Sponsoring the Little Guys: An investigation of North American Professional Niche Sport
Sponsorship Selection Criteria
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Sport organizations face tremendous pressure to secure sponsorship support (Copeland et al., 1996). Sponsorship has been
described as the ‘financial backbone’ for many sport properties and can be the central element in the image of an event. Within
North American society, an unsponsored event is often viewed as second rate and of little significance (Lamont & Dowell,
2007). Therefore, the attainment of sponsorship support is among the most critical tasks of any sport marketer. Benefits
provided by sponsorship can often mean the difference between a successful or unsuccessful sporting event, team, league, or
tour.

While sponsorship funding is important to all sport properties, professional niche sports face even greater pressure to secure
sponsorship funding as sponsorship support often determines whether an event can even take place (Sutton, 2009). Miloch and
Lambrecht (2006) stated niche sports could best be classified as sports that are not mainstream and do not appeal to a mass
audience. Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) also provided some examples of niche sports, including tennis, lacrosse, action/extreme
sports, and cycling. Funding from sponsorships within niche sports is often viewed as vital capital for operations (Lough &
Irwin, 2001) as they often do not receive the revenues from media broadcasting contracts and gate receipts found in their more
affluent mainstream sport counterparts. Stotlar (2009) reported three examples of professional niche sports canceling events due
purely to a lack of sponsorship funding. An international badminton tournament, the Chicago stop on the Women’s Tennis
Association (WTA) tour, and the Women’s World Doubles Championship in Fort Lauderdale were all canceled due to a lack of
sponsorship support.

A review of the contemporary sport management literature revealed that organizations solicited to engage in sport sponsorship
typically consider both objectives and selection criteria. Sport sponsorship objectives were described to be corporate marketing,
communications, public relations, and/or promotional objectives (Abratt et al., 1987) deemed to be attainable through sport
sponsorship. In essence, the sport sponsorship relationship is used as a vehicle to achieve these overarching corporate
objectives. Sport sponsorship selection criteria are related to sponsorship objectives yet distinctly different. Sponsorship
objectives are ingrained within the corporation and the corporation could use several different methods, or vehicles, to attempt
to achieve such objectives. Conversely, sponsorship selection criteria are specific to a given sponsorship opportunity. Selection
criteria represent the inventory a sport property is able and/or willing to provide a sponsor to assist in the achievement of
corporate sponsorship objectives. An example of a sponsorship selection criterion includes sponsor signage at an event,
television coverage, and hospitality opportunities. Some of the most commonly cited selection criteria included media coverage
at the local, regional, and national level (Abratt et al., 1987), ability to reach a specific audience including demographics and/or
psychographics (Irwin et al., 1994), hospitality opportunities (McCarthy & Irwin, 2000), audience size, both on-site and off-site
(Meenaghan, 1991), sport/sponsor product fit (Thwaites et al., 1998), and cost of the sponsorship opportunity (Irwin et al.,
1994).

Previous research focused specifically on niche sports unveiled several selection criteria niche sports may use as points of
differentiation from their mainstream counterparts. The most commonly cited selection criteria attributed to niche sports were
their ability to provide sponsors with a more targeted demographic than other sponsorship opportunities (Bennett et al., 2002;
Bennett et al., 2009; Doherty & Murray, 2007; Greenwald & Fernandez-Balboa, 1998; Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006) cost
effectiveness compared to alternative to professional mainstream sport sponsorships (Greenwald & Fernandez-Balboa, 1998),
and Finally, niche sports are typically less cluttered with sponsors than many other sport properties (Doherty & Murray, 2007;

The purpose of this study was to identify which criteria sponsors deem important when evaluating professional niche sport
sponsorship opportunities. From this, professional niche sport managers should be able to create more focused and better-
suited sponsorship proposals aimed at highlighting the selection criteria deemed important to sponsors. Subsequently, niche
sport properties may be better equipped to secure the sponsorship funding vital to the very existence.

The survey instrument utilized in the current study was a revised version of the Sport Sponsorship Proposal Evaluation Model
(SSPEM) which has been used by many previous researchers (e.g. Irwin & Sutton, 1994; Lough, 1996; Lough et al., 2000; Lough
& Irwin, 2001; McCarthy & Irwin, 2000). Four items were added to the SSPEM to address unique benefits niche sport
properties may be able to provide potential sponsors (i.e., cost-effective/affordable, decreased sponsorship clutter, more targeted demographic, and the flexibility of niche sport properties to meet the wants of sponsors). Participants were asked to rate the level of importance they had placed on each selection criteria when evaluating the most recent professional niche sport they had sponsored on an eight-point scale. Respondents were also provided the opportunity to provide additional objectives and selection criteria they deemed important when assessing niche sport sponsorship opportunities.

A survey of 352 sport sponsorship decision-makers, yielding a response rate of 25.3% (N = 89) was used to address the purposes of the current study. Sport sponsorship decision-makers were identified using the 2010 Sports Business Journal Resource Guide and Fact Book. Respondents reported sponsoring a variety of professional niche sports within North America including: minor league baseball, minor league hockey, AVP, LPGA, WNBA, WPS, and Indy Racing.

Niche sport sponsorship decision-makers within the current study reported the most important selection criteria used to screen niche sport sponsorship opportunities were (a) cost effectiveness (M = 7.55, SD = .88), (b) company image fit within the target market of the sport property (M = 7.29, SD = .97), (c) flexibility of the sport property (M = 7.22, SD = 1.02), (d) spectator demographics (M = 7.19, SD = 1.24), and (e) company product/service image fit with the sport image (M = 7.16, SD = 1.21). Finally, findings also suggested that different companies engaged in niche sport sponsorships for a variety of reasons. Some companies placed a greater importance on target market awareness than others, while some were more concerned with spectator demographics.

Overall, the sponsorship decision-making process was reported to be very complex as sponsors take many selection criteria into consideration when evaluating niche sport sponsorship opportunities. However, the most consistent finding indicated that sponsors are looking for a good fit between their target market, and image and the sport property they choose to sponsor. In summary, niche sport properties must be well aware of their fan base and community reach and how these factors match the target market of potential sponsors. Findings from the current study also indicated niche sport properties should be flexible in assisting sponsors achieve their sponsorship objectives. Finally, to increase the likelihood a sponsorship proposal will be funded, niche sport properties should demonstrate ways in which a potential sponsor can increase awareness within their target market while increasing sales/market share within the sponsorship proposal.