

## 2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

### A Qualitative Analysis of Athletic Apparel and Equipment Sponsorship and Student-Athlete Recruitment at the Football Championship Subdivision

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**20-minute oral presentation**

**Finalist**

**(including questions)**

**Abstract 2013-038**

**1:20 PM**

**(Room 408)**

College athletic departments are faced with the challenge of balancing a high level of competition with cost-cutting measures (DeSchrive, 2009; Fort, 2010; Lapchick, 2010). The commercialization, as well as the increased competition for blue-chip student-athletes is an ongoing concern in intercollegiate athletics. Schools compete for athletic achievement to gain national recognition, sell tickets, increase revenues, fundraise (Martinez, Stinson, Kang, & Jubenville, 2010; Meer & Rosen, 2009), and improve the quality of university admissions (Chressanthi & Grimes, 1993; Jones, 2009; Judson, 2004; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003; McEvoy, 2006; Toma & Cross, 1998). Athletic departments at the Division I level rely on ticket sales, donations, corporate sponsorships and TV broadcast rights for revenues (DeShriver, 2009; Fulks, 2010). Sponsorship contracts and perks have been readily documented in the media (Carty, 2007; Ott, 2009; Rovell, 2007). These reports indicate that sponsorship deals provide much needed financial support for college athletic departments, but the question remains as to whether the sponsorship deals directly impact student-athlete recruitment.

The ability to compete athletically comes in being able to tailor the program to the needs of the recruits and acquire top athletes at lower costs. Judson (2004) summarizes this phenomenon by stating: "competition for talented student-athletes is intense, time consuming, and expensive, but rewards earned from fielding successful teams are far-reaching, if not immeasurable" (p. 28). The rewards earned from winning programs are fostered by a variety of elements, including coaches, facilities, and financial support, but recruiting is the lifeline to an athletic program. Furthermore, "without gifted athletes, even the most talented strategist or motivator will be rendered ineffective as a coach" (Judson, 2004, p. 24).

Conversations with student-athletes prior to this study indicated that apparel and/or equipment sponsorships may have an impact on the recruitment process; however, a lack of prior empirical research left this assumption unsubstantiated. This phenomenological study was used to gain a better understanding of the impact that athletic apparel and equipment sponsorships have on student-athlete recruitment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten football players at a state-supported NCAA Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) institution in the Rocky Mountain region.

Four universal themes emerged through open and axial coding of the transcribed data: performance versus image, brand familiarity, gratitude, and other influential factors. Performance versus image referred to the idea that a brand doesn't make players perform better, but most participants agreed that they want to look cool, trendy, or cutting edge. The second theme was brand familiarity which came from the references made about brands that the players had used growing up, or brand which they felt represented authentic football brands. Gratitude emerged as a universal theme in that several participants described their gratitude for getting to play football while attending college. They were also thankful for the free equipment, regardless of their level of affection toward the brand. The final theme refers back to the many reasons cited in the literature for why student-athletes choose an institution including: family, friends, academic programs, academic reputation, proximity to home, relationship with the head coach, and opportunity to play. The results from this study suggest that football players at this institution did not hold the apparel and equipment sponsorship as a deciding factor for the commitment to a school, though they did hold strong opinions towards New Balance, and the other three brands referenced during the interviews.

The values expressed by these participants can provide a basis for future apparel and equipment contracts at this institution, as well as lay the framework for similar research across gender, sport, school, and conference. For athletic department staff and their recruitment strategies, this research offers a first step in understanding the contribution that apparel and equipment sponsorships may have toward student-athlete college choice.