

The Challenges of Women's Professional Soccer in the US

A theoretically and empirically informed discussion

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On November 22, the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) announced the formation of a professional league for women's football. It's not the first time this happens, in fact it is the third time. In 2000, the first professional league for women's football ever, the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA), was founded. After the victory of the US National Team in the 1999 World Cup, it was thought that there would be a market for a women's league. The initiators managed to get \$35 million from companies and individuals to start up a series of eight teams, and the actual playing of football started in February 2001. After three seasons, the league was suspended in 2003; neither the TV ratings nor the arena audiences had met expectations, and the money ran out. Six years later, a new attempt was made, but the launch of the Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) in 2009 had been prepared ever since WUSA folded, and, in fact, a few launch attempts had failed in between due to insufficient funding, lack of stadiums, and other factors.

When WPS began operations in March 2009, the league consisted of seven teams, and the same was true of the 2010 season. In 2011, they were down to six teams, although USSF rules stipulate that a professional league has to have eight teams. It didn't look too good, and in January 2012 it was announced that the season was suspended. A few months later the league was discontinued, reportedly due to internal organizational problems, including a complicated litigation and lack of financial resources. Now that a new league is starting up – an official name has not been offered – it is in crucial respects a completely different league than WPS; one important distinction is described by one of the initiators as "What we need is a sustainable model: less hype, better performance. The hype will come if we have the performance." Was it too much "hype" that spelled the decline and demise of the WPS? Well, hardly, as evidenced by Anna Maria Hellborg's article. She uses data from five in-depth interviews with individuals that have unique insights into US women's soccer and the possibilities and potentials of the Women's Professional Soccer, and her analysis is guided by a theoretical understanding in part based on C. Wright Mills and his sociological imagination.

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Introduction

The Women's Professional Soccer (WPS), the league for female professional soccer players in the USA, announced early in 2012 that the season was cancelled due to legal issues and a need to regroup financially. The league had then been operating for three years. This is the second league to fail within ten years. What happened, and why does it seem so hard to sustain a women's soccer league?

The aim of this article is to discuss, and to broaden the understanding of, the challenges to establish a women's professional soccer league. In the discussion I will use the Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) as an example. I will examine how people involved perceive the WPS product, how the product is marketed, and who the intended consumer might be. Is there a market for a women's professional soccer league? Is there a correlation between product and consumer, or is it a mismatch? And if the product can't be sold does it mean that it's a bad product? This also relates to matters concerning for whom the product needs to be sold? And finally, are the problems in any way related to gender? The purpose of this article is to present a theoretically and empirically informed discussion about these questions.

For this study I have interviewed five people who in different ways are or were involved with the WPS. Some interviews were performed in person and others over the phone. The interviewees were David Halstead, team owner of Philadelphia Independence; Fitz Johnson, team owner of Atlanta Beat; Terry Foley, former general manager of Philadelphia Independence; Melanie Fitzgerald, strategy and operations director of Western New York Flash; and Charles Cuttone, a journalist writing about soccer in the US. The empirical material also consists of interviews with owners, columns and articles from the Internet concerning the WPS, because I wanted to get an idea of what the written media is focusing on. With the help of previous research on related subjects and other sources I aim at understanding the structure, not only of the WPS, but also the structure that the WPS is surrounded by. Additionally, I used the WPS website and US Soccer's website as sources to get a notion of the relationship between the league and the federation.

The theoretical perspectives and models used are C Wright Mills' (1997) ideas about individual and structure. Mills distinguishes between personal troubles and public issues. Troubles occur within the individual and are limited by his immediate relations to other people and to the surroundings he is personally aware of. Trouble is a private matter, and is surfacing when values that are important to the individual are perceived as threatened. Issues have to do with questions that go beyond the individual's close surroundings and inner life. An issue is a public concern that arises when a value that the public treasures is perceived as threatened, for example could one value be to earn your own living. Troubles become issues when the structure of people's opportunities is collapsing and you can't solve a person's trouble by "changing" something within them. To be used as a theoretical tool, Mills' idea requires a relationship between individual and structure. Structural issues consist of a large amount of individuals' troubles. The WPS can be seen as neither the structure nor the individual but both. There are overarching structures that affect the cancellation of the league, and the WPS owners' decision to cancel affect the individuals that were hoping to play professional soccer. But it's also possible to see the WPS as an individual that is

dealing with troubles in a sport structure. The theory about individual and structure is used to put the WPS in a context.

