A Viable Pathway to Professional Hockey? An Empirical Investigation of U Sports Hockey from 2000-2018

Chris Chard, Brock University
Jonathon Edwards, University of New Brunswick

Management - Strategic Management (College Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2019-180

Friday, May 31, 2019
11:40 AM
Room: Napoleon D3

There are several hockey organizations that exist within North America that are influential in affecting male hockey players’ decisions regarding a specific pathway to pursue, thereby enhancing opportunities of playing in a professional league in the future (i.e., National Hockey League [NHL], or American Hockey League [AHL]). Some organizations that affect a player’s development, between the ages of 16-21, include: The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), and U Sports (formerly Canadian Interuniversity Sport [CIS]). Recently, Edwards and Washington (2015) identified the NCAA (specifically, Division I) and the CHL as two equally legitimate pathways to playing professional hockey. To date, however, little is empirically known about the viability of the Canadian university path. The focus of this research therefore is on a third alternative professional developmental pathway for players: U Sports men’s hockey.

Previous literature recognizes the perception that U Sports men’s hockey is not a league to advance careers (e.g., Chard, 2013; Edwards & Washington, 2015). Indeed, U Sports is perceived as the end of a hockey player’s path, rather than a stepping stone to professional ranks (Chard, 2013). Of interest, Chard, Hyatt and Foster (2013) found the level of play in U Sports to be extremely high; however, the ability to communicate this to myriad audiences, including prospective players, was sorely deficient.

Expectancy-value theories posit that human behaviour is goal-oriented (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). Thus, consumers are motivated by attributes that they expect will allow them to achieve a desired outcome (Chard, Edwards, & Potwarka, 2015). Using a brand lens, D’Alessandro (2001) notes that the brand, and its associations, are very comprehensive including, “the stuff you want to communicate to consumers and the stuff you communicate despite yourself” (p. xiv). Thus, accurate or inaccurate perceptions regarding a brand’s attributes may influence consumer decision-making and perceptions. As such, through utilization of expectancy-value theories, underpinned by brand theory, we empirically investigate whether the perceptions of U Sports men’s hockey, as a developmental path to the professional ranks, are warranted.

Empirical data were collected through information on every website of U Sports university hockey rosters from 2000-2018. Each, player was then searched using hockeydb.com to track players’ career progression to professional leagues (or not). Results show that perceptions around the U Sports men’s hockey brand are both accurate and erroneous, depending upon perspective. Preliminary findings show that a limited number of players advance from the Canadian university system to play at the highest levels of professional hockey (NHL and AHL). To be sure, however, the data clearly shows that numerous players evolve from myriad U Sports teams to enjoy professional careers in leagues throughout Europe and North America. For example, the University of New Brunswick graduated nine players to the professional ranks in 2016.

In sum, this research addresses a significant brand challenge for U Sports administrators: the perception that the league is a dead-end. It is apparent that the opportunity to progress to professional hockey exists; consumers simply need to know.