Making Fantasy a Reality: Fan Involvement in a Professional Sport Team's Decision Making

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In the past few years, all four North American major leagues have suffered a drop in attendance. Pundits have suggested that the decline can be attributed to the lingering effects of the economic recession (Fried, 2010) and the increased popularity of staying home to watch the game in climate controlled comfort surrounded by high-tech devices that add value to the viewing experience (Leahy, 2010). We offer a third explanation. Sport consumers who have come of age in the 21st c. are accustomed to calling the shots on their fantasy teams and through sport video games. Considering that approximately 27 million Americans play fantasy sports (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2010), and EA Sports’ Madden NFL has sold 60 million copies since its inception (Oates, 2009), this market segment is substantial. There is evidence that many of these consumers care more about the outcomes of their fantasy and video game teams than they do about the fortunes of real big-league teams competing for real championships (Curtis, 2007; Stark, 2008; Walker, 2005). New York Times reporter Bryan Curtis (2007) has noted that there is now a new breed of “postmodern fan” who follow only their fantasy team(s) and have no allegiance to any real big league franchise. Media theorist Thomas Oates (2009) believes that the increased interest in consuming the amateur drafts, fantasy sports, and video games has created a new class of sport consumers who are not motivated by the fortunes of any big-league team, but by “vicarious management” where the focus is solely on individual players who have become commodities not be consumed by a team’s management, but directly by individual sport consumers. We believe that these consumers have become so engaged in making management decisions in these virtual forums that they are less likely than their 20th c. forebears to be content purchasing a ticket to attend and merely spectate. To hold their attention, make cheering for a big league team more relevant, entice them to buy tickets, and keep them generating revenue for the team, sport managers must adopt a new management structure where they solicit fan input regarding matters having an impact with respect to a team’s on-field performance.

In past decades, teams staged promotions allowing fans to make in-game managerial decisions. In 1951, the St. Louis Browns held Grandstand Manager’s Day where the fans decided game tactics (Veeck & Linn, 1962). The Portland State football team ran a play suggested by a fan as part of a one-game promotion in 1989 (Crothers, 1990). In each case however, fan involvement lasted but one game. In recent years, teams have asked for fan input at much more frequent intervals, but with mixed results. In 2006, minor league baseball’s Schaumburg Flyers let fans pick the starting lineups via daily online voting, but found that rival fans voted in an attempt to sabotage the Flyers (Reilly, 2006). One year later a group of British football (soccer) fans formed an online organization called MyFootballClub where members pooled their money to buy and run a football team that eventually started to lose, which drove away members (and their dues), leaving the team broke and relegated to a lower league (Hutchins, Rowe, & Ruddock, 2009). In 2009 the MLS’ Seattle Sounders were formed and organized so that fans paid annual dues for the right to vote every four years on whether or not the General Manager (GM) should keep his job or be replaced (“Winning”, Sport Business Journal, 2009).

Based in part from the lessons learned from previous attempts to give the fans input into matters relating to on-field performance, we are advocating for a management model that (like Seattle) is based on fans paying annual membership dues allowing members to vote on keeping or firing the GM every four years, but asking for their input with respect to on-field affairs fairly regularly (certainly much more often than once every four years) in order to hold their attention and keep their identification levels high. The membership dues (of say $100 annually) would be low enough for most fans to afford, but high enough to keep out rival fans who might otherwise sabotage your efforts. The members would not own the team, nor be asked for capital over and above their annual dues; wealthy individuals or corporations would still own the teams, assume the financial risk, and reap the financial rewards. Paying the annual membership dues would entitle members to electronically vote on matters presented to them by the team’s management. What types of issues shall be put to a membership vote and how frequently such matters shall be voted on is up to the discretion of team management. The GM or coach may occasionally overrule the will of the members (should last minute information become available, for example), but they would do so fully aware that every four years the members can vote the GM out of office. For example, every NFL game begins with a decision literally based on a coin toss. The members could decide “heads” or “tails” based on online voting. In another example, an NHL team with the first overall pick might be torn between two outstanding amateurs. Assuming the GM took advice from a handful of trusted scouts, he could also ask for a vote of the members who could collectively act as another trusted scout. In another example, a slumping
An MLB team is contemplating benching an underperforming rookie in favor of an experienced veteran and makes the decision based on an online vote of the members.

To encourage members to attend more games, the team could ask for input during the game and tabulate the vote of in-venue members only. The technology now exists for teams to create an “app” that would only be operational on a member's wireless hand-held device if accessed via the in-venue wifi connection. For example, if an NHL team has a commanding lead after two periods, the in-venue members could be asked during the start of the second intermission if the starting goalie should be replaced so he can get some much needed rest. During an NFL football game with the home team within field goal range, they run a play on 3rd down and get close to the first down marker. As the officials bring out the chains to measure, the in-venue members could be asked, “If 4th down, do we go for it?” By the time the chains leave the field, the coaches can have an answer. We are not advocating that the fans make all the decisions all the time. The decisions are ultimately made by the GM and the coaches who are privy to a great deal of inside information (regarding such issues as nagging injuries, substance abuse, etc.). They decide when to ask for member input and they have the option of overruling them after the votes are tabulated. However, like a politician who routinely ignores the will of the electorate, the GM runs the risk of losing his job every four years when the members vote to renew his contract or fire him. GMs who never ask for member input and hire coaches who never ask for member input run the very real risk of losing their jobs. GMs who ask for member input and act on it and who hire coaches who are willing to do the same, will create an environment where members feel engaged. This engagement will lead to higher levels of team identification and an increase in the number of tickets sold. Not only would a team’s revenue increase by selling more tickets, but the $100 each member would pay in annual dues would also be a significant new revenue stream in itself, and the creation of electronic platforms to communicate with members would result in new inventory to offer potential sponsors, increasing a team’s overall sponsorship revenue.