

UNDERSTANDING OF SPONSORSHIP, BRANDS, SOCIAL  
MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS  
OF PROFESSIONAL SPORT: FROM THREE SPORT  
MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS' STUDENTS

Jong-Chae Kim<sup>\*</sup>

Jaeyeon Hwang<sup>\*\*</sup>

Young Tae Kim<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to examine understanding of sport management undergraduate students of the sport industry, particularly professional sport in the U.S. In order to examine it, the authors asked 14 open-ended questions assessing their views on the four different aspects (i.e., sport sponsorship, technology and social media in sport, sport brand, future directions and anticipation) of the U.S. professional sport. We collected data (N=116) from three different sport management programs located in three different States. Results of the current study showed that students anticipated the future of professional sport optimistically although they recognized several threatening factors such as economy, safety issues, and ethical issues of management. Students generally believed that the future of the sport sponsorship market will be growing. The authors believe that our students' understanding of the value, importance, and role of sponsorship could be positive contributions to the sport industry. Most of the students were active on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. It is likely that they consume and use sport contents through their preferred device and applications. Regarding perceptions on sport brand, the results could be interpreted that students were limited to certain categories in the sport industry. Sport management students are expected to have a good knowledge of the sport industry and its environment and culture. In conclusion, sport

<sup>\*</sup> Fairleigh Dickinson University

<sup>\*\*</sup> Livingstone College

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Lasell College

management educators are highly encouraged to help them have adequate knowledge, skills, and understanding on professional sport and the sport industry by education and appropriate training programs.

**Key words:** sport sponsorship, sport brand, sport and social media, sport management education, the sport industry

### Introduction

The first sport management program started in 1966 at Ohio University. Since then, there are currently over 450 universities which have an undergraduate program, a master program, and/or a doctoral program in America by the North American Society of Sport Management (NASSM), the biggest academic association in sport management. Because of the popularity of sport and its industry all over the world, lots of students including international students choose sport management/administration as their major and hope to develop their professional career in that industry. Generally, the sport industry is a male-dominated area but there is growing interest from our young female students who are passionate and knowledgeable in the sport industry.

Sport management as an academic discipline is definitely one of the rapidly growing and popular majors among the young generation. A lot of sport organizations and companies truly want to hire new employees, full-time or part-time, and even volunteers who have strong backgrounds in sport management and sport business principles applied to management. Therefore, it is important to soundly train our (sport management) students in order to help them become successful and competitive in the sport industry and its job market nationally or internationally. Most of the sport management undergraduate programs in the U.S. put a mandatory internship course and/or sport practicum in their sport management curriculum. Having work experience in sport is considered the most important factor for employers when they hire new employees. Consequently, sport management students are encouraged to have work experiences in sport as volunteers, part-time employees, or interns prior to receiving their bachelor's degree if they want to get a full-time job right after graduation. By recognizing this reality, sport management faculty needs to be aware of the way human resource management works in the sport industry, especially the hiring process. Additionally, it would be valuable to check how our sport management students understand the sport industry and what specific opinions they

have. Knowing their interests and perceptions can be an important training resource for sport management faculty when they advise their students. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the understanding of undergraduate students in the sport management program on the sport industry, particularly professional sport in the U.S.

### Sport Management Students and Jobs

Jobs offered at professional sport organizations are numerous, including accounting and financing, administration, communications, event management, facility operations, human resources management, marketing, consulting, sponsorship sales, and ticket sales. As you see the examples of jobs, sport management students may start building their professional career at different and unique areas within a sport organization. Accordingly, sport management programs are recommended to provide courses with management and business aspects (e.g., sport leadership, sport marketing, ethics in sport management, sport event management, principles of sport finance) as their key educational areas. In fact, Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) is promoting excellence in sport management education in colleges and universities stressing coverage of the key content areas of the sport management field (See the COSMA accreditation principle and self study preparation guide). Future job candidates, our students, clearly need to know what the professional sport (or the industry) job market is and how to prepare for it.

### The Sport Industry

According to VanderZwaag (1998), the sport industry can be identified with having 16 different settings which mean students may develop their career within at least one of those 16 areas of the industry (See Appendix 1). Among them, students usually show the most interest in professional sport and intercollegiate sport organizations they want to work for; however, each of these areas in the sport industry needs to hire experts who are familiar with business principles applied to sport management. Therefore, students also need to seriously consider those less popular areas for their professional career and of course as their internship sites. More importantly, faculty members and their sport management programs must focus on producing competitive job candidates who have education, skills, work experience, motivation, and good attitude.

