The Case of the Women's United Soccer Association: Explaining the Rise and Fall of a Social Movement Organization

Meghan McDonogh, The Catholic University of America

Abstract 2012-323

Socio-cultural

Saturday, May 26, 2012

20-minute oral presentation (including questions)

(North)

Abstract 2012-323

4:30 PM

Soccer has been one of the fastest growing sports in the United States for the past three decades, particularly on the women's side, as Title IX dictated there be more opportunities for females to participate in athletics (Blumenthal, 2005; Liston, 2006, Fasting & Pfister, 2000). The emergence of opportunities for women to play soccer at the collegiate level led to the natural evolution of the women's national team program in the mid 1980s and its eventual participation in the first Women's World Cup held in China in 1991 (US Soccer, 2011). To little fanfare, the 1991 Women's National Team won the inaugural World Cup and laid the groundwork for what would become some of the most widely celebrated moments in American women's sport history. Starting with the 1996 Olympic Games, described as the “Year of the Woman” based on the success of the U.S. Team’s gold medals (basketball, softball, and soccer in addition to gymnastics), the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team began to gain national recognition (Kemp & Shelton, 1996; Longman, 2000). The 1996 Women's Soccer gold medal match drew, at that time, the largest crowd to ever watch a women's sport, an attendance record that would be topped only three years later as the U.S. women defeated China in the Women's World Cup final match (Longman, 2000; Springer, 1999).

Following the media frenzy and pop culture phenomena that surrounded the 1999 Women’s World Cup Champion U.S. team, seeds were planted for the creation of a professional women’s soccer league in the United States. John Hendricks, the founder and CEO of the Discovery Channel, partnered with the 1999 championship team to establish the Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA) in 2001. The WUSA existed for three seasons, closing its doors in 2003 (WUSA, 2003; Southall, Nagel, & LeGrande, 2005).

While many scholars and sports writers alike chose to focus simply on a poor business model as the reason the WUSA was forced to “suspend operations” in September of 2003, such a quick rush to judgment seems shortsighted as many new professional sport leagues take years to turn a profit and gain fan support (Chapin, 2000; Southall, Nagel, & LeGrande, 2005; Stossel, 2001). Additionally, women's sport is a new addition to the already crowded sport marketplace and faces additional barriers than its more established male counterparts (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003). While an inadequate business plan may be one reason for the WUSA’s failure, it is just one of many reasons better analyzed through the lens of social movement literature. This research addresses the call by Davis-Delano and Crossett (2008) for more research on sport as a social movement and more specifically the role of the women's sport movement as part of the larger women's movement.

This analysis is of the women's soccer movement, focusing on the WUSA as a social movement organization (SMO), as part of a greater women's sports movement that continues to grow and evolve. Social movement (SM) theory is a logical theoretical school of thought developed from the early works of Merton (1957) and Parsons (1951), who examined the factors related to the changes occurring in social structures. The term social movement refers to a social phenomenon (Tilly, 2004) and “a distinct social process” (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 20). A social movement organization (SMO) is an organization working toward the goals of a specific SM (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; McCarthy & Zald, 1987). Within SM theory, several schools of thought offer important ways to analyze the factors social movement theorists have considered critical to social movement organization success.

Social movement literature is especially useful in understanding this phenomenon. Because of this rarely discussed area of exploration of sport as a social movement (Harvey & Houle, 1994), all three of the primary schools of social movement thought (resource mobilization, political opportunity structure, cultural cognitive) were used to examine and analyze the WUSA as part of the women in sport movement (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 1997; Tilly, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to examine the creation and demise of the WUSA, and to establish the league as a social movement organization (SMO) within the context of the rich body of social movement literature. In explaining
the rise and fall of the WUSA, three research questions were answered: (a) How was the WUSA founded? (b) Why was the WUSA founded? and (c) Why did the WUSA fail?

The design used to answer these research questions was a case study design from an historical analysis perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight WUSA leaders, including players and executives. The interviews were then transcribed and coded to establish themes answering each research question while also establishing the WUSA as a SMO. Interview was the primary form of data collection, though internal documents from the WUSA, WUSA publications, and newspapers and magazine articles were examined to accompany the findings from the interview process.

Three themes emerged to answer the question “How was the WUSA founded?” They were: (a) the 1999 Women’s World Cup Championship Team, (b) John Hendricks, and, (c) the “collision” of these two entities. Three themes also emerged in answering the question “Why was the WUSA founded?” and were: (a) players provided great role models, (b) the desire for a premier women's soccer league, and (c) the passion surrounding the players. Five themes emerged to answer the question “Why did the WUSA fail?”: (a) inadequate business plan, (b) lack of support for women's sports, (c) lack of trust in leadership, (d) a mixed league identification/branding message, and (e) inevitable sense of failure.

This study adds to social movement literature as well as the literature on women in sport. It also provides fresh insight for those contemplating starting new professional sport leagues, especially women's professional sport leagues such as Women's Professional Soccer (WPS). Ideas for future research include examining in greater detail the specific factors leading to the failure of the WUSA as well as comparative research of the WUSA, WPS, and various other women's professional sport leagues such as the ABL and WNBA.