The management models that are used are the business idea model, SWOT, brand asset valuator and customer based strategy.

- The business idea model shows interplay of five components: offerings, consumers, resources, brand and values. The way a company manages to analyse and connect the components is crucial to a surviving and successful business (Bruzelius & Skärvad, 2004).
- The SWOT analysis estimates a company's strengths and weaknesses (internal environment) and opportunities and threats (external environment) (Kotler & Keller, 2006). In this study the focus is mainly on strengths and weaknesses because it's used to define the quality of the product.
- The brand asset valuator is a measuring tool to identify the key components of brand equity. The first component is differentiation; it's about the way the brand is different from other brands. Relevance is how many people the brand would appeal to. Esteem is the brand's respectability and the regard people have for the brand. Knowledge is to what extent people know and recognize the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2006).
- The customer-based strategy involves four basic customer approaches: Getting new customers, keeping existing customers content, getting existing customers to buy more and dropping undesirable customers (Lehmann & Winer, 2002).

Examining the WPS

In this chapter I will first present the format of sports leagues in the United States, which is *franchise*. Then there's *the WPS*, what the discussion is about. This is the starting point. Further, because it's a franchise, the condition for the WPS's existence is to be able to sell it to an audience. Therefore matters concerning *product* and *marketing* need to be addressed. Finally there is a section that concerns the question of whether the problem with the WPS has to do with soccer in general or if it has to do with attitudes towards women and women's sport. This section presents the discussion about gender that has been unstated throughout the material.

To franchise a sport league

Franchising involves two important parties: the franchisor and the franchisee. The franchisor is the patentee that grants a person (the franchisee) to operate a location of its' developed business. The franchisor controls the products and trademarks, but through a contract the franchisee buys the right to use them. It's important for the franchisor to attract franchisees and gain competitive advantages, and if a franchisor is unable to do this it will probably renounce from franchising (Price, 1997).

To be a sustainable and prospering franchise the ideas and knowledge from the franchisees might be an important part of the competitive advantage Price says (1997). But in

the WPS the franchisor and the franchisees are the same people. The owners of the teams also own the league. This means that new franchisees get to be included in the process of advancement. But it also displays a risk that the mission is not unanimous and that the managing of the league is drawn in many different directions, as one of my informants suggests. This might, according to Bruzelius and Skärvad (2004), lead to development being slowed down or arrested, since there are several ideas that in theory are equally strong.

After the formation, there's a period of initial success. But then comes the high-risk period when the franchise is particularly susceptible to insolvency, and a majority of franchises fails within four years. Price refers to a study by Shane in 1996 where he found that out of 138 new US-based franchisors, approximately 75 per cent failed over a ten-year period. Whether a franchise grows or not is influenced by how alluring the offer is to potential franchisees and how long the franchisees are motivated to continue (Price, 1997). It appears to be a key issue to have franchisees that have the money and the patience to endure. If a franchise is having problems, new franchisees are hard to find. The owner of Philadelphia Independence, David Halstead, says that if the league doesn't have a good plan for new teams they will not join, since the old business model led to a huge money loss. It seems crucial to attract new teams, since the league needs more teams to share the burden of costs, and thus to be able to survive.

To expand is a question of strategy. If a franchisor expands too quickly they get too dependent on sales of new franchises to continue. This could be a problem for sport franchises since they need several teams from the start and don't have time to establish the business beforehand. That means that those committed from the beginning need to be committed until the franchise has been established long enough to be able to get new teams or new team owners to the franchise. This was a problem for the WPS because it begun with seven teams and after the first season one team departed and after the second season three teams departed, one in the middle of the season, according to journalist Charles Cuttone. Price (1997) advises future franchisees to choose a franchisor that has long experience as a manager, that the franchise has been established for more than five years and that the franchisor have resources to survive and sustain growth. I think the problem for the WPS could be that potential new investors want to wait until the league is established, when the risk isn't as big. Halstead says that most sports franchises lose money, so you need a team of owners that can lose a lot of money. But if you just lose some, that's tolerable as long as you gain equity value. Equity value is the team's identity; a strong identity is very valuable because you can sell the business for more money than you bought it for. But it's hard losing money if the trends aren't pointing towards future prosperity, Halstead says.

