atop-again/>
- Misonzhnik, E. (2010, May 19). Sports authority ventures into elite territory. Retrieved from http://retailtrafficmag.com/news/sports_authority_elite_05192010/
- Morrill, W. K. (1966). *Lacrosse*. New York: The Ronald Press Company.
- NLL Network powered by the new Livestream in 2012*. (2012, January 6). Retrieved from http://www.nll.com/news_article/show/127801?referrer_id=389128
- Pawade0484. (2012, June 28). Old Spice market overview. Retrieved from <http://pawade0484.hubpages.com/hub/Old-Spice-Market-Overview>
- Rovell, D. (2009, January 9). How healthy is the National Lacrosse League? Retrieved from http://www.cnbc.com/id/28580131/How_Healthy_Is_The_National_Lacrosse_League
- Schaff, P. (1995). *Sports marketing: It's not just a game anymore*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

- Scully, G. W. (1995). *The market structure of sports*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Shank, M. (2005). *Sports marketing: A strategic perspective*. (3rd ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Smith, M. (2012, May 7). Lacrosse world helps get sport on big screen. Retrieved from <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2012/05/07/Marketing-and-Sponsorship/Lacrosse-film.aspx>
- Sticks-2-Schools. (2013). Why Lacrosse? In Sticks-2-Schools. Retrieved from http://sticks2schools.com/why_lacrosse.html
- Tartaglione, N. (2012, July 27). London Olympics preview: Coverage is “hybrid of innovation and tradition”, but will it do the job? *Deadline*. Retrieved from <http://www.deadline.com/2012/07/london-olympics-tv-coverage-nbc-bbc-preview/>
- The Lacrosse Network. (2013, February 20). *Ask the NLL Commish with George Daniel and Samir Chaudry*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB5mdGyhV3M>
- Thompson, P. (2011, January 5). History lesson: National Lacrosse League. Retrieved from <http://sports.yahoo.com/nhl/news?slug=ycn-7516516>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2013). 2012 population estimates. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/>
- University of Denver. (2013). Men’s lacrosse – statistics. Retrieved from http://www.denverpioneers.com/SportArchives.dbml?ATCLID=204964704&SPSID=90266&DB_LANG=C&&DB_OEM_ID=18600&SPID=10874
- Walker, S. & Enz, M. (2006). The impact of professional sports on the local economy. *Western New England Law Review*, 29 (149). 149-163.

Wertheim, L. J. (2001, December 10). Low salaries and fast action: National Lacrosse League's 15 year success formula. Retrieved from

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1024497/index.htm>

What is Reebok's relationship with the National Lacrosse League (NLL)? (2013). Retrieved from

http://corporate.reebok.com/en/about_reebok/faq_section/partnerships/default.asp

Williams, P. (2010, April 8). Lacrosse is a boom sport at Washington area high schools.

Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp->

[dyn/content/article/2010/04/07/AR2010040703136.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/07/AR2010040703136.html)

Vasquez, D. (2013, March 18). Your client's message at a lacrosse game. Retrieved from

<http://www.medialifemagazine.com/your-client-at-a-lacrosse-game/>

VITA
Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Christopher R. Herbel

Cherbel12@msn.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Arts, Radio/Television, May 2002

Research Paper Title:

Leveling the Playing Field: Developing an Expansion Strategy for a Professional Sports League

Major Professor: Dr. Narayanan Iyer