## **Methods**

### Measurement

We found many interesting questions originally from the *Sport Business Journal*(Volume 14, Issue 31, November 28 - December 4, 2011) and decided to ask 14 open-ended questions assessing undergraduate sport management students' views on the U.S. professional sport business. We collected data from three different universities located in three different states totaling 116 students. The reason we asked students questions about professional sport is because students can easily identify with the teams and organizations as well as students are most interested in professional sport. Those 14 questions are located in Appendix 2. There are several critical questioning themes, including (a) future directions and anticipation of professional sport leagues (i.e., questions 2, 3, 6, 12, 13, and 14), (b) issues on sport sponsorship (i.e., questions 10 and 11), (c) use of technology and social media (i.e., questions 1, 7, 8, and 9), and (d) sport brands (i.e., questions 4 and 5). The authors of the current study consider that the questions are the key issues driving the industry. Again, all of the questions are used to understand how sport management students at three different universities think of the sport industry, particularly professional sport.

#### Participants

Convenience sampling was used. Thus, participants may not be representative of the target population, undergraduate students in sport management at American universities/colleges. The sample (N=116) was drawn from undergraduate students taking sport management classes taught by the authors within three institutions located in three different states. There were 27 females, 88 males, and one unknown respondent.

#### Procedure

As previously noted, the purpose of the study is to understand sport management undergraduate students' opinion and thoughts about the sport industry, focusing on professional sport. Three sport management faculty members at three different universities administered the selected 14 questions (originally came from and formerly used in the seventh annual Sports Business Journal/Sports Business Daily Reader Survey) at their undergraduate sport management classes. Originally, there were 100 questions in the survey. But, we only selected and asked 14 questions followed by our research interests. Each faculty member thoroughly explained all of the questions beforehand and students' opinion and answers were actually used for discussions in class later. Additionally, there were a few items related to basic demographic characteristics.

**Results**

Table 1. Summary of Results from three Universities

	Fairleigh Dickinson Univ., NJ (n=37)	Lasell College, MA (n=46)	Livingston College, NC (n=33)
<b>Theme 1: Future directions and anticipation of professional sport leagues</b>	<p>Only three respondents (8%) felt that sport business over the next five years will be going down. Students were optimistic about the sport industry and its future. 15 respondents (41%) thought that Roger Goodell, the NFL commissioner is the most influential person right now in sport business. This can be interpreted by students' high interests on Football and a significant impact of the sport on the sport industry. Combined with uses of illegal drugs among athletes, safety concerns (i.e., concussions), economy was the biggest threat to sport business (43%). Interestingly, 41% checked concussions and safety issues as the biggest threat to the continuing success of the NFL. 12 respondents (32%) anticipated that the NBA will be the first league to place a franchise overseas (excluding Canada) followed by the NFL (27%). Jacksonville Jaguars (NFL) (27%) and WNBA (16%) were chosen as the most likely to fold within the next five years.</p>	<p>32 respondents (70%) believed that the sport industry will continue to grow over the next five years. Eight respondents (17%) said the industry outlook is not promising. Concerning the most influential person in sports business, nine respondents picked Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots and New England Revolution, followed by Michael Jordan (7), and Jerry Jones. These results reflect that most of these respondents were from the Northeast and they were well aware of the team owners or sports professionals in the region. Concerning the question on the biggest threat in sport business, 13 respondents (28%) chose the concern over the rising cost of professional sports. Other major threats they identified include injuries (10%), greedy athletes or owners (8%), corruption (8%). As to the threats to the NFL, 20 respondents (43%) answered that safety (concussion) is the biggest. Other responses included unethical player conduct, rule changes, rising cost, and use of illegal drugs.</p>	<p>20 respondents (60.6%) expected the future of the sport industry over the next five years is optimistic and will grow continuously. Only one student (3.0%) predicted the sport industry will go down. Regarding the item asking about the most influential person in sport business, students' responses were various. Three students each answered Michael Jordan, Mark Cuban (the owner of Dallas Mavericks), and Kobe Bryant, followed by Magic Johnson and Roger Goodell (the commissioner of the NFL). Approximately 40% of respondents identified financial related issues (i.e., eight economy; three greedy of owners; two increasing media deals) as the biggest threat in the sport business. Other answers included lack of diversity/females in sport industry, lockouts, and safety issues. Concerning the threat of the NFL, safety (concussion) was the majority of answers with 24.2%, followed by rule changes (15.2%), greedy owners, and money issues each with 9.1% responses.</p>