WPS: The best league in the world?

The WPS was established in September 2007 and began playing in March 2009. It was constituted as a franchise where each team was individually owned and the league was operated by a group of investors. In 2011, the league consisted of six teams (Atlanta Beat, Boston Breakers, Philadelphia Independence, Magic Jack, Sky Blue FC and Western New York Flash). During 2012 the league was cancelled due to legal issues with the owner to the expelled team of Magic Jack. But the cancellation also had to do with the lack of profit, and the league needed to regroup and regain strength to be able to grow and become a per-

manent league. The average game attendance for 2011 was 3531 spectators, excluding the three play-off games (Women's professional soccer, 2012).

A damaged reputation

Concerning the financial situation, the question is: have the experiences and decline of the previous league, WUSA, provided useful information for the investors of the WPS? WUSA was a victim of hubris and overspending (Southall & Nagel, 2007), is this what has happened to the WPS as well? Halstead, and the former general manager of Philadelphia Independence Terry Foley, say that the business model was inadequate and that the expectations and projections were "way off". Foley says he doesn't know where the attendance prognosis came from that the owners used when planning the business. It might have been estimations made with the WUSA league in mind, but it was misleading and overly optimistic.

Halstead says that the most important thing is to understand business and how business works. We cancelled in 2012, Halstead says, to figure out how not to lose so much money. In business, if it doesn't work you have to stop and change what you're doing. We had a business model that didn't work; we lost more than we anticipated. Foley says that the WPS owners also made some unfortunate decisions, such as spending money on wrong things, like a front office with 24 employees, which is far too many. Another ineffective decision, he says was working with the wrong people; they should've brought in more people who knew soccer.

The articles in the media this year (2012) has been about the cancellation and mostly about the legal battle with the owner of Magic Jack. The conflict is the most prevalent story concerning the WPS in the media. Even if most stories are in favour of the WPS, it's still about a negative issue. Strategy and operations manager for Western New York Flash, Melanie Fitzgerald, points out that a cancellation never is a positive story, but that it's important to signal that women's soccer isn't dead just because of the cancellation, it's just trying to find its form. Foley says that it's the cancellation in itself that gives the league a bad reputation and not the Magic Jack situation.

US Soccer Federation

How is the relationship between the league and the federation? Do they benefit from each other? Certainly the national team players and their success are important to the WPS, as Atlanta Beat owner Fitz Johnson claims. But it's not quite as obvious that the WPS is important for the federation. In the policy manual for US soccer it says that every player that is a US citizen is required to be available if the federation is requesting this. It includes international games, FIFA, and the Olympic games as well as preparations and qualifications for the tournaments (US Soccer, 2012). Does this mean that the national team players aren't available for the league? Halstead says that the national team players are paid both by the league and by the federation. The WNT (women's national team) players are often called to play for the USA and they will be away from games in the league. They are often the stars of their team, so the team lose ticket sales when they are away. In an interview at examiner.com (2011) Mike Stoller, in the owner group of Boston Breakers, says that it's important that the league adapt to the schedule of the WNT to avoid important players being absent too much. For example, the league was ongoing during the World Cup 2011.

In 1999 communication between the WNT and the federation was strained, Longman (2001) claims. US Soccer didn't believe in the product of women's soccer and showed little interest in the women's team even after the World Cup success. The federation were more focused on the men's soccer. The WNT had to fight hard for equal pay despite that their merits far exceeded the men's. US Soccer wanted to support a female league under the MLS but the national players refused to play in such a league. They wanted a league of their own and not to be a part of the MLS, and so the WUSA was established as an independent league. Cuttone says that they probably didn't think the MLS would have their best interest in mind. Foley says that US Soccer isn't helping the league and that the organisation is still directing its efforts onto the men. One thing that the federation could do, Foley says, is to loosen the rules for division 1 pro leagues. For example, the WPS teams are required to play in bigger stadiums than they can fill, which is a higher expense than if they could play in smaller stadiums. On nytimes.com (2012) Sky Blue owner Thomas Hoffstetter is quoted saying that there haven't been enough financial support from the federation and that it would be significant for the league if the federation would just acknowledge the importance of the league. At the moment he doesn't know if they even share the vision that the owners have for the league.

