Modifying Rules to Create a Product: Managing the AFLW

Kim Encel, Deakin University
Pamm Phillips (Advisor), Deakin University
Helen Brown (Advisor), Deakin University
Josh Vanderloo (Advisor), Australian Football League

Professional sport leagues have a long history of developing strategies to maintain their commercial business (Shilbury, 2012). One such strategy is to modify rules—which essentially changes the game as a product. Modifying rules can change game dynamics (including relationships between players and the game actions) and structure (such as time-outs and length of play; Arias, Argudo & Alonso, 2009). The continual modification of rules to refine sports to be an attractive product to consumers and media organizations is common in professional leagues (Abrevaya, 2004; Easton & Rockerbie, 2005; Kew, 1987; 1990; 1992; Steen-Johnsen, 2008). For example, in the US context, the NFL and NBA are open about the evolution of rules for their sports (NBA, 2016; NFL, 2016). In Australia, the Australian Football League (AFL) have introduced over 30 rule changes to the sport in the previous five years. In this way, the introduction of rule modifications is akin to product development. Despite a large body of literature that understands product development in marketing and management, there has been little attention paid to product development in professional sport that understands both on and off-field evidence simultaneously. This is useful when examining rule modifications along with the decisions that underpin any product development such as this in professional sports. This research fills that knowledge gap by examining the actions of a professional sport governing body in the development of a new professional league. Specifically, this research examines the way in which the AFL managed the development of the AFL Women’s Competition (AFLW) for launch in 2017.

Australian football is traditionally a male dominated sport and although women have played the sport for many years at an amateur league level, the AFLW is the first time a professional league will exist. One consideration in planning for the AFLW was whether women would play under the same (traditional) rules as men, or if rules needed to be modified to create a product that would be appealing for consumers and broadcasters (consistent with the AFL’s professional men’s league). The AFL wanted the AFLW product to have limited congestion, be free flowing, high scoring, and demonstrate high levels of skill. The AFL held a series of (semi-professional) exhibition matches in 2016 which provided an experimental setting to examine the game of Australian football when played by women at the elite level, and to test and analyse the impact of any rule modifications on product development. This research examines the actions of the AFL in 2016 as it considered product developments for the AFLW inaugural season in 2017.

This research presents individual level performance indicators (on-field statistics) from 295 players who participated in 10 matches in the AFL 2016 exhibition match series. Four of these 10 matches were played under varying rule modifications with the other six using traditional (i.e., men’s) rules. Twelve performance indicators were chosen in consultation with the AFL as evidence for the matches to have the desired product of reduced congestion, be free flowing, high scoring and skilful (the desired product). Further, 35 interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in the delivery of the exhibition matches (administrators, coaches, and umpires) as well as players to understand the impact of rule modifications on product development. This research examines the actions of the AFL in 2016 as it considered product developments for the AFLW inaugural season in 2017.

Results indicated that the rule modifications introduced impacted only one of the twelve individual performance indicators linked to the desired product. Results suggested that modifying the rules for women did not have the desired effect on the match spectacle (on-field play). Qualitative data provided greater insights into the game dynamics and potential reasons for the limited impact of modifying rules. Firstly, teams formed for exhibition matches were representative teams where many players had not trained or played together previously. Further, teams were not informed of rule modifications until one week prior to matches. In this way, there was a lack of experience as a team as well as a lack of time to devote to analysis of rule modifications and adjust play accordingly. Players, coaches, managers and umpires were largely accepting and supportive of any rule modifications that the AFL were to
propose if it rendered a more commercially viable product, and did not change the core rules that underpin the sport.

Professional sport organizations have been criticized for introducing rule modifications based on intuition and subjective analysis rather than objective evidence (Arias et al., 2009). In this case, product development has been approached from an empirical perspective using mixed methods. The AFL’s robust approach to product development has led to very few rule modifications for the 2017 AFLW. This evidence-based decision challenges the often-held perceptions of the need to modify sports such as football for women (Arias et al., 2009). Implications for the governance, management and development of the sport will be further discussed.