The Sport Treatment: Examining Strategic Partnerships between Professional Sport Healthcare Organizations

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Introduction
Strategic partnerships in the sport industry have become central to the operation of sport organizations. Sponsorship, or “a cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property… in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property” (Ukman, 1995, p. 1), is a central and ubiquitous form of inter-organizational relationship in sport. Indeed, in North America, where 37% of worldwide sponsorship spending occurs, 70% of all sponsorship expenditures pertain to sports (IEG, 2017). However, as the nature and scope of the sport industry has evolved and expanded, demand for strategic partnerships that require a higher level of collaboration and commitment from partners is growing rapidly (Lei, Ghosh, & Srinivasan, 2010). Mohr and Spekman (1994) noted that partnerships are strategic relationships that share compatible goals, seek mutual benefit, and acknowledge a higher level of mutual independence.

Recent professional sport partnerships in the United States include relationships between teams and local healthcare systems around marketing, philanthropy, and medical care, among other activities (Flanagan, 2016; Punke, 2015). While partnerships between professional sport and healthcare are not a new phenomenon, these relationships are becoming more prominent and sophisticated and playing a larger strategic role for both partners. For example, in 2016, Emory Healthcare and the Atlanta Hawks announced a new partnership that includes co-building the Emory Healthcare Sport Complex - a training center and the hub of Emory’s sport medicine and sport science research division (Emory Healthcare, 2016). In another example, Sutter Health and Oakland Athletics jointly formed a youth wellness program (Major League Baseball, 2016). Through these partnerships, healthcare organizations can leverage the power of sport to a) build connections to consumers (and other stakeholders) in their communities and b) promote health and wellness. Flanagan (2016) noted that with ‘consumerism’ playing a more active role in the healthcare industry, sport partnerships may help providers differentiate their products and services. Also, through these innovative relationships, sport teams and leagues can demonstrate a commitment to the health and wellness of their players, fans, and local communities, in addition to securing sponsorship revenue. Thus, there is potential strategic and social value of sport-healthcare partnerships.

Previous studies in sport management on sport–healthcare relationships have looked at partnerships between non-profit sport organizations and healthcare entities. For example, Misener and Misener (2016) examined a local partnership for health promotion between non-profit sport organizations and public health agencies in a Canadian community. Marlier and colleagues (2015) explored collaboration among local health centers and nonprofits in the capacity building of community sport programs in disadvantaged communities. While these studies of cross-sector partnership offer insight into collaborative capacity and partnership alignment, they are focused on non-profit sport. We lack an understanding of partnerships between professional sport and healthcare systems. These partnerships involve significant financial, human capital, and physical resources, and likely include different motivations, structures, and activities, than collaborations between local non-profit and public sector organizations. Further, unpacking professional sport partnerships can shed light on the role of leagues and local sport markets in shaping partnership characteristics, including the intended impact of partnership activities on community health and well-being.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of our study is to examine strategic partnerships between U.S. professional sport teams and healthcare organizations. In an ongoing study, we are exploring the following questions: 1) What are the motivations and the strategic value derived from these partnerships? 2) What are partnership structures/activities and how do they vary across markets and sport leagues? 3) What characteristics of the local market may predict partnership motivations, structure, and activities?

Methods
We use exploratory case studies to gain an in-depth understanding of the structure and motivation of partnerships between professional sport teams and healthcare organizations, as well as variation in partnership structures across market and sport league. We will examine partnerships in three different metropolitan markets: Detroit, New York, and San Francisco. In each market, we will look at the partnerships between teams from the major professional leagues in the U.S. (i.e. National Football League, Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, and National Hockey League) and their healthcare partners. Our data are being collected from multiple sources to allow for richer and more robust findings, including: 1) websites/ published online materials from each of the partners; 2) news reports, articles, and other publicly available sources; and 3) semi-structured interviews with team and healthcare organization executives. So far, we have collected publicly available data on the healthcare partnerships of all the teams from the major professional leagues in the U.S.; and our semi-structured interviews have already begun. We plan to collect approximately 25 interviews across the three different markets from October 2016 to February 2017. We will analyze data inductively, generating themes with the aid of NVivo content analysis software. We will then connect themes around motivations and structure to market and league variables to generate insights about the relationship between elements.

Expected Contributions
This research contributes to the sport management literature on sport-health partnerships by uncovering the structures and motivations of strategic partnerships between professional sport and healthcare organization. By looking at partnerships within markets, we can generate insights about networks and configurations of (sometimes interlocking) partnerships between professional sports teams and healthcare partners. Further, by looking across markets, we can gain knowledge of the role of market characteristics (e.g. number of healthcare systems, local demographics, government, sports fandom) in partnership motivations and structures. Further, this research will develop a base knowledge of the context that can be leveraged for future studies on causal links between these sport-health partnerships and stakeholder outcomes. Finally, the insights of this research can inform teams and healthcare organizations looking to develop partnerships or redefine existing ones.