The Best League?

A mission statement clarifies what the organisation wants to accomplish beyond the value created by its offers. The mission provides an identity to the company. It's meant to inspire the staff and everyone with an interest in the company (Bruzeliuss & Skärvad, 2004). On the WPS' website, the following statement about their ambitions for the league is published: "Our mission is to be the premier women's soccer league in the world, and the global standard by which women's professional sports are measured" (Women's professional soccer, 2012). That's a vast, but not a surprising ambition. Markovits and Hellerman (2003) mean that women's soccer in the US is a good example of the term institutionalization of primacy, which is a necessity for a successful and sustainable league in any team sport on the American sports scene. Institutionalization of primacy means that the league is the best in the world, that the league attracts all the best players in the sport. Foley believes the league has to be the best to be more marketable in the US and therefore it also needs the best players, like Marta. Cuttone says that one player doesn't make a difference but that it's important that the WNT players are playing in the league. Johnson says that the league has to be the best to set a standard and be the leader in the world. Kotler and Keller (2006) state that when formulating goals one important aspect is that they are realistic. Goals should be a result of an analysis of the company's opportunities and strengths and not be formed out of wishful thinking. Are these goals realistic? Fitzgerald thinks the most important thing now is to be responsible and start smaller, like the MLS did. Halstead continues; to be the best you need big stadiums and high salaries and that business model didn't work. So it might be necessary to revise the mission statement, he concludes.

A good product or the right product?

A good product is something that satisfies the consumers' perception of what they need. And consumers learn what kind of products that can be used to satisfy those needs. But a product is more than a physical object or a performed service; its value also lies in the cul-

ture surrounding the product. You don't just buy to satisfy basic needs, you buy style, service, prestige and brand (Wasson, 1971). Consumers are attracted to the product with the highest quality, best performance or most resourceful assets, but in combination with right price and successful advertising (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

A new product

Wasson (1971) describes when there are opportunities for new products being developed. That is: if there's a space between the products offered by competitors, if there's a demand that is unsatisfied, or if there are new markets being developed. It's important that the organisation developing the concept have the resources to nurture it through the introduction to the market. If the product is launched too early it will have problems standing on its' own. The market must be prepared for the product, Wasson states. Halstead says that the WSP was a new product and it was going to take time. Entering a business is always a risk. But at the same time he says he had confidence in his ability and in the ability of the people he hired.

Following Wassons (1971) description of opportunities for new products you could say that there is a gap in the market since there is no other operational, fully professional soccer league for women. But is there a demand from the fans? When forming new products one significant element is analysing what the customer need, want and will use. Has this been done? Is the league an initiative based on identified consumer needs? This raises the question if the league is a product for the benefit of the consumers or a profession opportunity for female soccer players.

Strengths and weaknesses

The weakness of the WPS was the business model and that is what needs to change. According to Fitzgerald the WPS is too small. The strength is in numbers and five teams are not strong enough. Johnson says that one weakness is the difficulties of getting the word out, because women's sports are harder to sell. Everybody I have talked to say that the strength of the WPS is the product. The WPS stood for quality play by the best players in the world. The games were exciting and the players were enthusiastic and positive role models for youths. But if the strength of the product is its quality, then why isn't the league attracting more spectators?

Market competition

Competitors compete for the same consumers. To fail in identifying competitors can negatively affect the success of the marketing plan, since awareness of the competition improves your chances of responding to their strategies. There are several levels of competition. There are products that appear to be the same, products with similar features and products that could substitute the product and is fulfilling the same needs (Lehmann & Winer, 2001). On a day-to-day basis the products that appears to be the same are the ones to focus on, but in a long-term view the competition mapping should be broadened.

What is the competition for the WPS? Foley says that there's a rivalry between the WPS and the semi-professional leagues. And both Cuttone and Fitzgerald say that these leagues are exploring their options to become fully professional leagues. But Fitzgerald adds that the difference between the WPS and the semi-pro leagues is that the WPS is professional

through and through. Right now the teams in the semi-pro leagues are not on the same parity. The team owners Halstead and Johnson see the question of competition in a wider perspective, and mention the leagues in Europe as competitors because they compete for the best players.

