Overview

It is always interesting to reflect back on work that one has done in the past. This chapter is based on some of my earlier work (Mason, 1999), where I presented an integrated framework that pulled together various concepts and assumptions appearing in different bodies of literature. I would like to make clear that marketing was/is not my background or academic area of focus, although the paper appeared in a special issue on sports marketing. In the call for papers I saw an opportunity to draw upon the literature I was familiar with and make some general statements about the sports product, which I had hoped would be useful for those in the marketing field. In many respects, the paper represents an amalgam of assembled ideas, and I have been surprised and flattered by the number of scholars who have cited it in their work.

In addition, instead of inspiring specific empirical studies, it has been used more as a jumping-off point for scholars doing research in different fields, including sports economics, marketing and consumer behaviour, to frame the context of their research. Thus, scholars from a variety of disciplines, including economics, marketing, management, tourism, communication, public policy, and even history, have cited the article in a rather eclectic group of journals. Later in this chapter, I make some suggestions about extending the framework. I would also like to note that many scholars have explored this topic and again, I am simply trying to pull together some ideas into one framework. As a result, I hope that I have not overlooked the contributions that some may have already made to this area of study.

Interestingly, the one discipline that has not cited this paper widely is the one that influenced the paper the most: the sports law literature. The other field that provided a starting point for the paper was the economics literature, specifically the foundational work of Neale (1964) and Rottenberg (1956). That work inspired a number of studies in the sports economics literature that have examined determinants of demand and whether the closeness of competition between teams influences game attendance. It was the notion of the uncertainty of game outcomes between two different entities (teams) – the core product – and a dialogue in the legal literature surrounding the legal status of leagues as joint ventures or single entities, that provided a starting point for me.

The sports economics literature had already established that the core product for sports leagues was the uncertainty of game outcomes. The logic here is that, in the absence of a team to compete against or a series of games that lead to a championship, an individual team cannot...
produce a product. However, this did not seem to capture the complexities of the sports fan consumption experience or the manner through which cities clamoured to serve as hosts of major league professional sports franchises. As a result, I chose to develop a way to describe and frame the different stakeholders who consumed the professional sports league product, how they consumed it, and the nature of the relationship between the stakeholder and the league itself. Thus, the core product had evolved into different things for different consumers. Not only that, but sports fans represented only one type of consumer; cities, corporations and media companies also consumed the sports product, albeit for different reasons.

**Process**

At the time I wrote the paper, I was putting together my reading list for my comprehensive exams and candidacy for my doctorate. At the University of Alberta, comprehensive examinations and candidacy take place at the same time. The student takes the written exam over two days and then meets with the doctoral committee approximately one week later for an oral defense of both the exam answers and the proposed dissertation research. As a result, I was heavily immersed in both reading related directly to my dissertation and with the broader literature. However, the ideas that appeared in the paper were rooted in the reading I had done during the course of my master’s degree studies. At that time, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to take a sports law class in the Faculty of Law of my university. A professor who also was a practising lawyer with considerable experience working in the professional sport industry taught the course. As part of my coursework, I had to write a term paper looking at a legal issue related to sport. I chose to examine agent problems, including corruption, recruitment and mismanagement, in professional sport. This work would later be the foundation for my doctoral research (Mason and Slack, 2001a, 2001b, 2003).

In preparing this assignment, I spent a significant amount of time in the law library, where it turns out a considerable amount of material had been published in law journals on the subject. As I read more on the subject, I discovered that there were many interesting legal arguments being made, on a number of subjects, in this literature. Thus, although my term paper was concerned with agent regulation, I read more widely on legal issues related to the sport industry, including franchise relocation. Later, my doctoral research employed a theory from the organisational economics literature – agency theory – and examined the development and regulation of player agents (Mason and Slack, 2005). Part of my preparation involved background reading on the market structure of professional sports, and I returned to the sports law literature. At that time, much of the operations of professional sports leagues were more mysterious; for example, the National Hockey League (and National Hockey League Players’ Association) had only recently begun making the players’ salaries public. However, I found that whenever a sports league was involved in any legal wranglings, they were forced to ‘open the books’ and reveal financial information about their operations. For this reason, I found law journals to be a treasure trove of not just arguments about the fundamental operations of sports leagues, but basic financial information on league operations.

