An Investigation of Professional Arena Soccer League Sponsorship

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Sport sponsorship is an increasingly popular topic with intensifying questions from practitioners and researchers. Many sport properties admit sport sponsorship serves as the financial backbone for a particular organization or event. More specifically, 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 it is clear sponsorship funding serves an important role among nearly all sport properties, its significance has not yet been clearly defined among professional niche sports. Niche sports refer to activities that are not mainstream and do not appeal to a mass audience (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006, p. 147). In North America, niche sports include the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), United States Tennis Association (USTA), North American Lacrosse League (NALL), and Professional Arena Soccer League (PASL). These professional niche sport leagues face even greater pressure to secure sponsorship funding as sponsorship support typically accounts for a larger percentage of the operating budget and, consequently, often determines whether a niche sport event can even take place (Sutton, 2009). Funding from sponsorships within these types of sports is frequently 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 mainstream sport counterparts.

Despite this need, nearly all previous sponsorship literature focused on mainstream professional, elite amateur (Olympic), or major collegiate sport (Wartella, 2009). This trend shows previous research neglects to consider the unique and valuable sponsorship selection criteria a professional niche sport property can offer to businesses (Greenhalgh, 2010). Therefore, the current research study highlight two critical problems. First, there is a significant gap in the literature thereby making it difficult for sport researchers to adequately understand the application of sport sponsorship to a professional niche sport organization. It is currently unclear as to whether or not the information regarding sport sponsorship among mainstream sport properties can be directly applied to professional niche sport. Second, this gap also makes it difficult for sport managers working with a professional niche sport organization to create effective sponsorship programs for their property. For example, professional niche sport managers rightly question whether the lack of media broadcasting contracts and lower gate receipts found among their organizations could affect sport sponsorship programs. Further, these issues are magnified under the current economic challenges facing sport properties in North America, as they compete for dollars among an expanded marketplace offering more choices to citizens on the verge of recession.

The purpose of the current study is to overcome the two aforementioned problems by identifying the types of companies engaged in sponsorship relationships with professional niche sport teams and the practices used for securing such engagement. A mixed method approach is utilized to determine how multiple teams found in one specific professional niche sport league, the PASL, effectively apply sport sponsorship. Marketing managers for each of the teams in the Professional Arena Soccer League provided lists of previous and current sponsors. Subjects received follow up online surveys and asked to provide further information regarding the industry, size, and scope of each sponsor. Subjects also provided information concerning the duration of each sponsorship contract, the type of support provided (cash, in-kind, hybrid), and the job title of the sponsorship decision-maker within each sponsor company.

Researchers applied a three step process to elucidate best practices for sport marketers of professional niche sport properties. First, predominantly descriptive statistics identified the types of organizations involved in sponsorship relationships. Second, the duration of the sponsorship contract was regressed on each of the corporate variables to determine if any corporate variable is a significant predictor of contract duration or type of support provided. Finally, a follow up interview provided additional qualitative information describing how each sponsor was
approached. Content analysis provided a list of several themes described by marketers, which were then narrowed down to provide a list of best practices for other professional niche sport properties to potentially utilize.

Findings from this study offer professional niche sport properties insight into the industry, size, and scope of companies most likely to offer future support. This information will help sport managers more effectively identify potential sponsors of niche sport. The findings also provide important information regarding how professional niche sport properties could approach potential sponsors. More specifically, it is clear that sponsorship opportunities related to professional niche sport do not appeal to every potential sponsor. Therefore, sport practitioners should have a basis of comparison from which to begin when deciding how best to spend their time. Finally, the current study begins to narrow a gap in the research related to sport sponsorship. While several of the niche sport properties under review are successful, there are various levels of attention given to sport sponsorship among each of the teams involved. Therefore, the importance of niche sport sponsorship is not yet adequately understood and deserves more attention in the future.