If there are competitive products on the market that have well-established brand names and companies with commendable prominence, it is hard for new competitors to enter the market. In succeeding to establish a brand lays a successful product differentiation (Lehmann & Winer, 2002), since consumers perceive differences between products when there in fact are none which is due to the image of the brand or the retailer (Wasson, 1971). The WPS is the only professional soccer league for women in the US, but it's not the only league providing women's soccer. The W-league and the WPSL (Women's premier soccer league) have been around for about fifteen years each and are more established. But you couldn't say they are so well established that you would call them market leaders. And what about the MLS? Do the MLS and the WPS share the same audience? Or are they perceived as two different sports with different target markets?

Marketing is tough competition.

For a company to earn financial success the key is its ability to market its products. If you can't create a demand for the product it will not be sold (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

Market research

Market research has two main purposes. First, it will show if there are opportunities in the market that are unexplored, such as lack of competitors or ways of enhancing the product. Second, threats become visible, which gives the company a chance to alter the strategy. Market research increases the company's readiness to make decisions concerning marketing (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008). For example, Kotler (2004) writes, a company can easily determine whether their message is getting across by mapping the target consumers' knowledge and perception of the company.

No market research has been done for the whole WPS, just in certain teams. Halstead means that they have a pretty good idea of who's coming to the games in Philadelphia without having made market research. In Atlanta there has been market research done to find out who's attending and it's the same as their target market – teenage girls, Johnson says.

Marketing

Halstead says that they can't really afford big marketing campaigns. According to Stoller, the spending on marketing has decreased because the campaigns cost more than they gave and that they now focus on grass root marketing instead (examiner.com, 2011). There is a big enough youth market to attain satisfying ticket sales, but it is an effort to reach each of them and marketing is not prioritized, says Foley. Cuttone claims that when it comes to marketing the owners didn't use the money as they could have.

The sport consumer

Success requires that you understand who the sport consumers are and identify the aspects that influences their consumer habits. In order to be competitive in a myriad of offered

sport events it's critical for the management to be aware of the segmentation and realize where the consumers live, what motivates them, and how they choose and use products (Milne & McDonald, 1999). Kotler and Keller (2006) write that the most successful strategy for a company is to choose their target market and custom-make a marketing program for that segment. To try and sell a product to everyone is not acceptable. There is always a more likely consumer (Kotler 2004).

The target market in Philadelphia is active families, Halstead says, families involved with sports who have daughters playing soccer, but also people who generally love soccer. Foley, on the other hand, says that the goal is to reach all demographics. Fitzgerald agrees that it's important to reach beyond the soccer families, and to do that you have to connect with colleges and businesses and get them to attend games and then the word of mouth would carry it from there. It seems like the focus in the WPS lies in the community, to attract and market towards people in each city where there is a team. But the WPS games were also aired on television, so who is going to watch the games on television? If all marketing is directed towards the local community, to those who should attend the games, then why air on television at all?

Publicity

Media's perception of a sport organisation is often shared with the people (Pedersen, Miloch and Laucella, 2007). Though sport isn't dependent on media to exist a sport that doesn't get attention by the media has a hard time attracting fans and to generate financial success. Michener (1983) stresses that the written media, such as newspapers, are more important for a team than broadcasts on television. A newspaper's positive writing of a team is a key to financial success; nowadays, this is probably true also of some Internet media. This is due to people's opinions being shaped by what's written in the papers, since papers often contains more opinionated information than television. Kotler (2004) says it's important to get experts, columnists and opinion leaders to talk and write positive things about the product. A lot of consumers appreciate the recommendations from experts. Halstead says that getting awareness is the most difficult issue in the beginning. When it comes to media attention the WPS don't get a lot of national coverage but local media write about their teams.

