Fairness, Safety, and Spectacle: A Look at Changes to NFL Rules and Structure Through the Lens of Institutional Theory

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While some scholars have suggested that sport marketers “have no control or influence over competition outcomes” (Jones, Byon, & Huang, 2019, p. 65), and thus need to focus their marketing efforts on off-field mechanisms, there is evidence that administrators at the league and governing body level certainly do have influence and do consider marketing desirability when making on-field changes (Sutton & Parrett, 1992). This creates an interdependent relationship between on-field and off-field management decisions that warrants a theoretical exploration of why sport leagues frequently change their rules and structure, as well as how those changes relate to creating a more marketable product for its fans and other stakeholders.

An analysis guided by institutional theory can better explain whether these changes create an advantage for these sport organizations and the overall product (Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby, & Sahlin-Andersson, 2008a, 2008b). The different components of institutional theory explored by scholars point to competitive advantage through internal resources and capabilities the enterprises have (Barney, 1996), the external environment (Porter & Miliar, 1985; Peng, Sun, & Pinkham, 2009), and attributed to external institutions (Oliver, 1997).

The National Football League (NFL), which generates more revenue than any North American professional sport league (Mathewson, 2019), provides an appropriate case study to examine how professional sport leagues adjust their rules and structure in response to internal and external threats in their operating environment. Since its inaugural season in 1920, the NFL has sought to achieve a balance between fairness, safety, and spectacle. They have implemented numerous changes over the years to increase fairness among its clubs, improve the safety of its players, and elevate the spectacle of its games (“Bent but not Broken,” 2019). There has been an assumption these changes have improved the core product for the fans as well as stakeholders, who have put pressure on the league for various reasons.

Therefore, through the lens of institutional theory, the purpose of this study is to identify key changes made by the NFL throughout its 100-year history regarding fairness of play, player safety, and spectacle, and how those changes related to creating a more marketable product. In line with previous research regarding organizational theory and management change (Seifried, Katz, & Tutka, 2017), this research will use a historical research approach. The addition of a play clock, instant replay, tighter protection of the quarterback and changes to the league’s playoff structure, are just a few of the changes the NFL has made to balance between fairness, safety, and spectacle. Investigating how the NFL has adapted its core offering in response to internal and external environmental factors can provide a blueprint for other professional leagues for how to respond to these forces and grow the success and reach of their leagues. Additionally, this study challenges the notion that the core product is “beyond managerial control” (Yoshida, 2017, p. 431) and extends the work of Sutton & Parrett (1992) in the context of the National Football League.