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Industry Analysis

The NFL: Are Women Included?

The National Football League, commonly known as the NFL, is the largest and highest level of professional American football in the United States and in the world. The NFL was founded in 1920 when eleven teams joined together to form, what was called then, the American Professional Football Association. The league as a whole changed its name to the National Football League two years later in 1922. When founded in 1920, women played no role in American football at all. Football was known as a man’s sport and women knew this as a fact as well as the men. The NFL is consists of teams, coaches, commentators, trainers and most importantly, the fans, however what most people don’t know about the NFL is that since the 1920’s, 44% of the National Football League’s fan base is now women.

The National Football League is technically considered a nonprofit organization. Although the league took in a total of $9.5 billion last season, it still holds that tax-exempt status. The NFL’s overall operating income in its 2011 season was $979 billion and greatly exceeds other sport leagues within the Sports Industry. Other sport leagues like the NHL, MLB and NBA have revenues of $3 billion, $7.7 billion and $4.3 billion, respectively, which are significantly lower than the NFL’s. The National Football League also has a shorter season than other leagues totaling a 16 game season. Even with the short period of time, the NFL still totals an average of 67,413 spectators per game compared to MLB’s 162 game season with a total of only 29,950 spectators and the NHL’s 82 game season with 17,455 spectators. (Plunkett Research, 2012) However, it isn’t the competition outside of the league that is important to the fans, it is the competition within the NFL that makes such a huge turnout for the league as a whole. With the consistent intensity and excitement of the football season, the NFL is guaranteed a successful future.

Income and revenues of a total season of course, determine the NFL’s success, however the NFL wouldn’t be so successful without their huge fan base. Income and revenues come from the leagues ticket sales and merchandise sales. Along with sales made within the stadiums and parking passes that are available to fans that are or are not attending games. The NFL guarantees everyone a team with its 32 teams that are spread across the country. However since the players are male, the referees are male, the commentators are male and the coaches are male most people don’t realize that 44% of all football fans are women. (Dosh 2012) Over the past few years, women fans have been increasing, the amount of women participating in Fantasy Football doubled in the 2011 season. (Dosh 2012) As a result to the huge increase in female fans, the NFL started putting out products marketed to women such as petite sized jerseys, t-shirts and sweat pants and as a result “shower a dramatic change, an 85% sales increase in December over 2010 and a 125% increase in January from the year prior”. (Dosh, 2012)

With the large success that the organization has with the women merchandise, they produced a new line called Fit for You which included various sizes from juniors to maternity so all women could represent their favorite NFL teams. Peter O’Reilly, the vice president of fan strategy/marketing for the NFL stated that the NFLShop.com saw “double digit growth this season on merchandise geared toward women”, he also goes on to say that women are considered a prized demographic because once you have a women customer, they are your customers for life, and that women are more likely to become brand-loyalists. (Dosh, 2012) Although women have been marketed to regarding clothes and fashion, are they being included in the actual game and are women getting the full football fan experience? The NFL is a successful organization that keeps its fans hanging onto its exciting games and rivalries, but if they don’t make changes in including women in the game, will they lose out on fans?

Getting females involved in the game of football, whether it would be female fans or employment of women in the NFL, is important since such a large percentage of fans is now women. The involvement of women on the field may seem far-fetched to old-fashioned football fans, however it isn’t impossible. Many reporters on the field are women, only recently, and of course cheerleaders are female.

Cheerleaders, for many years, were the only role that females played when it came to football. Twenty-six of the thirty-two NFL teams have cheerleading squads. The first cheerleading squad to appear in the NFL was in 1954 for the Baltimore Ravens. Cheerleaders are still used today, to bring in a sex appeal to the sport, and basically give something for men to look at during half time. This was the main place where women were included for a long time, however only to look sexy. Today, cheerleaders are there to perform during half time, to gain the team more airtime on TV. Cheerleaders also make appearances to schools and benefits along with photo-shoots for teams’ annual cheerleading calendar where the cheerleaders pose in swimsuits, lingerie or uniforms. Cheerleaders have nothing to do with the game of football, and attribute nothing but long legs and tight uniforms to the game. Being that women have played little, if any, roles in football taking it a step further could benefit in the NFL in many ways when regarding the female fan base.