Marketable female athletes

Being marketable as a woman is often associated with looks and being sexually attractive. Before the 1999 World Cup, soccer star Brandi Chastain posed nude for the magazine Gear. Chastain said she agreed to the photo because it was a strong athletic photo and that it improved her self image. Co-player Michelle Akers was critical of Chastain's Gear posing and meant that it reflected negatively on the team and women's sports as a whole. Here the appearance of the players as role models might clash with how female athletes are marketable as women (Longman, 2001). After the World Cup 2011 Hope Solo, the US team's goalkeeper and WPS profile, posed nude in ESPN's The Body Issue (2011) and in March 2012 another WNT and WPS profile, Alex Morgan, posed in Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition (2012). Are these two recent nude posings damaging to the league? Does it matter at all for the marketability of the league? And will it damage the perception the target mar-

ket has of the players and the league? Do families want their girls to have these players as role models?

There is a Swedish example that explains what is troublesome with these kinds of photos. Jönsson (2010) writes about the difference between the lightly dressed appearances of two Swedish sport profiles: the equestrian Malin Baryard and the soccer player Josefine Öqvist. Baryard was wearing sexy underwear at a horse-jumping exhibition and Öqvist posed in a bikini in the men's magazine *Slitz*. Öqvist was highly criticized for her decision, teammates commented on her decision, and journalists wrote about Öqvist damaging women's soccer. Baryard on the other hand, was celebrated for her smart decision that made her recognizable, and resulted in a long-term sponsor contract. The clothing was practically the same but the difference was, Jönsson argues, that Baryard was performing her sport, while Öqvist was a passive object. For women to get respect as an athlete there seems to be some "rules", and that is portraying the woman as an athlete before anything else. The sport world is harder on women, therefore women who get attention for their looks are said to damage the entire sport, as the example above shows.

A soccer issue or a women's issue?

Even though soccer is more accepted for women in the US than in Europe, it's still a team sport and therefore a male domain (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2003). Men get more resources and are prioritized at collegiate level as well as by the federation. Since women's sports won't fill the biggest stadiums or yield television revenue, and women's sports seldom require as expensive equipment as men's sports do, the huge inequality of how resources are divided between the sexes is justified (Michener 1983). But, Michener adds, the culture of regarding men's sports as more serious and worthy of encouragement should be taken into consideration when analyzing gender inequality within sports. In their article from 2003, before the WUSA was cancelled, Markovits and Hellerman claimed that the fact that women were playing a team sport at professional level was a development for gender equality in the US. Does this mean that you should interpret the cancellation of the WPS as a backlash for equality? Or maybe the cancellation just means that women's soccer have significance but isn't big enough yet to generate a profitable business? Should women have a professional soccer league in the name of equality, even if there's no foundation to build a business yet?

Soccer failed in general because baseball and football grew more popular since soccer was perceived as non-American (Markovits and Hellerman 2001). It also failed as a result of inadequate promotion. And because a men's soccer league in the US isn't the best in the world, it makes it unattractive to American fans. Instead the best American players aspire to play in Europe, which is a problem for the image of soccer. Is this true, or is it just a self-fulfilling prophecy? Cuttone says that there's a misperception that soccer in the US isn't that big. The MLS is well attended and the European teams draw spectators as well when they visit. There's a lot of interest in soccer, just not in women's soccer, he says.

Markovits and Hellerman (2001) say that key conditions for making a sport popular in the US is met by women's soccer in the US: it's the best in the world, which the men's league isn't. According to this it's hard to understand that there's a men's professional league going on its 16th year and that two female leagues have failed. It seems like it doesn't really matter to be the best to make a professional league. So is there a devaluation

of the women's game because of gender? Back in 1999 the WNT was the only soccer in the US therefore it got a lot of attention, Cuttone says, but then the MLS improved and the interest were transferred to them. Halstead says that any sport league is hard to make-work, add to that a women's league and it gets even harder.

Challenges for the WPS

In this section I will put the WPS in a context with the help of Mills' ideas on individual and structure. I will discuss weaknesses in the WPS when it comes to marketing and how this could threaten the league. The discussion turn towards the consumers and who these are and what kind of product they want. I will also approach gender and femininity and how this affects the conditions for the female athletes.