As I was re-immersing myself in this literature, I became aware of a call for papers for a special issue on sports marketing to be published in the *European Journal of Marketing*. This was a fairly open call and, perhaps naively, I thought that some of the ideas that I was throwing around could be shaped to fit the call. At that time in the legal literature there was much debate over how to define professional sports leagues, as this would have implications for the manner through which leagues would be considered cartels, monopolies, joint ventures and/or single business entities (cf. Goldman, 1989; Grauer, 1983; 1989; Gray, 1987; Gray and Walters, 1988;
The most high-profile case involved the relocation of the National Football League’s (NFL) Oakland Raiders to Los Angeles (Kurlantzick, 1983). In this case, the Raiders’ owner, Al Davis, elected to move the team and receive some substantial financial benefits for doing so. However, for a number of reasons, including vacating the second largest market in the US and undermining the stability of franchises in local markets, the NFL voted not to allow the move (Davis also alleged that there were personal reasons for the League not allowing him to move; Harris, 1986).

This case raised some fundamental questions surrounding what leagues were, how individual franchises related to them and the rights individual teams had in making business decisions that might compromise the interests of other league teams. In reading through this material, I found that my own interest was not in which party (the league or the franchise) had the legal right to decide where franchises could be located; rather, it was in how each side was crafting arguments about what the business entity itself was. The argument from the Raiders was that, as a separately owned legal business entity, the team should be considered the relevant business enterprise; thus, a decision to move a team was within the rights of the individual team owner. The NFL’s counterargument was that the league itself was the relevant business entity, with the need for franchises to be privately owned in order to preserve perceptions of the integrity of the games being played (fans might question game outcomes where one entity owned and controlled all players). I realise that this discussion is grossly oversimplifying the many different arguments that were being made; however, what I took from this debate was that the most interesting argument being waged was about exactly what was being produced and that this would lead to an understanding of the relevant level of analysis at which professional sport should be examined (i.e., the league or franchise level).

For this reason, reading these articles made me think about exactly what was being consumed as a product and who was doing the consuming. In other words, while the legal debate was concerned with whether or not leagues should be considered single business entities, or groups of independent businesses combining to produce a product, could I move a step further by discussing who was doing the consuming? At this point, the product could be defined as a series of games with an uncertain outcome that led to an eventual league champion (also with an uncertain outcome). The key to the single entity argument of the NFL was that, in the absence of a league, an individual franchise could not produce the core product, and interest in the team would not be the same in the absence of the league. Imagine, if you will, the Dallas Cowboys existing, but without the other NFL teams to play against or a Super Bowl to challenge for. There would still be Cowboys fans, but interest in, and the value of, the franchise would be substantially diminished.

While the argument was logical, what was missing here was an explanation of the intricacies of the ways in which fans experience the NFL. For example, while someone might be drawn to watching football (or any other sport) due to the excitement of the contest (particularly a close or uncertain one), fans develop their own unique relationships with their sports, teams and players. We know now that fans cheer for teams because they are fans of a given sport, a specific sports league and/or always support a local team. Some fans follow certain players as they move from team to team, while others only cheer for ‘their’ team (Borland and Macdonald, 2003). Others cheer for the local team and would stop supporting a team if it moved (Foster and Hyatt, 2007), and would start following a new team that began playing locally (Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw, 1999; Lewis, 2001). There has been a considerable amount of scholarship that has teased apart these relationships, several of the authors of which are also contributing to this volume. Given that I am not a sport marketing expert, I will defer to their expertise to explain these nuances in greater detail.
With this background, I sought to develop a discussion that used this literature to say something about how fans consumed the professional sport product. However, this discussion would not capture the other business operations of sports leagues, where revenues were increasingly driven by revenues derived from media and/or corporations, and lucrative subsidies offered by cities to relocate (or remain) in a given market. For this reason, I assumed that, while the uncertainty of game outcomes remained the ‘core’ product produced by leagues, this did not completely capture the other types of business relationships leagues had and what the media sought in return. For example, while close contests and many teams challenging for a championship would enhance overall interest in a given league, the cities that sought franchises were likely looking for something else. This would mean that the league ‘product’ would vary depending on the consumer.

To address this, I reflected on the revenue streams that leagues generated. Clearly, fan interest had driven demand for professional sports leagues as a televised product. The result had been exponentially growing league-wide media contracts. However, while viewers were motivated to watch games on television for a number of different reasons, television and other media providers were purchasing something else: content. In other words, while providers obviously would prefer close contests, they were only interested insofar as sports leagues generated a large enough audience to sustain their own revenue streams (from sponsors, advertisers, etc.). Thus, the media were interested in a product that would garner more viewers than the programming options offered by competing providers. In addition, there might also be other benefits, such as the prestige associated with showing league or championship games, that the media could receive by virtue of affiliating with a given league or sport.

