

The internationalization of a sport league: A comparison between the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the French Soccer League (LFP)

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**Marketing
Abstract 2009-103**

**May 29, 2009
1:20 PM**

**25 minute oral
(Lexington A)**

Previous research has underlined the importance of branding in sports (Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt, 2005; Farrelly, Quester and Greyer, 2005; Mullin, Hardy and Sutton, 2007; Richelieu and Pons, 2006) and has acknowledged sports teams as brands in their own right (Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005; Ross, 2006). The same could be said about leagues which, nowadays, compete worldwide for the disposable income of consumers and the loyalty of fans. The NBA, NHL, NFL, even MLB to a certain extent, are trying or have tried to expand their league beyond their original borders, seduce fans in other markets and generate new streams of revenues through TV rights, sponsorship deals and merchandise sales. But what about the internationalization of European leagues in North America, especially in soccer? How could a European Soccer League get engrained, in one way or another, on a land that has not been very welcoming to soccer historically?

Grounded in the literature on the internationalization of the firm (Johanson & Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975; Johanson & Vahlne, 1990; Knight & Cavusgil, 1996; Luostarinen & Gabrielsson, 2006; Welch & Luostarinen, 1988), as well as the brand (Anderson et al., 1998; Cheng et al., 2005; Kapferer, 1998; Van Gelder, 2002), then applying it to sport (Richelieu, Lopez and Desbordes, 2008), we shall compare the internationalization of the NBA with the internationalization of the French Soccer League (LFP). More precisely, what are the determinants of success when a sports league goes abroad? What are some of the catalyst factors that enable a league to move along the internationalization curve? What are the constraints to consider in order to successfully expand abroad?

We used a multi-method approach. We began with semi-structured interviews with managers of both leagues and teams. This qualitative method enabled us to carry out an in-depth case analysis of the strategic vision of NBA and LFP managers in terms of their plans to internationalize. Cases were selected according to the researcher's observation skills and the cases' ability to provide pertinent information, instead of a sample size (Patton 1980); as we know, the case study limits the number of companies that could be studied in a reasonable period of time and at reasonable cost (Eisenhardt, 1989). A set of one and a half hour face-to-face meetings were held, which were transcribed within 24 hours (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Given that the main criterion in the choice of a respondent for a case study was the quality of the information that could be obtained from the respondent (Matear, Gray and Irving, 2000), the managers chosen were directly involved in the league's or team's marketing initiatives. For data analysis, content analysis was used to analyze the responses of the manager, focusing on the league's and team's internationalization strategy. We followed with a survey among fans of both leagues, which were contacted using the database that was provided by both leagues. We complemented our approach with secondary data (team documents, online and offline articles, etc.).

Some leagues appear to be more successful than others, for instance the NBA, which seems to have found the right combination between the demand and the offer factors. Truly, from the demand perspective, basketball has deep roots in Europe, and some countries are very passionate about it (i.e. Greece, Spain, former Yugoslavia). Hence, from an offer point of view, the marketing actions undertaken by the NBA to conquer the Old Continent benefit from a fertile ground, which did not exist for the NFL when it introduced the NFL Europe project, for instance. As for the French Soccer League (LFP), the main challenge is the lack of brand awareness that the League itself and the teams face, with the exception of Olympique de Marseille, Paris Saint-Germain and Lyon. The competition the LFP faces from other European soccer leagues, such as the English Premiership League, the Italian Serie A and the Spanish League, as well as the lack of exposure of soccer during prime time in North America are some of the hurdles the LFP faces when considering an expansion in the U.S. As a first step, Marseille, Paris Saint-Germain and Lyon could take part in an exhibition tournament in the U.S. against other European teams and some local clubs, which could help boost the awareness and interest of American fans for the French League and its teams. This could then lead to more aggressive actions in a second set of actions. Determinants of success, catalyst factors, as well as constraints associated with the internationalization of a sport league are illustrated in a graph.