Individual and structure

Mills says that an individual's trouble is a matter that surface when important values are perceived as threatened. He says that it's not always clear what's threatening these values. If the WPS is viewed as an individual in a sport structure, it could be many different things, like an unwilling federation, the silent media, an unmerciful court system and spectators that choose other events. But what's disturbing for the WPS concerns what Mills says about public issues. When the public perceive treasured values as threatened it is an issue. Is the WPS of public concern? Probably not. Mills also says that troubles become issues when people's opportunities are hindered by failing structures. There might be a failing structure and a threat if the federation is unwilling to support the league, if the media refuse to write about them or if the sponsors don't want to support women's soccer. But still there could be no claim that the public need to attend women's professional soccer games since the interest isn't that high in comparison to other sports and other activities. Therefore the WPS stands quite solitary in the sport structure. It's not just a structural problem, though. If the individual can solve their troubles by changing something within, it's not a structural problem, Mills says. And change within the WPS is possible and necessary.

The consumer...

The most important thing for a business is to have consumers (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2006; Milne & McDonald, 1999). Since the estimations of attendance rates for the WPS weren't at all fulfilled, it is questionable if these estimats were based on research made according to the current market. If the results differ from the plan, the marketers need to decide if it has to do with poor implementation, an incoherent marketing mix or inept market research (Kotler, 2004). Market research seems to be a decision for every team to do on a local level, but what about the league? The league was also aired on television; who watched the league on TV? Schwarz and Hunter (2008) say that market research has the advantage of letting the company know what the customer wants and how the product and marketing must be altered. What's the point of spending money on television broadcasts if there is no marketing towards a television audience? Who watches these games on TV and why? What do they want? These questions remain unanswered.

To reach beyond the target market is a goal for the WPS, according to some of my informants. But getting new markets to attend is expensive (Kotler and Keller 2006), and companies often try to get new consumers before they put in efforts on keeping existing consumers (Lehmann and Winer 2002). This means that if you don't perform market research and don't know why people attend, you might change things about the product that won't appeal to the existing target market. And while trying to expand the market you might lose the core market because you don't know what attracted them to the games in the first place. The result might turn out to be more expenses and fewer consumers.

When it comes to identifying competitors it is crucial to be thorough, otherwise you will not be able to adjust your strategy and you are risking losing consumers because of it (Lehmann and Winer 2002). Some of the informants mention that the semi-pro leagues are exploring their option to start pro leagues, but not all consider them as competitors. Lehmann and Winer point out that you have to think wide when it comes to competition and consider the intended customer. You need to find out what they want and need, and then figure out who else is satisfying those needs. You have to adjust the product to the market, not the other way around (Wasson 1971). What does this mean in the case of women's soccer as an entertainment product? Is there a market and is it big enough? If girls are the target market and not enough girls are attending games then what are the girls doing instead? Who or what are the WPS competing with for these girls' attention? Maybe it isn't sport at all. Then what could be done to make them chose a women's soccer game instead? If the sport product is demand-based (Schwarz and Hunter, 2008), then what are the consumers demanding?

...and the product

According to the informants, the WPS product is a quality product. But in order to determine a product or a brand's value, two important criteria need to be met. People need to have high regards for the brand and they need to know and recognise it (Kotler & Keller, 2006). How many people know there's a women's soccer league? And how many people know anything about it? A strong brand demands a link between image, profile and identity (Bruzeliuss and Skärvad 2004). So, is the way the WPS league perceive themselves the same as how they want to be perceived and, more important, how the people perceive them? To strengthen the brand these perceptions need to correlate, which in turn requires some kind of unanimity regarding what kind of product it is. To my mind, it is a problem to have a mission for the product like "the global standard by which women's professional sports are measured", and be managed as a local business.

Two thirds of the TV audience during the World Cup 1999 were men, and this means that female soccer players need to be commercially attractive for male audiences in order for women's soccer to survive (Markovits and Hellermann, 2001). But do we know that this is why men watch women's sports? The discussion is merely a way to devalue the success, to claim that the players aren't appreciated for their skills but for their physical appearance. And as soon as women are successful they're offered to pose in a magazine where they are supposed to show their female attractiveness only.