In August 2012, during the NFL’s preseason, Shannon Eastin was the first woman ever to be a female judge line. “Her arrival . . . is a big deal for a male-dominated sport that often ignores its strong female fan base, and for professional sports in general, which has been slow to integrate women into executive, coaching and commentator roles”. (Rosenburg, 2012) Eastin opened many doors when refereeing that preseason game because it begins to allow people to accept women and allow them to take on roles that have more direct involvement in the NFL. Although she was a referee during the time period where the pro refs were locked-out, Eastin has made the process easier for other women who are on the path of becoming football officials by “demonstrating that gender has nothing to do with a person’s ability to patrol the line of scrimmage”. (Rosenburg, 2012) Eastin is helping to diminish the stereotypes that surround women in sports like football.

Stereotypes play a huge role with women and sports in general, because sports aren’t “feminine”. The stereotypes that surround sports, and football specifically are that it is male-dominated which means males should watch them. The book Sport, Beer and Gender by Lawrence A. Wenner and Steven J. Jackson, go into depth about the relationships between sports, beer and gender and brings up some of the stereotypes that are included within those relationships. The relationship between men and sports and men and beer define a man and “play roles in male rites of passage and in foundational socialization of what it means to be a ‘real man’”. (Collins & Vamplew, 2002) If men and sports and men and beer are what define a man and watching a game while drinking a beer makes that man a “real man”, where do the women fans come into play? If a woman were to drink a beer and watch the game, what would that define her as? Media also plays a big role when it comes to these stereotypes. Gender stereotypes tend to uphold traditional gender roles of men and women. Therefore, these gender roles have been maintained, for the most part, when it comes to women and sports. “…Gender-related sports images have been evolved, portraying women as fit only for certain sports but not others. In addition, media companies and editorial decision-makers tend to think of male sports as being commercially more viable than female sports, so that they publish no lack of sports role models for boys, while the opposite tends to be true for girls.” (Centre for Gender Equality 2006)

NFL party sites have attempted to address this issue, however it may seem controversial to women that are fans of football in general. The idea of “homegating” has become a popular idea that is infesting NFL party websites over the Internet. Homegating is a party that women throw at home before the game starts. The websites include recipes of meals and desserts that you can serve at these parties. Although homegating is an opportunity to get families into the mix, and allow a family-friendly environment so everyone can enjoy the game, it may be controversial when looked at by women fans that aren’t mothers or wives. Why should women be held back to this idea by homegating at home, when they could just tailgate at the real sites of the games just like male fans do? The idea around homegating could be looked at as stereotypical because it is suggesting that women should stay home and watch the game and “homegate” instead of actually going to the game and tailgating. This wasn’t one of the smartest ideas in NFL marketing because the idea could be looked at from two different sides, and if women get the idea that they belong at home, it is driving sales of NFL tickets down because women will be less likely to attend games.

Ticket sales play a huge role in the NFL’s success of their large income and revenues. However, making ticket sales more attractive and available to women would only help sales even more. Although tickets are marketed towards everyone in general, targeting women specifically could help the NFL gain sales, and gain fans in the process. Ann Bastianelli said that women are important to market to because women are said to make 70% of family decisions. (Dosh 2012) In that case, if football tickets are marketed towards women, families are more likely to attend football games, thus driving fans and sales up. The NFL recently has been recognizing coach’s wives and daughters, which is bringing a family aspect into the game of football. Heather Zeller, creator of AGlamSlam.com, which is a website that intertwines fashion and sports, said “The NFL has done a really good job realizing wives and daughters of coaches are some of the best ambassadors of the game. They could have used Victoria’s Secret models, but these are the women actually watching the game, so they’re much more relatable.” (Dosh 2012) Making football games and stadiums more family-friendly, would only benefit the NFL when regarding sales of tickets and merchandise and sales within the stadiums of food and drink and other merchandise they may appeal to children. This not only guarantees an increase in sales, but an increase in life fans as well. If children are taught to be fans, that tradition will be passed down from generation to generation, guaranteeing the NFL’s continuous success in the future.

