**Concordia UNIVERSITY chicago**

**Masters Program**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Student:** | Anthony Di Virgilio  crf\_divirga@cuchicago.edu  20 Pond St. Stoneham, MA 02180 |
| **Day Telephone:** | 339-293-9230 ET |
| **Evening Telephone:** | 339-293-9230 ET |
|  |  |
| **Assignment Title:** | Increasing WNBA Spectator Attendance & Viewership |
| **Date of Submission:** | 02/05/2020 |
| **Assignment Due Date:** | 02/09/2020 |
|  |  |
| **Course:** | SPML-6130 |
| **Section Number:** | 12S |
| **Semester:** | Spring |
| **Course Instructor:** | Robert Mechikoff |
|  |  |

*Certification of Authorship:* I certify that I am the author of this paper and that any assistance I received in its preparation is fully acknowledged and disclosed in the paper. I also have cited any sources from which I used data, ideas, or words, either quoted directly or paraphrased. I certify that this paper was prepared by me specifically for the purpose of this assignment, as directed.

Student’s Signature: Anthony Di Virgilio

[Digital signature]

Increasing WNBA Spectator Attendance & Viewership

In its near 25-year history the WNBA remains among the most successful professional women sports leagues to date. Uniform of most startup leagues, the WNBA has faced several challenges impacting spectator attendance and viewership fluctuations in its short history. Berri (2019) stated “WNBA average attendance rose above 10,000 per game in the league’s second and third years. Across the next few years, however, average attendance generally declined. But then, after reaching a low of 7,318 in 2015, league average attendance rebounded in both 2016 and 2017” (p. 193). The WNBA attracted most of its fans in its early stage as a new and emerging basketball league. Then the aura of newness faded and the loss of talent overseas playing for higher wages, lack of media coverage, and low publicity all contributed to diminishing spectator attendance and viewership. The WNBA has an opportunity to increase spectator attendance and viewership by addressing league challenges and incorporating a unique and new exciting element to rebrand the league for future generations.

**WNBA X-Factor**

A survey conducted by Jackson et al. (2017) on fan feelings towards the WNBA showed “The majority of our participants were satisfied with the overall product the WNBA has to offer (affordability and family-oriented atmosphere), yet, it still lacked a certain ‘excitement’ factor that would make the participant want to personally watch or attend a game” (p. 519). Fans of the 1990’s-2000’s NBA tuned in to watch Vince Carter perform explosive dunks and transitioned into watching Steph Curry and the Warriors shooting barrage of three pointers over the last decade. While the WNBA certainly has exciting moments, disengaged fans argue it still lacks a league trademark to attract more viewers. Jackson et al. (2017) survey participants showed they were in favor of the suggestion for lowering the rim by 6 inches to allow more players to dunk. This is certainly an intriguing possibility capable of improving excitement and fan retention. However, an equally intriguing option would be to incorporate a four-point shot into the league. The NBA’s experiment with adding this dynamic during All-Star weekend was met with success and fan approval. The WNBA currently has some of the world’s most elite shooters and adding a four-point shot would certainly be unique and provide new excitement during crunch time of close games.

**Increasing WNBA Publicity**

In the survey comment section conducted by Jackson et al. (2017) fans stressed a determinant of them losing interest was not knowing when games were being played due to low media publicity. Results also showed that marketing and advertising were other crucial factors needing to be addressed (Jackson et al., 2017). Minimal airtime for female sports is the most significant deterrent for fans not being aware of WNBA games. Nyad et al. (2010) found that female sports coverage accounted for 1.4% of *SportsCenter* airtime and the show never led off with a female sports story. Without routine coverage of the WNBA, fans can become uninformed and frustrated. Fans also want to feel like they know the players they are rooting for. Mumcu et al. (2016) found ESPN has improved WNBA coverage through human-interest pieces depicting the journeys of 2013 rookies Skylar Diggins-Smith, Brittney Griner, and Elena Delle Donne. Fans are more likely to stay engaged when they know their favorite WNBA players on and off the court. If ESPN continues producing these segments and creates more content promoting important games, fans will know what’s at stake and look forward to attending and watching WNBA games.

***Appreciating WNBA Talent***

Jackson et al. (2017) identified “The league and women’s basketball in general, has been represented as synonymous with ‘lesbian’ athletes or athletes that aren’t very feminine; this could deter some people away. Also, more college players are choosing to forgo the WNBA in order to make more money overseas. All of these things lead to the biggest problem the league faces which is low attendance” (p. 520). The WNBA is very progressive and has exceeded expectations for supporting its LGBTQ+ community through its pride nights and pride parades. Most WNBA fans tend to be accepting and respectful of players regardless of their sexual orientation. If the league can strategize ways to attract more conservative basketball fans the league would gain new followers and help create better societal acceptance towards the LGBTQ+ community. This could be done through commercials showcasing WNBA players as athletes and people without regard to their sexual orientation. To address the loss of WNBA prospects playing for higher wages overseas, the league needs to continue to generate more revenue and better reward their players. In 2017 the average NBA player made $6.1 million annually in comparison to $75,000 in the WNBA (Berri, 2019). The new 2020 WNBA CBA was a historic first step in increasing player salaries. However, the new CBA raised salaries for mainly the league’s top players, who are still only eligible to make around half a million. As Mumcu et al. (2016) mentioned “The success of women’s sports properties will depend on their ability to increase attendance and television ratings thereby increasing revenues from ticket sales and gameday sales at event venues, which in theory will result in an increase in revenues from sponsorships, advertisements, and broadcasting contracts” (p. 28).

**Conclusion.** The struggles the WNBA has faced in its early history are not abnormal compared to any other startup league. Berri (2019) suggested sport leagues need time to develop history to gain popularity and that the NBA had a near equivalent number of spectators in its early years. As more rivalries begin to develop overtime, trends support that the WNBA will have its own breakthrough period like the rise of NBA popularity during the Celtics and Lakers dynasties of the 1980’s. If the WNBA rebrands the league by incorporating new elements of excitement and works to gain support from the media, then surely spectator attendance and viewership will gradually increase.

References

Berri, D. (2019). The relative success story of the WNBA. In N. Lough, & A.N. Geurin (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of the business of women’s sport* (1st ed., pp. 191-203). Routledge.

Jackson, N., Thompson, A., Lee, M., Rotich, J., & Fuller, T. (2017). Impact of spectator motivation on long-term sustainability for women’s basketball league. *Journal of Human Sciences, 14*(1), 519-527.

Mumcu, C., Lough, N., & Barnes, J.C. (2016). Examination of women’s sports fans’ attitudes and consumption intentions. *Journal of Applied Sport Management, 8*(4), 25-47.

Nyad, D., Messner, M.A., & Cooky, C. (2010). Gender in televised sports: News and highlights shows.