In the 1940's and 1950's the players in All-American girls professional baseball league were required to attend charm school. There they were educated in etiquette, personal hygiene and dress code. The effort was that every player should be physically attractive. The

players also had rules of conduct to obey. These included rules such as “always appear in feminine attire when not actively engaged in practice or playing ball” and “boyish bobs are not permissible” (All-American girls professional baseball league, 2012). This was seventy years ago and even though there are no compulsory charm schools today, the importance of femininity is still a reality, or at least it is perceived as a reality. The media has its own agenda, which is selling their newspapers or getting people to watch their television programs. So, if physically attractive women are more sellable, they might be inclined to portray women that way. The WPS product also has a life of its own since it consists of individuals who are free to make their own decisions. But players' choices of posing nude might not be good for the marketing of the league. A study by Harrison and Secarea (2010) displays the attitudes college students have of professional female athletes that are being described in a flashy manner. Their findings show that the students view athletes that are being sexualized as less skilled athletes than those that are not depicted in a sexualized way.

There seems to be a certain logic concerning women's professional sports, which stipulates that if you want to earn money through your sport, you have to adapt to the commercial market, since investors and sponsors are the ones providing the opportunity to be professional. And you can assume that (most of) the companies that sponsor sport are conservative in their view of women, because stereotypical representations of women sell products (Peiss, 2000; Wolf, 1996). They can't therefore have any desires to challenge the norm. But if this in consequence is damaging to women's credibility as skilled athletes, then that's a problem. Young people are looking for role models, parents want appropriate role models for their children, owners want to make money, sponsors want to sell their products, media want to be seen and heard and athletes want to play their sport. All these agents might not agree on what the product should be. What the consumers, young girls, want might not be what is best for the sport's development from a credibility perspective or a financial perspective. So whom do you please? Wasson and other marketing authors say that you should always please the customer. But what if what the customer wants are role models that are attractive, cares about clothes and style and who performs on *Dancing with the stars*, do you then succumb to that portrayal of female athletes? And what will be lost if you do?

Further thoughts

The issue concerning the ability to be professional in team sports is an important research topic, since this displays huge inequalities between men and women. All over the world there are men's professional leagues in all kinds of sports and even in levels below the elite. Women's leagues are scarce. The key is that a professional league needs an audience and according to Michener (1983), among others, women's sports do not attract huge crowds to their games. Why is that? And what will make people attend women's sporting events? This is difficult but necessary questions to explore.

Maybe women's soccer isn't like men's soccer, and therefore needs a different approach. And maybe it's not soccer in itself that makes it different but the intended audience, the young girls. Perhaps the customer defines the product. This means that if the intended

market can't identify with the product, they will not choose it. Does this mean that the WPS have to change the product and adjust to the preferences of the intended market? To what extent is the WPS willing to alter the product to build a business and will the players agree? Then the question arises again; is it a league for the consumers or for the players? And if you adapt to the consumers, will it still be high quality soccer?

In the market there is a choice to make for women's sports, and in this case women's professional soccer – to adapt to the logic of marketing and portray women in a traditional, stereotypical manner, or to challenge the market and portray women as athletes. The first might earn you money and the other might earn you respect. I believe this is not just true for female athletes, but also for male athletes. The difference is that men don't have to break any norms by being successful and committed athletes, women do, and therefore they have something to lose by committing to sports. The problem, as I see it, is that there is a belief that women have to be stereotypically feminine to be likeable as athletes. But to focus on women's looks is also the easiest choice, a well-tried strategy that has proved to be effective when selling other products. However, it hasn't advanced equality between men and women in sports. Also, the focus on women's looks hasn't really been challenged, since the women who the sponsors expose are the women within the norm. There might be a market for women's professional soccer, but the league doesn't reach the consumers because they know too little about them. There is an idea of a correlation between the product and the consumer, but it's based on beliefs and not research. I believe the product is good enough to be sold, but it's not sold properly at this stage (which almost no female sports are). I don't see the problem for the league primarily as a question of money; I see it as a problem with consumer identification and a problem to find a balance between what the product is and what the consumer wants. This is where a gender perspective becomes relevant. If the target market is male then it's believed that women need to be attractive to appeal to the consumers. But it's not really known what will appeal to a female target market. This is a problem. What do the female consumers want? Do they want the same as male consumers? They might. Or they want something different. Whether you choose to adjust the product to the consumers or find the right target market for your product, you need to know who those consumers are and what they want. I believe that's crucial when selling a product, even for a sports product.

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