		23 respondents (50%) anticipated that the NFL will be the first league to place a franchise overseas followed by the NBA (22%) and the NHL (10%).	12 respondents (36.4%) anticipated that the NBA will be the first league to place a franchise overseas, followed by the NFL (21.2%). Arena Football (12.1%) and WNBA (9.1%) were chosen as the most likely to fold within the next five years.
<b>Theme 2: Issues on sport sponsorship</b>	Several respondents believed teams, including the New York Yankees, Dallas Cowboys, and New York Knicks as a corporate sponsor would most want to identify with. 30 respondents (81%) believed that sport sponsorship will continue to grow over the next five years.	Boston Red Sox (55%) was found to be the best property students consider corporate sponsors would be interested in. Other names include New York Giants, New York Yankees, New England Patriots, and New York Knicks. 32 (70%) respondents said that there would be increase in sponsorship spending over the next five years.	The NBA and Miami Heat were selected the best property as a corporate sponsor would most identify with (21.2%), followed by the NFL and MLB. Approximately 50% of respondents expected that sport sponsorship will continue to grow over the next five years.
<b>Theme 3: Use of technology and social media</b>	36 respondents (97%) were active on social media and use on average two different social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Respondents' favorite major league websites were NFL (41%), MLB (24%), and NBA (8%). 27 respondents (73%) said that NFL's Superbowl is the best TV sport event. As their favorite sport-related mobile app, ESPN ScoreCenter was chosen by 20 respondents (54%) followed by Yahoo fantasy football (19%).	41 respondents (91%) were active on social media using at least one type of social media. Importantly, 18 respondents were using more than three types of social media. The most popular social media used were Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Respondents' favorite major league websites were MLB (37%), NBA (29%), and NFL (14%).	29 respondents (87.9%) were active on social media and 14 of them (42.4%) used more than three types of social media. The most popular social media were Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The favorite major league website was NBA (21.2%) or NFL (18.2%). The Super Bowl was selected as the best produced event on TV with 17 respondents (51.5%). A total of 26 students (78.8%) selected ESPN ScoreCenter as the most favorite sport-related mobile app.

<p><b>Theme 4: Sport brand</b></p>	<p>33 (almost 90%) respondents perceived NIKE as the most powerful brand in sport. A couple of respondents chose Under Armour instead of NIKE. As you can see, NIKE was overwhelming. As the most marketable athlete, LeBron James in the NBA was selected by 19 respondents (51%). Other names include Michael Jordan, NBA retired (16%), Payton Manning, NFL (11%), and Derek Jeter, MLB (5%). There were no athletes from the NHL and MLS at all.</p>	<p>37 (80%) respondents perceived NIKE as the most powerful brand in sport. Other names included NFL, Yankees, and Under Armour. LeBron James was chosen to be the most marketable athlete (43%), followed by Michael Jordan (13%) and Tom Brady (9%).</p>	<p>28 respondents (84.8%) perceived NIKE as the most powerful brand in sport. The majority of students chose LeBron James as the most marketable athlete (69.7%), followed by Michael Jordan (27.3%) and Kobe Bryant (6.1%).</p>
<p><b>Demographics</b></p>	<p>Average age: 19.5 years 26 Males; 11 Females</p>	<p>Average age: 20 years 34 Males; 11 Females; 1 not known</p>	<p>Average age: 20.2 years 28 Males; 5 Females</p>

## Discussion

### *Theme 1: Future Directions and Anticipation of Professional Sport Leagues*

Professional sport provides entertaining opportunities to fans and spectators with the highest level of sports performance (Guterson, 1994). It also provides various career opportunities and has profound economic effect collaborating with other industries such as media, sponsorship, licensing, merchandising, and endorsement. Gladden and Sutton (2011) identified several challenges that professional sport leagues/teams are currently facing, however it is continuously growing. They addressed (a) needs for generating new revenue streams, (b) adaptation of technology, and (c) dealing with globalization as challenges of the professional sport industry. As players' salaries continuously have increased and the market has been competitive with other sports or entertainment providers, team owners should develop new revenue sources while considering their own current circumstances (e.g., league structure, market environment, and competitors). Revenues from media contracts, especially national broadcasting contracts, have contributed the largest portion to the professional sport industry. Recently, media outlet has been diversified because of the development of technology. This also has an influence in the professional sport industry; some sports teams could create their own media networks as new revenue sources (Schultz, Caskey, & Esherick, 2010). The New York Yankee's YES Network and Boston Red Sox's New England Sports Network would be good examples. However, this may also cause other challenges in professional sports: disparity between large- and small-market teams and eventually failure in leagues' competitive balance.