In the course of developing my broader research programme, I was also interested in franchise relocation (Mason and Slack, 1997) and the notion that cities were seeking status affiliations by hosting major league sports teams. In the two decades leading up to the writing of the 1999 paper, there had been a period of ‘franchise free agency’ in North American professional sport, where teams moved more freely (and in the wake of the Raiders’ case where the team was allowed to move without permission of the parent league; Euchner, 1993). This saw cities increasingly offering lucrative lease agreements and other incentives for teams to relocate, or to keep local teams from moving (Rosentraub, 1997). Examining this issue led to the conclusion that, although it was the uncertainty of game outcomes that gave sport its unique character, leading to its importance to local citizens, the cities that bid for teams were consuming something else. This manifested itself in terms of economic benefits, where cities anticipated new jobs and investment by virtue of hosting a team (the veracity of which has been questioned by independent assessment). In addition, other intangible benefits are sought by cities, found in the form of ‘big league’ status and psychic income (Crompton, 2004). Cities were less interested in uncertainty of outcome and more with the prospects of basking in the reflected glory of team successes and affiliating with other host cities.

Finally, I identified one other group of consumers: corporations. They pay to affiliate with sports leagues and teams, but not because the outcome of games is uncertain. It is because they look to leverage their links to sport to serve their own business interests. This can be achieved in a number of ways, including sponsorships, owning teams outright, advertising and/or using games as a site to conduct business (using luxury boxes or other seating).

Extensions and applications

Since its publication, the paper has been used conceptually to undergird research in two areas: sports economics and sport marketing. The framework has not been extended per se; rather, it is typically used to help describe the research context for other studies (Funk and Pritchard,
2006), frame hypotheses (Pritchard and Funk, 2010) or develop scales (Marticotte and Carrier, 2009). In the sports economics field, the discussion of the uncertainty of game outcomes as the core product has been cited in reviews of demand (Borland and Macdonald, 2003), tanking in professional sport (Price, Soebbing, Berri and Humphreys, 2010) and influences of game outcomes on team stock prices (Demir and Rigoni, in press).

Marketing, however, remains the field where the paper is cited most frequently. In many cases, the framework is cited in order to describe the complex market for sport as part of the broader entertainment industry (Breitbarth and Harris, 2008; Dale, van Iwaarden, van der Wiele and Williams, 2005; Pritchard and Kharouf, in press) and credited as being ‘an attempt to clarify the sport product in greater detail’ (Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt, 2005, p. 499). Described as ‘an extensive literature review’ (Dale et al., 2005, p. 472), the paper has been positioned as a foundational citation for many papers. For example, it has often been the lead-in citation to studies (Chih-Hung Wang, Jain, Ming-Sung Cheng and Kyaw-Myo Aung, 2012; Farrelly, Quester and Clulow, 2008; Kunkel, Funk and Hill, 2013; Madichie, 2009; McDonald, Karg and Vocino, 2013; Pritchard, Funk and Alexandris, 2009), or been part of the introductory discussion in an article (Farrelly and Quester, 2003; Funk and Prichard, 2006; Kunkel, Doyle and Funk, 2014; Polonsky and Speed, 2001; Pritchard and Funk, 2006; Smith and Stewart, 2007). Thus, the framework appears to serve as a jumping-off point for conceptualising issues related to: corporate social responsibility (Blumrodt, Desbordes and Bodin, 2013; Walker and Parent, 2010); brands, brand equity and brand communities (Bauer et al., 2005; Devasagayum and Buff, 2008; Kunkel, Doyle and Funk, 2014); sponsorship (Cliffe and Motion, 2005; Farrelly, 2010; Farrelly and Quester, 2003; Polonsky and Speed, 2001); and fans, fan consumption and media (Funk and Pritchard, 2006; Pritchard and Funk, 2006; Pritchard et al., 2009).

More recently, Kunkel and colleagues have used the framework as a starting point to examine brand architecture, which has led to the ability to segment spectators (Kunkel et al., 2013; Kunkel, Funk and King, 2014). This work serves as a good representation of how the framework has been used. Although nothing new was introduced in the framework that hadn’t been discussed variously in different literatures, in bringing these (at times) disparate concepts together, the paper has become a convenient starting point for work in other areas. Thus, the contribution that the framework seems to make is in articulating the complexities of how sports leagues, as products, are marketed, which has been used by scholars to introduce their own unique and novel ideas related to the various subjects listed above.