The NFL has to find new and better ways to market to women and get them involved directly when it comes to football. It is important to the organization when regarding sales and customers to include women because of the increasing fanbase of females, and female dominance in decision-making when it comes to families. Being such a successful organization gives the NFL the power to focus on female fans and give them their full attention when regarding female involvement. Since they have succeeded in all areas, keeping up with what they already have accomplished may not be as necessary as trying to accomplish new ideas and concepts to make the NFL more successful and widespread. By coming up with new ways to make women comfortable attending games and making female fans feel more comfortable within the football setting will eliminate the stereotypes that surround football and other sports. By making these innovative changes, the NFL will be more up to date and will apply better to our changing society that surrounds it.

**Annotated Bibliography**

1. Centre for Gender Equality, (2006). Sports, Media and Stereotypes Women and Men in Sports and Media. *Centre for Gender Equality Iceland*. 1 (6), pp.6

*Gives more information on stereotypes that surround gender and sports. Includes the factor of media and social media and how those two components keep the stereotypes alive.*

1. Dosh, K (2012). *NFL may be hitting stride with female fans*. Retrieved October 19, 2012 at: http://espn.go.com/espnw/more-sports/7536295/print.

*Provides useful information on the NFL’s actions towards marketing to women through merchandise and the increase of women fanbases over the past few years.*

1. In the NFL, There Are No Sick Days. (2012). Journal of Advertising Research, 52(3), 377-380.

*Provides information on how the NFL uses sponsorships to get their industry name in the public. Nyquil, Dayquil and ZzzQuil are the prime examples given in the journal and how it is fixed into the NFL as a sponsor. I used information on how the NFL as an industry will use sponsorships to reach their fans and potential fans and how they can use sponsorships to their advantage in order to reach female fans.*

1. National Football League (2011). *National Football League Company Information* Retrieved October 17, 2012 at: <http://www.hoovers.com/>

companyinformation/cs/companyprofile.National\_Football\_League.f36bd60db3fbcb01.html.

*Gives a brief background of the NFL, and a description of the NFL today and how they have grown over the years as an organization. Provides information on the industry itself and gives an overview of the goals and functions of the NFL. Directly from the NFL website, an explanation on the purpose of the NFL and what it’s goals and priorities are.*

1. National Football League Communications (2012). *WISE and NFL Join Forces to Help Industry Women*. Retrieved October 17, 2012 at: http://nflcommunications.com/2012/04/16/wise-and-nfl-join-forces-to-help-industry-women/.

*An article showing WISE (Women in Sporting Events) and the NFL coming together to help the NFL’s industry towards women. Gives information on the steps WISE and the NFL are taking to make women more involved in the NFL. Supports my industry analysis on the participation and inclusion of women in the NFL.*

1. Rosenburg, A (2012). *Shannon Eastin To Become First Female NFL Ref*. Retrieved October 19, 2012 at: http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx\_factor/2012/08/07/shannon\_eastin\_to\_become\_first\_female\_nfl\_referree\_.html.

*Gives the story of Shannon Eastin, first woman to be a referee in an NFL game. Shows that gender does not form boundaries and that women could be on field officials. Supports women involvement in the NFL.*

1. Schaaf, P (1995). *Sports Marketing: It's Not Just a Game Anymore*. 1st ed. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

*Provides information on sports marketing and the ideas behind the marketing strategies in organizations like the NFL. Gives information on what sport organizations target, what they look to do in order to draw in fans/customers and how they achieve that. Gives examples on how organizations like the NFL reach their target markets, which helps in the situation of them choosing women as a target market*.

1. *Sports Industry Overview*. Plunkett Research (2012). Retrieved October 17, 2012 at: http://www.plunkettresearch.com/sports-recreation-leisure-market-research/industry-statistics.

*A chart listing the overviews of different sports industries including NHL, MLB, NBA and NFL. Includes information such as revenues, income, the number of teams in the organization and the team value. Gives a lot of useful information on the NFL, what they take in as profit, the size of the NFL, etc. in chart form.*

1. Wenner, L & Jackson, S, (2009). *Sport, Beer, and Gender*. 1st ed. New York, New York: Peter Lang.

*A book on the relationship between sports, beer and gender. Provides information on the demographics included in the NFL and sports as a whole, along with stereotypes and gender roles in sports. Gives great examples on the typical stereotypes on sports in general and what sports are directly affiliated with, men and beer. Brings up the argument that women are typically left out.*