As the domestic market became more competitive and saturated, professional sport leagues put their efforts on expanding their market to international countries. New technologies such as satellite television and Internet-based media outlets have contributed to global market expansion and enhancement of professional sports. International fans can watch American professional sports and access information of the leagues and teams through various channels including social media (i.e., Facebook, Tweeter, and Instagram). Professional sport leagues should continuously develop more feasible and effective marketing strategies based on in-depth understanding of needs and wants of targeting global markets.

Professional sport is one of the most popular areas of interests among sport management major students. It is very competitive to become an intern or first-level employee in the professional sport organizations. In order to be successful in the job market, students have to be prepared with



garnering relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) based on clearly understanding current situations of the industry and demands of the market. Accordingly, it is imperative for sport management educators to understand students' perception of the professional sport industry. Results of the current study showed that students anticipated the future of professional sport optimistically although they could recognize several threatening factors of sport business. A majority of the students identified the economy as the largest threat to sport business, followed by safety and ethical issues. Their responses varied and included details with managerial perspective, which should have been emphasized in sport management curriculum.

Students selected professional sport team owners in their regional areas with Roger Goodell, the commissioner of the NFL as the most influential person in sport business. This is because of their frequent exposure on media, either on the local or national level. In the survey, some students mentioned team owner's greedy as a threatening factor of professional sport business. This implies that students may understand the importance of work ethics and the leadership of top-level managers.

Although this survey did not eliminate the scope of sport business, the summary of results indicated that the perspectives of our students regarding professional sport could be more developed. Thus, sport management educators should provide students more learning opportunities about issues of major sport leagues.

### Theme 2: Sport Sponsorship

Sponsorship in sport is a valid and viable marketing vehicle and it is mainly used when sport organizations and sport entities want to strategically partner with outside entities (Milne & McDonald, 1999). Companies objectively use sponsorship based on their purposes such as improving company image, increasing company awareness, increasing short-term/long-term sales revenue, and fostering employee pride and motivation (Kuzma, Shanklin, & McCally, 1993). Both sponsors and sport organizations expect to create new customers by the sponsorship method (Stotlar, 1999). However, Chadwick (2009) argued that there is still a need for each sport to adopt a strategic approach for development and sponsorship opportunities.

In addition to the importance of sport sponsorship, the authors of the current study think that investigating future sport organization employees' (i.e., our sport management students) perceptions on sport sponsorship can also be an essential object. College students' exposure, interest, favorability, and actual use of sponsoring products could cause positive or negative

perceptions on a typical sponsor and/or sport. Furthermore, it could affect their level of understanding of the sport sponsorship business in general. Based on the summary from the three universities above, students generally believed that the future of the sport sponsorship market will be growing. The authors recognize our students' understanding of the value, importance, and role of sponsorship as their positive contributions to the sport industry.

Finally, the authors suggest sport organizations need to effectively manage, protect, and develop their sponsorship by appropriate collaboration and partnership in the sport market. Sport management professors should focus on developing and promoting a sport-specific sponsorship model, practice throughout examination of past, current and future trends in sport sponsorship, and providing proper education, activities, and training for their students.

### Theme 3: Social Media and Its Roles and Uses in Sport

According to the International Telecommunication Union, it is estimated that approximately 2.7 million people had access to the Internet by early 2013. In the United States, 91% of adults own a mobile phone and more than half of them are smartphone users, capable of surfing the Internet and possible users of mobile services such as apps (Smith, 2013).

New social media and technology drive sport. Their impact on sport and sport consumers is huge. Traditional sport networks (e.g., ABC, NBC, CBS, ESPN) have also expanded their presence on the web to provide more stories, pictures, videos, and podcasts to their audiences. Additionally, sport organizations such as teams, leagues, and businesses in the sport industry have adopted new technology (e.g., blogs, social media, mobile apps, podcasts, etc.) to provide a variety of services to their customers and encourage active involvement of fans and consumers utilizing new communication platforms. These efforts can serve existing markets and create new market opportunities (Chadwick, 2009; Schultz et al., 2010). As the roles of social media and technology have expanded, new work positions such as 'director of digital communications,' 'social media coordinator,' and 'director of new media' have been created in the sport industry.

As expected, most of the students participating in the survey were active on social media; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr were popular social media networks among college students. It is likely that they consume and use sport contents through their preferred device. The websites of major professional sports (i.e., NFL, MLB, and NBA) were popular among the students and the favorite sport-related mobile apps were ESPN ScoreCenter and Bleacher Report.