**Future directions**

Although the framework has been used as a foundation for other work, this does not mean that it could not be built upon in the future. In terms of future directions and applications, a modest proposal follows. Because the original paper was targeted for a marketing journal, I focused solely on the consumer of the sports product: those to whom the product would be marketed. As a follow up, I suggest that future work examine what is being produced as a result of the consumption of the product, and extend it beyond professional sports leagues to other levels of organised sport.

**Producing the ‘product’**

As a starting point, I would like to reflect on the process through which the core sports product gets made. What I would like to discuss now is what is produced as a result of that consumption
process. In other words, in the course of producing the sports product, what else is being made? For the purposes of elaboration, I divide the discussion into three basic categories – the production of athletes, the production of participation opportunities, and the production of achievement.

The production of athletes

While people participate in sport for fun and recreation, one consequence of training and playing is the production of athletes of varying skills. Viewed in this way, we can see how, at various levels, competing and participating in sport provides an opportunity for the production of the athlete-as-product. The ways in which we see this product are determined by the level at which the production occurs. These are described in more detail below.

YOUTH/GRASSROOTS SPORT AND PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

Children of all ages become involved in organised sport for a variety of reasons. Regardless of the rationale, an outcome of participation, coaching and other factors is an incremental improvement in athletic or playing ability. Thus, many people see grassroots sport as a vehicle to produce better players; athletes who will go on to be successful in other leagues, or even professionally. This is not to say that participating in sport is not a reward on its own (see below); rather, the delivery system for high-performance sport views participation as a necessary step to reaching higher levels of competition. Seen in this way, the product is athletic ability and the consumer is the participant, the parent who signs the child up, or higher levels of the delivery system in a given sport.

There are also those who feel that, in addition to simple incremental improvements in athletic ability, athletic participation has the potential to yield very desirable personal attributes, such as teamwork, working with others and leadership. In this sense, the athlete is the desired end product, but not simply as a talented player who will move on to another level of competition; rather, the end product is the athlete as a desirable individual who may make valuable contributions in other life endeavours based on the knowledge/experience gained through playing sport. Seen in this way, a product of grassroots sport development is the desirable traits that athletes (and, possibly by extension, coaches and other affiliated stakeholders) garner through participation. This would also be consumed (or enjoyed) by participants and/or their families and the deliverers of that given sport.

ORGANISED, COMPETITIVE SPORT

The rationale described above for grassroots sport holds true for more organised, competitive sport, but the stakes are higher. By the time a player makes it to this level, the athlete has risen above the level of many others who continue to play, but only recreationally. This affords the athlete additional possibilities for advancement, such as: (a) playing professionally (where applicable); and (b) representing region, province/state, or even country in elite competition. In this way, the participant becomes an athletic product that can be used to produce an entertainment product (such as a professional brand of a sport, e.g., ‘NHL hockey’), and also a product that can be used to produce regional or even national sentiment. This is the level at which there is a potential for fans to become consumers of the product.
SPORTS CAMPS

Sports camps are small business operations that operate primarily during the off-season and provide an opportunity for players – more frequently in their developmental stages – to improve their skills through additional coaching and instruction. Typically, camps feature prominent current and former players and coaches. Many parents send their children to camps as a way of improving their skills, ideally to increase their chances for advancement. Thus, the fundamental goal of, say, ice hockey camps is to produce an elite (or at least improved) athlete. At the higher levels, more specialised camps are offered where athletes hone specific skills and techniques in order to refine their games.

The production of participation opportunities

Contrary to the goals for involvement in sport described above, many people play sport purely for its intrinsic value as a form of recreation, leisure and play. Thus, one of the foundational goals of sport, at a variety of levels, is to produce an environment that creates an opportunity for meaningful leisure experience to occur.

YOUTH/GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

Thus, while some players, coaches and parents see youth/grassroots sport as a means through which to train children for the purposes of advancement, others are simply seeking a rewarding social and physical experience.

SPORTS CAMPS

While some parents and participants attend sports camps to develop their skills, others are more geared towards providing a fun, social experience. These rationales are not mutually exclusive and camps will tend to gravitate towards one or the other, with more specialised camps catering to skill development for specific sports. The key means to differentiate lies in the motivations for participation, rather than what is provided as a camp experience.