However, this study could not figure out how often the students visit such sport websites and how many of them actively consume sport services using their mobile device.

#### Theme 4: Brands in Sport

As the market becomes more competitive, it is essential for sport organizations to develop successful marketing strategies. Particularly, it is important to differentiate their own sport products from those of competitors by creating a distinctive and favorable image. Branding refers to the process of positioning the sport product using its name, design, symbol, or mixed use of these elements (Blann& Armstrong, 2011). Successful branding may result in favorable positioning of a product in the market. This will eventually influence on increase of consumption of the product.

Every year Forbes Fab 40 announces the world's 10 most valuable sports brands in each category of businesses, events, teams and athletes. According to the 2013 Forbes Fab 40, Nike was selected as the most valuable business brand followed by ESPN and Adidas; estimated brand value of Nike was \$17.3 billion. The Super Bowl and Real Madrid were ranked as the world's most valuable event and sports team with the value of \$464 million and \$450 million, respectively. In the category of sport athletes, Tiger Woods tied with Roger Federer. Their brand value was approximately \$46 million (Ozanian, 2013).

Summary of our survey results indicated that almost 90% of respondents perceived NIKE as the most powerful brand in sport similar to the result of 2013 Forbes Fab 40. Only a few other sport brand names such as Under Armour, the NFL, and the New York Yankees were referred in the current survey. In addition, no brand names were mentioned in the category of sport events and media. Among the athletes, LeBron James was selected as the most marketable athlete, followed by Michael Jordan. Several students answered Kobe Bryant, Payton Manning, and Tom Brady. However, only a few responses included athletes from individual professional sports (e.g., golf and tennis) and athletes from international leagues such as English Premier League (EPL). In sum, the results of this survey might be interpreted that perceptions of students on sport brand were limited to certain categories in the sport industry while their scope and interest toward professional sport were narrow.

## Conclusion

### *Sport Management Education: Issues and Challenges*

Sport management educators should help the body of knowledge in sport management. More importantly help their students grow by appropriate course development, use of different teaching methods and technology, research on various areas and important issues of the sport industry, international sport experiences, and building university-industry cooperation and relationships. At the same time, educators should increase their own understanding level about the sport industry and direct themselves efficiently in order to do their jobs.

Students majoring in sport management who wish to contribute to the sport industry must be comfortable with sport organization's work, issues, trends, and surroundings. Receiving theory-based classroom education from their university and any type of practical experience opportunities (e.g., internship and volunteering) in the sport context will definitely help them to be more knowledgeable about the industry and eventually more competitive job candidates.

As limitations of the current study, we only asked respondents questions regarding the four aspects (i.e., future direction of professional sport leagues, sport sponsorship, technology and social media in sport, and sport brand) of professional sport. However, we could include more diverse questions and aspects of it in order to have respondents' overall perspectives about the sport industry. Additionally, our samples, only collected from three sport management programs, cannot represent our population. Thus, we could think of including more samples from various locations and programs all around the United States.

In conclusion, the authors expect to see the sport management major grow in an academic level of higher education. Sport management educators and students are expected to have a good knowledge of the sport industry including its environment and culture. The findings of the current study showed that sport management students had relatively general knowledge about professional sport. Sport management educators are highly encouraged to help students have adequate knowledge, skills, and understanding of professional sport and the sport industry by education and appropriate training programs.

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**Appendix 1.16** Areas of the Sport Industry

1. School and college sports programs
2. Professional sport
3. Amateur sport organizations
4. Private club sport
5. Other commercialized sport establishments
6. Arenas, coliseums, civic centers, and stadia
7. Community recreation sport programs
8. Industrial sport programs
9. Sport programs in social agencies
10. Military sport programs
11. Sport marketing and consulting firms
12. Developmental programs for sport
13. Corporate sponsors
14. The sporting goods industry
15. The sport news media
16. Academic programs in sport management



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**Appendix 2.**Survey Questions

1. Are you active on social media? Which?
2. Most influential person in sport business
3. Feeling about the state of the sport business over the next five years.
4. Most powerful brand in sport
5. Most marketable athlete
6. Biggest threat to sport business
7. Favorite major league website
8. Sport event that is produced the best on TV
9. Favorite sport-related mobile app
10. Sport property a corporate sponsor would most want to identify with
11. How will sport sponsorship spending change over the next 5 years
12. Biggest threat to the success of the NFL
13. League that will be the first to place a franchise overseas
14. Property/Organization most likely to fold within the next 5 years