The production of achievement

Participation in sport results in an outcome. As described above, it can be manifested in athletic ability and/or leisure experience. However, the outcome also has broader implications for different stakeholders.

COMMUNITY, REGIONAL, NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS

The results of an athletic event have meaning to its participants, viewers and other stakeholders. There are numerous examples of where the outcome of a game has impacted many outside of the production of the event itself. This can occur on a more local level, such as a local minor sport team winning a championship, or on a larger scale, such as the 1980 gold-medal winning US Men’s Olympic hockey team.

The delivery system for this kind of achievement has become much more rationalised and streamlined; as a result, many sport bodies have created highly sophisticated talent identification systems and have developed age-specific elite development programmes in their respective sports.
The sports product

INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT

While athletic exploits can garner widespread attention, participants and their immediate stakeholders may also seek specific outcomes from participation. This could include setting personal bests, losing weight or beating rivals.

COLLECTIVE ACHIEVEMENT

Other aims could be realised from athletic achievement, such as increasing participation numbers, reducing obesity or raising the profile of a given sport. Any number of these can be realised simultaneously and vary according to the goals of the stakeholder.

Conclusions

In sum, I am honoured and flattered to have been offered the opportunity to submit a chapter to this volume. As I have shown, my work on the sports product is likely different from many of the other contributions, in that it has provided more of a foundation for studies and research in other areas, rather than a theory that has since been tested and/or extended. I hope that my discussion above has shed light on the process through which ideas emerge and are synthesised into new work. I also hope that my brief extension may provide some foundation for further understanding the complexities of the ways in which sport, as a product, is produced and consumed.

Note

1 This chapter is a reflection on Mason (1999) and the work related to it.

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Dan Mason
The sports product


Applying the sports product framework

*Thilo Kunkel*

I first discovered Mason’s (1999) article in 2007 when I was writing a literature review for my honours thesis. In the thesis, I investigated what factors influence the attractiveness of professional sport leagues from a consumer perspective. Consumer behaviour research in relation to sport leagues was scarce, and most academic sport consumer behaviour publications focused on sport teams, whereas research focused on leagues was mainly positioned in the economic area of competitive balance. However, Mason’s article was an exception and provided a starting point for my research project of investigating sport league consumers.

I was attracted to this article because it provides a basis to understanding the consumption of sport leagues. In particular, the article outlines the unique relationship between leagues and their teams, the nature of sport fans, the different ways sport is consumed and the different income streams for sport organisations. Throughout the article, Mason highlights that consumers are the most important stakeholder group and that other groups, such as media and sponsors, would not be attracted to professional (spectator) sport organisations without the interest of end consumers. Understanding the importance of consumers and their influence on other stakeholder groups and the target sport organisation is imperative for sport management researchers. Therefore, the article provided me with a solid foundation for research related to sport leagues and connected parties, and as a result has significantly influenced my own research agenda of sport league branding.

In my research, I investigate strategic brand development for sport organisations, with a focus on sport leagues. Mason emphasised that sport league marketing is complex because decision-making needs to consider the league as well as the affiliated teams, which highlights the close relationship between leagues and teams. To investigate this relationship, my colleagues and I first
examined the brand architecture of sport leagues and teams from a consumer’s perspective. Findings demonstrated that consumer brand loyalty is influenced by both the league and the team for a majority of consumers (Kunkel, Funk and Hill, 2013). In subsequent inquiries, we observed seventeen unique brand associations consumers link with sport leagues. These brand associations were correlated with behavioural outcomes related to sport leagues (Kunkel, Funk and King, 2014). We then examined strategies sport leagues can utilise to develop their brand and positively influence consumer involvement with the league and its teams. Identified strategies can be used to position league brands and influence consumers’ brand associations (Kunkel, Doyle and Funk, 2014). Overall, my research has extended Mason’s conceptual foundation of sport league marketing by investigating the unique relationship between leagues and teams from a consumer perspective.

As Mason has highlighted, sport organisations, such as teams, are evaluated with a broader context in mind; in this case the influence of the consumer’s perceptions of the league. Therefore, I envision future research based on Mason’s (1999) article to further investigate the relationships between sport leagues and their related stakeholders. Examples are to investigate the influence sport leagues have on their teams, the players within the league and sponsors of these entities. Given the advancement of technology, future sport league consumer research should also investigate how leagues can use technologies to foster consumer involvement and the internationalisation of sport leagues.

**Note**

1 Dr. Thilo Kunkel is an Assistant Professor in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Temple University.

**References**


